 Sep 10th 2016 The post-truth world :

***Yes, I’d lie to you***

*Dishonesty in politics is nothing new; but the manner in which some politicians now lie, and the havoc they may wreak by doing so, are worrying*



WHEN Donald Trump, the Republican presidential hopeful, claimed recently that President Barack Obama “is the founder” of Islamic State and Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate, the “co-founder”, even some of his supporters were perplexed. Surely he did not mean that literally? Perhaps, suggested Hugh Hewitt, a conservative radio host, he meant that the Obama administration’s rapid pull-out from Iraq “created the vacuum” that the terrorists then filled?

“No, I meant he’s the founder of ISIS,” replied Mr Trump. “He was the most valuable player. I give him the most valuable player award. I give her, too, by the way, Hillary Clinton.”

Mr Hewitt, who detests Mr Obama and has written a book denouncing Mrs Clinton’s “epic ambition”, was not convinced. “But he’s not sympathetic to them. He hates them. He’s trying to kill them,” he pushed back.

Again, Mr Trump did not give an inch: “I don’t care. He was the founder. The way he got out of Iraq was, that, that was the founding of ISIS, OK?”

For many observers, the exchange was yet more proof that the world has entered an era of “post-truth politics”. Mr Trump appears not to care whether his words bear any relation to reality, so long as they fire up voters. PolitiFact, a fact-checking website, has rated more of his statements “pants-on-fire” lies than of any other candidate—for instance his assertion that “inner city crime is reaching record levels”, which plays on unfounded fears that crime rates are rising (see chart 1).



And he is not the only prominent practitioner of post-truth politics. Britons voted to leave the European Union in June on the basis of a campaign of blatant misinformation, including the “fact” that EU membership costs their country £350m ($470m) a week, which could be spent instead on the National Health Service, and that Turkey is likely to join the EU by 2020.

Hang on, though. Don’t bruised elites always cry foul when they fail to persuade the masses of their truth? Don’t they always say the other side was peddling lies and persuaded ignoramuses to vote against their interest? Perhaps, some argue, British Remainers should accept the vote to leave the EU as an expression of justified grievance and an urge to take back control—not unlike the decision by many Americans to support Mr Trump.

There may have been some fibbing involved but it is hardly as though politics has ever been synonymous with truthfulness. “Those princes who do great things,” Machiavelli informed his readers, “have considered keeping their word of little account, and have known how to beguile men’s minds by shrewdness and cunning.” British ministers and prime ministers have lied to the press and to Parliament, as Anthony Eden did during the Suez affair. Lyndon Johnson misinformed the American people about the Gulf of Tonkin incident, thus getting the country into Vietnam. In 1986 Ronald Reagan insisted that his administration did not trade weapons for hostages with Iran, before having to admit a few months later that: “My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and evidence tell me it is not.”

**Fact or fiction**

It is thus tempting to dismiss the idea of “post-truth” political discourse—the term was first used by David Roberts, then a blogger on an environmentalist website, Grist—as a modish myth invented by de-haut-en-bas liberals and sore losers ignorant of how dirty a business politics has always been. But that would be complacent. There is a strong case that, in America and elsewhere, there is a shift towards a politics in which feelings trump facts more freely and with less resistance than used to be the case. Helped by new technology, a deluge of facts and a public much less given to trust than once it was, some politicians are getting away with a new depth and pervasiveness of falsehood. If this continues, the power of truth as a tool for solving society’s problems could be lastingly reduced.

Reagan’s words point to an important aspect of what has changed. Political lies used to imply that there was a truth—one that had to be prevented from coming out. Evidence, consistency and scholarship had political power. Today a growing number of politicians and pundits simply no longer care. They are content with what Stephen Colbert, an American comedian, calls “truthiness”: ideas which “feel right” or “should be true”. They deal in insinuation (“A lot of people are saying...” is one of Mr Trump’s favourite phrases) and question the provenance, rather than accuracy, of anything that goes against them (“They would say that, wouldn’t they?”). And when the distance between what feels true and what the facts say grows too great, it can always be bridged with a handy conspiracy theory.

This way of thinking is not new. America saw a campaign against the allegedly subversive activities of the “Bavarian Illuminati” in the early 19th century, and Senator Joseph McCarthy’s witch-hunt against un-American activities in the 1950s. In 1964 a historian called Richard Hofstadter published “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”. When George W. Bush was president, the preposterous belief that the attacks of September 11th 2001 were an “inside job” spread far and wide among left-wingers, and became conventional wisdom in the Arab world.

**The lie of the lands**

Post-truth politics is advancing in many parts of the world. In Europe the best example is Poland’s ultranationalist ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS). Among other strange stories, it peddles lurid tales about Poland’s post-communist leaders plotting with the communist regime to rule the country together. In Turkey the protests at Gezi Park in 2013 and a recent attempted coup have given rise to all kinds of conspiracy theories, some touted by government officials: the first was financed by Lufthansa, a German airline (to stop Turkey from building a new airport which would divert flights from Germany), the second was orchestrated by the CIA.

Then there is Russia, arguably the country (apart from North Korea) that has moved furthest past truth, both in its foreign policy and internal politics. The Ukraine crisis offers examples aplenty: state-controlled Russian media faked interviews with “witnesses” of alleged atrocities, such as a child being crucified by Ukrainian forces; Vladimir Putin, Russia’s president, did not hesitate to say on television that there were no Russian soldiers in Ukraine, despite abundant proof to the contrary.

Such dezinformatsiya may seem like a mere reversion to Soviet form. But at least the Soviets’ lies were meant to be coherent, argues Peter Pomerantsev, a journalist whose memoir of Mr Putin’s Russia is titled “Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible”. In a study in 2014 for the Institute of Modern Russia, a think-tank, he quotes a political consultant for the president saying that in Soviet times, “if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth’. Now no one even tries proving ‘the truth’. You can just say anything. Create realities.”

In such creation it helps to keep in mind—as Mr Putin surely does—that humans do not naturally seek truth. In fact, as plenty of research shows, they tend to avoid it. People instinctively accept information to which they are exposed and must work actively to resist believing falsehoods; they tend to think that familiar information is true; and they cherry-pick data to support their existing views. At the root of all these biases seems to be what Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel- prizewinning psychologist and author of a bestselling book, “Thinking, Fast and Slow”, calls “cognitive ease”: humans have a tendency to steer clear of facts that would force their brains to work harder.

In some cases confronting people with correcting facts even strengthens their beliefs, a phenomenon Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, now of Dartmouth College and the University of Exeter, respectively, call the “backfire effect”. In a study in 2010 they randomly presented participants either with newspaper articles which supported widespread misconceptions about certain issues, such as the “fact” that America had found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, or articles including a correction. Subjects in both groups were then asked how strongly they agreed with the misperception that Saddam Hussein had such weapons immediately before the war, but was able to hide or destroy them before American forces arrived.

As might be expected, liberals who had seen the correction were more likely to disagree than liberals who had not seen the correction. But conservatives who had seen the correction were even more convinced that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Further studies are needed, Mr Nyhan and Mr Reifler say, to see whether conservatives are indeed more prone to the backfire effect.

Given such biases, it is somewhat surprising that people can ever agree on facts, particularly in politics. But many societies have developed institutions which allow some level of consensus over what is true: schools, science, the legal system, the media. This truth-producing infrastructure, though, is never close to perfect: it can establish as truth things for which there is little or no evidence; it is constantly prey to abuse by those to whom it grants privileges; and, crucially, it is slow to build but may be quick to break.

**Trust your gut**

Post-truth politics is made possible by two threats to this public sphere: a loss of trust in institutions that support its infrastructure and deep changes in the way knowledge of the world reaches the public. Take trust first. Across the Western world it is at an all-time low, which helps explain why many prefer so-called “authentic” politicians, who “tell it how it is” (ie, say what people feel), to the wonkish type. Britons think that hairdressers and the “man in the street” are twice as trustworthy as business leaders, journalists and government ministers, according to a recent poll by Ipsos MORI. When Michael Gove, a leading Brexiteer, said before the referendum that “people in this country have had enough of experts” he may have had a point.

This loss of trust has many roots. In some areas—dietary advice, for example —experts seem to contradict each other more than they used to; governments get things spectacularly wrong, as with their assurances about the wisdom of invading Iraq, trusting in the world financial system and setting up the euro. But it would be a mistake to see the erosion of trust simply as a response to the travails of the world. In some places trust in institutions has been systematically undermined.

Mr Roberts first used the term “post-truth politics” in the context of American climate-change policy. In the 1990s many conservatives became alarmed by the likely economic cost of a serious effort to reduce carbon emissions. Some of the less scrupulous decided to cast doubt on the need for a climate policy by stressing to the point of distortion uncertainties in the underlying science. In a memo Frank Luntz, a Republican pollster, argued: “Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate.” Challenging—and denigrating—scientists in order to make the truth seem distant and unknowable worked pretty well. One poll found that 43% of Republicans believe climate change is not happening at all, compared to 10% of Democrats.

Some conservative politicians, talk-show hosts and websites, have since included the scientific establishment in their list of institutions to bash, alongside the government itself, the courts of activist judges and the mainstream media. The populist wing of the conservative movement thus did much to create the conditions for the trust-only-your-prejudices world of Mr Trump’s campaign. Some are now having second thoughts. “We’ve basically eliminated any of the referees, the gatekeepers...There is nobody: you can’t go to anybody and say: ‘Look, here are the facts’” said Charlie Sykes, an influential conservative radio-show host, in a recent interview, adding that “When this is all over, we have to go back. There’s got to be a reckoning on all this.”

Yet gatekeepers would be in much less trouble without the second big factor in post-truth politics: the internet and the services it has spawned. Nearly two-thirds of adults in America now get news on social media and a fifth do so often, according to a recent survey by the Pew Research Centre, a polling outfit; the numbers continue to grow fast.

On Facebook, Reddit, Twitter or WhatsApp, anybody can be a publisher. Content no longer comes in fixed formats and in bundles, such as articles in a newspaper, that help establish provenance and set expectations; it can take any shape—a video, a chart, an animation. A single idea, or “meme”, can replicate shorn of all context, like DNA in a test tube. Data about the spread of a meme has become more important than whether it is based on facts.

The mechanisms of these new media are only now beginning to be understood. One crucial process is “homophilous sorting”: like-minded people forming clusters. The rise of cable and satellite television channels in the 1980s and 1990s made it possible to serve news tailored to specific types of consumer; the internet makes it much easier. According to Yochai Benkler of Harvard University in his book “The Wealth of Networks”, individuals with shared interests are far more likely to find each other or converge around a source of information online than offline. Social media enable members of such groups to strengthen each other’s beliefs, by shutting out contradictory information, and to take collective action.

Fringe beliefs reinforced in these ways can establish themselves and persist long after outsiders deem them debunked: see, for example, online communities devoted to the idea that the government is spraying “chemtrails” from high-flying aircraft or that evidence suggesting that vaccines cause autism is being suppressed. As Eric Oliver of the University of Chicago points out in a forthcoming book, “Enchanted America: The Struggle between Reason and Intuition in US Politics”, this is the sort of thinking that comes naturally to Mr Trump: he was once devoted to the “birther” fantasy that Mr Obama was not born an American.

Following Mr Oliver’s ideas about the increasing role of “magical thinking” on the American populist right, The Economist asked YouGov to look at different elements of magical thinking, including belief in conspiracies and a fear of terrible things, like a Zika outbreak or a terrorist attack, happening soon. Even after controlling for party identification, religion and age, there was a marked correlation with support for Mr Trump: 55% of voters who scored positively on our conspiracism index favoured him, compared with 45% of their less superstitious peers. These measures were not statistically significant predictors of support for Mitt Romney, the far more conventional Republican presidential candidate in 2012.

