

**In Truth:
A History of Lies from Ancient Rome to Modern America**

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INTRODUCTION (excerpt)

At the end of August in 1835, the *New York Sun* published a story that stunned the world.

The newspaper revealed that the eminent British astronomer Sir John Herschel had just discovered life on the moon. Herschel's powerful telescope had observed with astonishing clarity a lunar landscape teeming with animal life—herds of bison-like beasts, single-horned goats, two-legged beavers, and even more extraordinary, humanoid creatures that resembled large bats about four feet tall.

At first blush, there was no reason to doubt the veracity of the *Sun's* extraordinary revelation. Sir John Herschel, L.L.D., F.R.S., founder of the Royal Astronomical Society, was the world's most distinguished name in his field. His illustrious father, renowned astronomer William Herschel, had discovered the planet Uranus and was known for his belief in the possibility of extraterrestrial life. What's more, the source for Sir John Herschel's astounding discovery was a scientific article published in the prestigious *Edinburgh Journal of Science*. Everything added up. It had to be true.

The *Sun's* scoop was a massive coup for the upstart penny paper struggling to survive in the crowded New York newspaper market. The *Sun* stretched out the story over an entire week, adding fantastic details with each edition. Thousands of New Yorkers clamored to get their hands on the latest installment about Sir John Herschel's "Great Astronomical Discoveries." Other American newspapers, embarrassed to have missed the story of the century, scrambled to catch up. The *New York Times* conceded that the *Sun's* story was "possible and probable." The *New Yorker*, for its part, declared: "The promulgation of these discoveries creates a new era in astronomy and science generally." Soon European papers were offering the *Sun* large sums to reprint the original six-part series.

The story was, of course, a complete fabrication—the first silly-season hoax in the history of journalism. Not a word of it was true. Sir John Herschel was real, but he had never made any claim about discovering life on the moon. The prestigious *Edinburgh Journal of Science* was authentic too, but was now defunct. The "Great Moon Hoax," as it became known, was an extravagant pseudo-science satire, mocking widespread credulity in an era when people were prepared to believe just about anything—including, apparently, that herds of bison, reindeer, and zebra were roaming through lush lunar valleys.

For the *Sun*, the Great Moon Hoax was a huge commercial success. Circulation shot up to more than 40,000 copies, making the *Sun* the biggest-selling newspaper in the world. The Great Moon Hoax was so successful, in fact, that it gave birth to a whole new genre in journalism. For decades, hoax stories flourished in newspapers, filling their pages with alarming tales of bloody massacres, escaped zoo animals, and the unearthing of petrified men. Journalists didn't let facts get in the way of a great story. By the end of the century, fabricated news would provoke diplomatic incidents, even wars, between nations.

In today's internet era of "fake news," the outlandish stories hatched in Victorian-era newsrooms seem oddly familiar. And yet we debate the proliferation of false information as if it were an alarming new trend. Today, fabricated news does more than astound, shock, and distract. Many claim pervasive misinformation is debasing public discourse and corroding democracy. Over the past few years it has become commonplace, even clichéd, to observe despairingly that we are living in a "post-truth" age.

According to the accepted chronology, the post-truth era emerged from the political turmoil of 2016. It was indeed an *annus horribilis* for the truth. The year started with a carnival of deceptive claims and outrageous lies in the run-up to the Brexit referendum in Britain and ended with the spectacle of falsehoods and slander during the American presidential election campaign. Donald Trump's stunning victory appeared to demonstrate that truth no longer mattered in politics. People believed what they wanted to believe. News wasn't fact-checked; it was gut-checked.

Trump was a perfect icon for the post-truth era: real-estate tycoon, casino magnate, Wrestlemania showman, and reality TV celebrity. His media persona belonged to the realm of fantasy. He made no bones about his disregard for truth; he professed it as a virtue. Throughout his flamboyant business career, Trump's motto had been "truthful hyperbole." As he boasted in his autobiography, *The Art of the Deal*: "I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion."

Twenty years later, Trump brought his "truthful hyperbole" credo to politics. And it worked. Americans who voted for Trumped believed—or wanted to believe—his inflammatory rhetoric. Once installed in the White House, his penchant for hyperbole, exaggeration, and outright falsehoods continued, unrestrained by the duties of high office. His boasts and tirades on Twitter became the object of satire. Newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* began publishing tallies of his steady flow of false statements.

Donald Trump was not, of course, the first American presidential candidate to arrive in the White House on a wave of false promises.

Politics, in America and elsewhere, has long been animated by hype, distortions, and lies. It may be a regrettable fact of modern democracy, but deception and dishonesty are indispensable to winning and exercising power. As Hannah Arendt observes in her essay “Lying in Politics”:
“Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings.”
For Donald Trump’s critics, however, he was in a league of his own. Trump took lying to a whole new level. Hillary Clinton, his rival for the White House in 2016, accused Trump of waging an “all-out war” on truth, facts, and reason. “When leaders deny things we can see with our own eyes, like the size of a crowd at the inauguration,” said Clinton, “when they refuse to accept settled science when it comes to urgent challenges like climate change. . . . It is the beginning of the end of freedom. And that is not hyperbole. It’s what authoritarian regimes through history have done.”

At the end of 2016, the *Oxford English Dictionary* declared *post-truth* as Word of the Year. Two months after Trump’s inauguration, *Time* magazine’s cover was solid black featuring three words in large scarlet letters: “Is Truth Dead?”

The question was almost apocalyptic. Donald Trump’s presidency, it seemed, was a symptom of a malaise that went much deeper than the crass claims of political contests. The curtain had come down on an entire epoch. Nearly three centuries ago, Enlightenment thinkers had framed our modern constitutions proclaiming truths as self-evident. The Latin word for truth—*veritas*—was embedded in the mottos of our great universities. Our understanding of what is true and false was shaped by unwavering adherence to values based on reason and verifiable facts. Now the consensus around those cherished values was shattered.

In our “post-truth” age, it seems the distinction between truth and falsehood is no longer discernible. Worse, it is considered irrelevant. Values are relative, subject to personal opinions. In politics, widespread suspicion of facts has opened a breach for demagogues—in America and elsewhere—to come peddling their dangerous fictions. The fundamental values that underpin liberal democracy, with all its imperfections, are under threat. Some claim that the liberal model is obsolete. Religious fanaticism and populist nationalism are spreading throughout the world with passionate intensity. