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## Post-Truth as a Main Feature of Modern Media Landscape and Primary Concern of Media Education

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### Abstract

Post-truth is increasingly in demand among scholars, journalists, and ordinary people all over the world. That is why it may be no accident that in 2016, the Oxford Dictionary named it a word of the year. Based on the wide range of available interpretations of post-truth, the author formulates his own definition of this phenomenon as a part of existing media and political landscape: post-truth is first and foremost an attribute of contemporary media and political reality the essence of which is that facts are replaced with subjective, emotional, and sometimes false statements. An inference is made that in order to successfully combat negative effects of a post-truth media environment (i.e. disinformation, misinformation, fake news, manipulation, etc.), joint efforts of both institutional and non-institutional subjects are needed. These are (but not limited to) nonprofit organizations focusing on debunking false information, governmental agencies supporting media education programs and developing relevant legislation, and media community monitoring the way professional ethical standards and norms are abided by. However, efforts of governmental and non-profit organizations, as well as the part of professional media community most committed to ethic norms, would not be enough to withstand negative effects of a post-truth age unless the audience itself develops media literacy skills.

**Keywords:** post-truth, media studies, fake news, disinformation, manipulation, mass media, media literacy, media education.

### 1. Introduction

Scholars analyze various aspects of modern media systems nowadays. Among other things, they discuss trustworthiness of the news, decline in objectivity while covering political process, ideological bias and partisanship in relation to different media outlets. Usually, these issues are considered within the context of subject-object interaction where the audience serves as a target for intended politically motivated influence by mass media and structures behind them. In recent decades, relatively new notions to describe the current situation in the field appeared. Post-truth, fakes, fake news, prank, trolling, fact-checking, verification are arguably the most commonly used among them.

On the one hand, these neologisms are quite important as they allow scholars to clearly define the actual situation in the world of media. On the other hand, they are obviously far from being understood unambiguously: there has not been an unequivocal approach to them within scholarships so far. Toward that end, this article aims at bringing together interpretations already

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existing within the Russian and foreign media studies. Apart from this, possible way to withstand post-truth consequences will be proposed.

## 2. Materials and methods

Having analyzed more than hundred media research papers that are the most often quoted in both Russian and foreign academia, I picked out those of them that raise an issue of a post-truth era. Then, special attention was given to quite rare attempts of defining this phenomenon and explaining its ramifications. With the help of comparative method, existing approaches were juxtaposed and contrasted. The most meaningful and clear elements were then borrowed for my own approach.

I also gave careful perusal to scholarship on certain ways to confront media manipulation. As a result, I extracted those of them usually mentioned in this regard and put them in a central place of my own study.

At last, I bore in mind media literacy concept that served as an ultimate context for my research. If one is media literate, he or she is less vulnerable to fakes, disinformation, and stuff like that. To that end, numerous definitions of media literacy were also examined (Fedorov, 2015; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2016; Zhizhina, 2016). For the purposes of this study, I define media literacy as an ability to find information amidst a deluge of media messages, to critically interpret and analyze it, to check its credibility and – if necessary – to create their own short media texts.

## 3. Discussion

For a start, post-truth – a notion that is in demand all over the media academic community (or, at least, its political communication part) – should be considered. Moreover, to some extent, it embraces the majority of other terms mentioned above. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary named it a word of the year and defined it as an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Word ... , 2016).

Since then a handful of texts have sought to further describe and explore the notion, moving beyond its initial definition. Some scholars deem post-truth to be “a shorthand for strategic constructions and distortions by all parties in political communication” (Temmerman et al., 2019: 1). Others underlie that within a post-truth media environment “facts are deemed as malleable and subservient to beliefs, and indeed, can be strategically deployed to serve beliefs” (Garland, 2018: 347). In a sense, post-truth inaugurates a radical departure from political spin that signals the crisis in political communication characterized by a growing public distrust in government and the democratic process.

There are also attempts to put post-truth in a broader context. Sengul sees it through the lens of populism, democracy, and political style (Sengul, 2019: 88-101). D. Buckingham stresses the importance of teaching media literacy in a post-truth age (Buckingham, 2019: 213-231). I would rather add that not just teaching but also tuning media literacy programs to take into account a post-truth reality is of crucial importance today.