**From fringe to forefront**

Self-reinforcing online communities are not just a fringe phenomenon. Even opponents of TTIP, a transatlantic free-trade agreement, admit that the debate over it in Austria and Germany has verged on the hysterical, giving rise to outlandish scare stories—for instance that Europe would be flooded with American chickens treated with chlorine. “Battling TTIP myths sometimes feels like taking on Russian propaganda,” says an EU trade official.

The tendency of netizens to form self-contained groups is strengthened by what Eli Pariser, an internet activist, identified five years ago as the “filter bubble”. Back in 2011 he worried that Google’s search algorithms, which offer users personalised results according to what the system knows of their preferences and surfing behaviour, would keep people from coming across countervailing views. Facebook subsequently became a much better—or worse—example. Although Mark Zuckerberg, the firm’s founder, insists that his social network does not trap its users in their own world, its algorithms are designed to populate their news feeds with content similar to material they previously “liked”. So, for example, during the referendum campaign Leavers mostly saw pro-Brexit items; Remainers were served mainly pro-EU fare.

But though Facebook and other social media can filter news according to whether it conforms with users’ expectations, they are a poor filter of what is true. Filippo Menczer and his team at Indiana University used data from Emergent, a now defunct website, to see whether there are differences in popularity between articles containing “misinformation” and those containing “reliable information”. They found that the distribution in which both types of articles were shared on Facebook are very similar (see chart 3). “In other words, there is no advantage in being correct,” says Mr Menczer.



If Facebook does little to sort the wheat from the chaff, neither does the market. Online publications such as National Report, Huzlers and the World News Daily Report have found a profitable niche pumping out hoaxes, often based on long-circulating rumours or prejudices, in the hope that they will go viral and earn clicks. Newly discovered eyewitness accounts of Jesus’s miracles, a well-known ice-tea brand testing positive for urine, a “transgender woman” caught taking pictures of an underage girl in the bathroom of a department store—anything goes in this parallel news world. Many share such content without even thinking twice, let alone checking to determine if it is true.

Weakened by shrinking audiences and advertising revenues, and trying to keep up online, mainstream media have become part of the problem. “Too often news organisations play a major role in propagating hoaxes, false claims, questionable rumours and dubious viral content, thereby polluting the digital information stream,” writes Craig Silverman, now the editor of BuzzFeed Canada, in a study for the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism at the Columbia Journalism School. It does not help that the tools to keep track of and even predict the links most clicked on are getting ever better. In fact, this helps explain why Mr Trump has been getting so much coverage, says Matt Hindman of George Washington University.

Equally important, ecosystems of political online publications have emerged on Facebook—both on the left and the right. Pages such as Occupy Democrats and Make America Great can have millions of fans. They pander mostly to the converted, but in these echo chambers narratives can form before they make it into the wider political world. They have helped build support for both Bernie Sanders and Mr Trump, but it is the latter’s campaign, friendly media outlets and political surrogates that are masters at exploiting social media and its mechanisms.

A case in point is the recent speculation about the health of Mrs Clinton. It started with videos purporting to show Mrs Clinton suffering from seizures, which garnered millions of views online. Breitbart News, an “alt-right” web publisher that gleefully supports Mr Trump—Stephen Bannon, the site’s boss, took over as the Trump campaign’s “chief executive officer” last month—picked up the story. “I’m not saying that, you know, she had a stroke or anything like that, but this is not the woman we’re used to seeing,” Mr Bannon said. Mr Trump mentioned Mrs Clinton’s health in a campaign speech. Rudy Giuliani, a former mayor of New York, urged people to look for videos on the internet that support the speculation. The Clinton campaign slammed what it calls “deranged conspiracy theories”, but doubts are spreading and the backfire effect is in full swing.

Such tactics would make Dmitry Kiselyov proud. “The age of neutral journalism has passed,” the Kremlin’s propagandist-in-chief recently said in an interview. “It is impossible because what you select from the huge sea of information is already subjective.” The Russian government and its media, such as Rossiya Segodnya, an international news agency run by Mr Kiselyov, produce a steady stream of falsehoods, much like fake-news sites in the West. The Kremlin deploys armies of “trolls” to fight on its behalf in Western comment sections and Twitter feeds (see article (http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21706534-tweetaganda) ). Its minions have set up thousands of social-media “bots” and other spamming weapons to drown out other content.