It is worthy of note that not only post-truth phenomenon itself is given treatment by scholars, but its connections with other notions and processes as well. More often than not, it is examined in conjunction with fake news (Farrow, Moe, 2019: 272-287) and propaganda (Boyd-Barrett, 2019: 87-91). Oddly enough, some scholars reject the term “post-truth”, in favor of propaganda. They believe that “post-truth tends to be utilized as an evaluative term of contemporary political public discourse, as articulated by specific politicians, predominantly through social media”. Taking the field of information management as its starting point, their approach underlines the diachronic character of persuasion efforts through information management, understood as propaganda in the public sphere. In contrast to post-truth, so the argument goes, propaganda encapsulates both the diachronic character of information management in the public sphere and the ground-breaking transformation of the process of personal opinion expression, initially described by the spiral of silence model, through the emergence of new interactive media (Poulakidakos et al., 2018: 367-368). To my mind, post-truth and propaganda do differ from each other so significantly, that none of these notions can replace another. The former is meant to describe the current situation in media sphere, while the latter is just one of the ways of spreading information among the audiences; not to mention the fact that propaganda at its broadest (i.e. other than information,

especially false information, that a government or organization spreads in order to influence people's opinions and beliefs) is not necessarily detrimental to society.

Needless to say, sometimes scholars try to delineate the impact that post-truth (as well as fake news) narratives have on political, institutional, and social levels. In most cases, such influence is rather harmful (Deligiaouri, 2018: 313-315). As far as reasons of the current situation are concerned, the general consensus is almost reached that some of the responsibility for public manipulation certainly rests with those who present false or artificial information as real (McDermott, 2019: 220-222). Apart from fake news producers, the current political environment (i.e. political polarization driven by mostly ideological, but sometimes also financial, motivations) and technological platforms (like Google or Facebook) are also blamed for the rise of a post-truth era (Tandoc et al., 2019: 680-684).

Having said that, we should admit that relative success of fakes' promoters depends on, at least in part, universal psychological processes that often make audiences vulnerable to things that are not true. According to McDermott, "people often weigh emotional feelings more heavily than abstract facts in their decision making" (McDermott, 2019: 218). Put differently, not only those who disseminate false information, but also those who are susceptible to it allow a post-truth media environment to emerge, escalate, and persist.

In fact, the audience is usually given full consideration within studies on post-truth and fake news. Among other things, the effects of elite discourse about fake news on the public's evaluation of news media are analyzed (Van Duyn, Collier, 2019: 29-31); attempts to evaluate the size of the online fake news consumers are made (Nelson, Taneja, 2018:3720-3721); and the way audiences grapple with pervasive ambiguity as they navigate their media and communication resources is explored (Wenzel, 2019: 1987-1990). In terms of media education, the latter seems to be of crucial importance. How residents cycle between verifying information and disengaging from news to relieve stress, as well as possible pathways to resolve ambiguity are arguably the most urgent issues in the whole field nowadays.

One of the easiest way (even though not necessarily the most efficient one) to solve this problem is to rely on government interventions and sanctions for fake news creators and sharers. In this sense, there is a hypothesis that individuals' support for such measures was stronger if they believed that fake news influenced both other people and themselves (Baek et al., 2019: 301-302). However, my point is that fact-checking may well be more effective treatment for this social tribulation.

In recent years, fact-checking as a main issue of media studies has grown in popularity. Sometimes, it is examined within the context of relationship between media literacy and fake news as one of the challenges that misinformation represents in the Internet age (Loterio-Echeverri et al., 2018: 295-316). Research on journalists' perception of fact-checking has also become quite common (Mena, 2019: 657-672). Some scholars go further and aim at exploring the role of information format (print vs. video) and tone (humorous vs. nonhumorous) in shaping message interest and belief correction in the context of political fact-checking (Young et al., 2018: 49-75). Others argue that "strong social connections between fact-checkers and rumor spreaders encourage the latter to prefer sharing accurate information, making them more likely to accept corrections" (Margolin et. al., 2018: 196). At last, ingenious attempts to check how fact-checkers check are also worth mentioning (Lim, 2018).

The way post-truth and its ramifications are treated by Russian media scholars is also worthy of note. Having analyzed a wide range of existing approaches to this phenomenon, I can argue that there is a large variety of different interpretations ranging from sophisticated philosophical to applied political insights into the nature of post-truth.

To illustrate, Chugrov thinks that post-truth "reflects a kind of postmodern reality, distorted state of conscience within which stereotypes have lost their grip on reality. In a post-truth world, emotions replace facts, fakes substitute for news, thus constructing specific political discourse and alternative reality" (Chugrov, 2017: 42). He likens it to some context, modality, or situation, enabling spreading false information and facing no consequences for that. Within such relativistic context, no matter whether news is true or false. The only point of importance is that it should correspond to both emotional mood of the audience and political goals of the communicator.

Volodina considers post-truth from a political science angle. She argues that post-truth implies implementation of a so-called emotional media discourse when truth is of little importance. At the same time, the scholar identifies post-truth with political culture within which discourse

abounds in frequent appeals for emotions and stubborn disregard of the facts that refute false statements (Volodina, 2017: 59). To my way of thinking, post-truth cannot be equated with political culture. Whereas the former describes general way of perception of mass information, the latter is a kind of indicator of the level of awareness and attitude to politics (including value-based, behavioral, worldview, and some other aspects) pertaining to a certain individual, social group, or the whole society.

Ivanova interprets post-truth in a mixed political and communicative way. She is convinced that it denotes a new tendency and a method of public conscience manipulation when emotions prevail over facts; it also reflects the way people percept the world (Ivanova, 2017: 156). Sharing the second part of this idea, I cannot agree with the first one. Essentially, post-truth is not a tool of manipulation. Rather, it serves as media environment that fosters the spread of such manipulation.

At last, the most categorical (to some extent, even judgmental) approach to post-truth was offered by Zholud. He defines it as a “new disease”, “social tribulation”, and “one of the most significant global crises of our age encompassing political, social, and cultural spheres and, consequently, mass media domain” (Zholud, 2018: 117-122).

Clearly, media scholars nowadays study post-truth quite broadly. Postmodern reality, distorted state of conscience, certain context, situation, destruction and transformation of social and political reality, new tendency, a tool of public conscience manipulation, the way people percept the world, global crisis of our age, new disease or social problem – to name but a few existing designations of the phenomenon. In my view, post-truth is first and foremost an attribute of contemporary media and political reality the essence of which is that facts are replaced with subjective, emotional, and sometimes false statements. It is also worth mentioning that this is a relatively new phenomenon, even though some scholars (Waldrop, 2017; Fuller, 2018) trace it back to the faraway past.

It is hard to deny that some post-truth elements took place in ancient times. That said, I suppose it was not until fairly recently that it has formed as a tangible phenomenon – ever since the Internet and up-to-date information technologies’ deep penetration in everyday life. In this sense, key factors conducive to entrenchment of post-truth are new media that turned into a kind of channels of distributing manipulations, fakes, and propaganda, as well as technologies simplified dissemination of false information and thus disorientation of the audience.

Why do I place emphasis on the new media and Internet technologies? Back in the day, in the age of traditional or “old” media, there were ways to disseminate false information and use manipulative techniques too. However, it was not on this scale as it is nowadays. As a result, there have not been any reasons to speak about post-truth until recent times. Only after the emergence of social networks, messengers, and various technological platforms (as a rule, easily accessible to the public), all this has taken a different turn.

Not least because of this, so-called filter bubbles became a widespread phenomenon. The author of this term – Pariser – defines it as the intellectual isolation that can occur when websites make use of algorithms to selectively assume the information a user would want to see, and then give information to the user according to this assumption. A filter bubble, therefore, can cause users to get significantly less contact with contradicting viewpoints, causing the user to become intellectually isolated (Pariser, 2011: 37). Besides psychic setup, individual filter bubbles’ formation is also due to mechanisms of personalized information search and special services of tuning to tastes, interests, and favors of the audiences used by search engines. Ultimately, a human being ends up in a sort of intellectual isolation that impedes getting alternative information.