“Information glut is the new censorship,” says Zeynep Tufekci of the University of North Carolina, adding that other governments are now employing similar tactics. China’s authorities, for instance, do not try to censor everything they do not like on social media, but often flood the networks with distracting information. Similarly, in post-coup Turkey the number of dubious posts and tweets has increased sharply. “Even I can no longer really tell what is happening in parts of Turkey,” says Ms Tufekci, who was born in the country.

This plurality of voices is not in itself a bad thing. Vibrant social media are often a power for good, allowing information to spread that would otherwise be bottled up. In Brazil and Malaysia social media have been the conduit for truth about a corruption scandal involving Petrobras, the state oil company, and the looting of 1MDB, a state-owned investment fund. And there are ways to tell good information from bad. Fact-checking sites are multiplying, and not just in America: there are now nearly 100, according to the Reporters’ Lab at Duke University. Social media have started to police their platforms more heavily: Facebook recently changed the algorithm that decides what users see in their newsfeeds to filter out more clickbait. Technology will improve: Mr Menczer and his team at Indiana University are building tools that can, among other things, detect whether a bot is behind a Twitter account.

**The truth is out there**

The effectiveness of such tools, the use of such filters and the impact of such sites depends on people making the effort to seek them out and use them. And the nature of the problem—that the post-truth strategy works because it allows people to forgo critical thinking in favour of having their feelings reinforced by soundbite truthiness—suggests that such effort may not be forthcoming. The alternative is to take the power out of users’ hands and recreate the gatekeepers of old. “We need to increase the reputational consequences and change the incentives for making false statements,” says Mr Nyhan of Dartmouth College. “Right now, it pays to be outrageous, but not to be truthful.”

But trying to do this would be a tall order for the cash-strapped remnants of old media. It is not always possible or appropriate for reporters to opine as to what is true or not, as opposed to reporting what is said by others. The courage to name and shame chronic liars—and stop giving them a stage—is hard to come by in a competitive marketplace the economic basis of which is crumbling. Gatekeeping power will always bring with it a temptation for abuse—and it will take a long time for people to come to believe that temptation can be resisted even if it is.

But if old media will be hard put to get a new grip on the gates, the new ones that have emerged so far do not inspire much confidence as an alternative. Facebook (which now has more than 1.7 billion monthly users worldwide) and other social networks do not see themselves as media companies, which implies a degree of journalistic responsibility, but as tech firms powered by algorithms. And putting artificial intelligence in charge may be a recipe for disaster: when Facebook recently moved to automate its “trending” news section, it promoted a fake news story which claimed that Fox News had fired an anchor, Megyn Kelly, for being a “traitor”.

And then there is Mr Trump, whose Twitter following of over 11m makes him a gatekeeper of a sort in his own right. His moment of truth may well come on election day; the odds are that he will lose. If he does so, however, he will probably claim that the election was rigged—thus undermining democracy yet further. And although his campaign denies it, reports have multiplied recently that he is thinking about creating a “mini-media conglomerate”, a cross of Fox and Breitbart News, to make money from the political base he has created. Whatever Mr Trump comes up with next, with or without him in the White House, post-truth politics will be with us for some time to come.

Focus questions

Do you think, with the new depth of falsehood, the power of truth for solving societies’ problems could be lastingly reduced? Why? Why not?

How do politicians deal in insinuation?

Do people, naturally seek the truth? Or avoid it? Cite examples.

How is the truth affected by your bias?

Who is prone to abusing the interpretation of the truth in your estimation? Cite examples.

Where to Americans get their news now?

What is the power of algorithms in defining the truth?

Has the age of neutral journalism passed? Why? And How?

Could Facebook control the news?

How is critical thinking affected?

Why is it hard to name and shame liars?

Writing assignment. In 250 words or more, discuss the following.

How could this new trend affect your job interview? What can you do counteract?