Apart from factors mentioned above, some other roots of post-truth are worth listing. Keyes stresses the role of postmodern philosophy with its relativity that, among other things, trickles down to moral principles. Consequently, alternative ethic is formed that allows humans not to regret lying; “alternative”, “personal”, and other variants of the “truth” come into existence (Keyes, 2004: 43).

Perhaps a so-called “crisis of fact” has also played a role in the emergence of post-truth politics. According to Davies, to focus on recent, more egregious abuses of facts is to overlook the ways in which the authority of facts has been in decline for quite some time. Newspapers might provide resistance to the excesses of populist demagoguery, but not to the broader crisis of facts. The problem is the oversupply of facts in the 21st century: there are too many sources, too many methods, with varying levels of credibility, depending on who funded a given study and how the eye-catching number was selected (Davies, 2016).

It is obvious that we should not underestimate the influence of the main stakeholders in a post-truth world. Ball argues that these are politicians (in a post-truth era, it becomes easier for them to win power), public relations companies, and IT-corporations (they make money out of engineering and selling software) (Ball, 2017). As in the case of traditional media, it is important to note that, say, politicians have always been trying to apply certain manipulative techniques, populism, and disinformation in order to win, use, and keep power. But only after such information technologies had become full-fledged, their aspirations to do it got to be as strongly marked as they are now.

As far as IT-corporations' impact on establishing post-truth principles is concerned, it seems to be rather substantial. It is quite hard to judge to what extent Google or Facebook's influence is intended and purposeful here (to their credit, both companies take steps to withstand disinformation and fakes). However, the fact that their activity and products to some degree are instrumental in promoting post-truth principles is beyond doubt.

#### 4. Results

What are the main hazards of post-truth politics? Why does it attract so much attention in recent years? Having analyzed a great deal of research on this issue, I have noticed that often it is taken for granted – in most cases, scholars agree by default that post-truth comes laden with detrimental effects on the society but do not give them an articulate description. In the meantime, I think such effects need to be separated to discuss them fairly.

On a global scale, all transformations in media sphere caused by post-truth politics can well lead to tectonic changes in the whole world order. In particular, it may result in depreciation of freedom of speech that, in its turn, can cause the erosion of the institute of free election and crisis of many democratic procedures and – in the long run – system of international security in general.

Davies puts the same idea a bit differently. “Facts hold a sacred place in Western liberal democracies. Whenever democracy seems to be going awry, when voters are manipulated or politicians are ducking questions, we turn to facts for salvation. But they seem to be losing their ability to support consensus” (Davies, 2016).

Other harmful consequences remain possible too: cleavages in regard to views between “us” and “them”, difficulties in holding productive dialogue within society, exploding the reputation of mass media, politicians, experts, total distrust and – at the same time – uncritical attitude to news sources perceived as “friendly” to your own views, to mention but a few.

The upshot of all these is a kind of vicious circle. Post-truth itself is in part a result of underdeveloped media literacy skills. However, one of its consequences implies that such skills degrade even further: by indulging in individual filter bubbles, retiring into their own media environments, and building invisible barriers between themselves and streams of “alien” information that does not fit into existing frameworks, a human being becomes more vulnerable to manipulations and distortions of all sorts.

In my opinion, all this unequivocally points to the fact that to develop media education is of crucial importance in a post-truth era. I am convinced that only through purposeful cultivation of relevant competencies we have a chance to neutralize various harmful effects of the phenomenon under discussion. Determined efforts to cope with this problem should be made not only by the audience but by mass media as well. The press should thoroughly control the way journalists abide by professional ethic norms and codes. If the fourth estate does not fight against manipulations and fake news they produce, it will inevitably exacerbate the current situation. And no attempts to inoculate people against detrimental post-truth effects through disseminating media literacy principles will be enough.

Unfortunately, as media educators, we cannot compel journalists and politicians to respect their own ethic norms. The only way we can affect the situation is to come up with some practical recommendations on how to withstand manipulations and spread them among as many people as possible. In media scholarship, there are many good tips on distinguishing true news from fakes. Here I would like to recap the most important of them.

Firstly, it is necessary to take account of the media outlet we get information from, i.e. to what extent it is known, authoritative, competent, and reliable. Secondly, everyone should understand that one of the key functions of a heading is to grab reader's attention. Therefore, the narratives of the news and the headline do not necessarily match up. Thirdly, author's argumentation needs to be critically analyzed in terms of its consistence and political partisanship.

Fourthly, if situation so requires, one can check authenticity of photos and pictures (there are special services for that over the Internet), as well as accuracy and correctness of facts, figures, and citations. Fifthly, sometimes it is quite useful to explore linguistic features of the media text – labels, metaphors, comparisons, epithets etc. used by its author. Sixthly, the source of information (i.e. where the journalist gets it from) is also quite indicative. If it is anonymous, it should set off alarm bells at the very least. And lastly, it always pays to bring into correlation facts and arguments presented in a media message, on the one hand, and your own common sense and life experience, on the other.

It should be noted that throughout the Western world there is a growing number of Internet sites fixating on fact-checking. The most high-profile of them are factcheck.org, madiamatters.org, newsbusters.org, politifact.com, propublica.org, snopes.com, sunlightfoundation.com etc. Most of these primarily non-profit structures specialize on debunking fakes in a certain spheres (i.e. politicians' speeches and statements, stories of liberal or conservative media, candidates or state officials' business affairs). It is also quite revealing that established mass media begin to employ specialists responsible for checking the facts and data contained in stories that are about to be published or aired. Strictly speaking, this is more verification than fact-checking. However, this terminological elaboration is not very important in this context and does not refute the fact that such type of activity is on the rise nowadays.

Worthy of separate attention is the Dutch experience of struggle against fake news. There is the first “legal factory of fabricated news”. They purposely invent fakes, set them off through the Internet, and, unlike all other manipulators and liars, debunk them after a while in order to teach the audience how to deal with such type of content. By reading these fakes, one can get to know what was wrong with them and how not to fall for a similar scam next time (Hoe..., 2019).

In Russia, fact-checking practice is still in its infancy. Interestingly, Ministry of Foreign Affairs was one of the first institutions that have launched such service. There is a special tab on its site – “Published materials that contain false information about Russia” – where fake news or disinformation concerning Russia and its politics are presented on a regular basis (Published materials..., 2019). Sometimes, M. Zakharova, Director of the Information and Press Department of Russian Foreign Ministry, posts similar messages on her personal pages on social networks. A few specialized fact-checking sites analogous to those in the United States and Europe have appeared in Russia in recent years.

## 5. Conclusion

One way or another, all these ways of fighting against spreading false information in the long run are aimed at fostering media literacy skills among people. The more often fakes are debunked, the more skeptical the audience's attitude to the deluge of media messages becomes. And I believe that a grain of salt, in its turn, is an essential element of media literacy: unless getting accustomed to taking media texts with a pinch of salt, one cannot be immune from fakes and manipulations of different sorts.

It goes without saying that there is no need to cast doubt on everything. There are facts and events that are obvious. However, it is absolutely necessary when and if more or less complicated, disputable, and controversial issues are concerned. Politics is one of such spheres. Having no opportunities for obtaining firsthand information about it, people have to look at it from the eyes of journalists that automatically runs the risk of distortion. In this sense I cannot agree with Silverblatt who considers media literacy to be a nonpolitical phenomenon that teaches *how* to think, but not *what* to think (Silverblatt, 2018: 71). Of course, general principles of media literacy do not imply any recommendations on how to feel about certain political forces, ideologies, processes, or media outlets. Instead, they offer general insight into media texts analysis: what is worth paying attention in the first place; how to evaluate its credibility, check facts and authenticity of quotations; why does it matter etc. On this count Silverblatt is absolutely right.

On the other side, even though media literacy does not encroach upon “*what* to think” domain, it is still closely tied to politics. As previously noted, it plays an important role (if not to say “pivotal”) in countering disinformation, fakes, manipulations, and other attributes of a post-truth era. Efforts of governmental and non-profit organizations, as well as the part of professional media community most committed to ethic norms, would not be enough to withstand taints and “sins” of a post-truth age unless the audience itself develops media literacy skills.

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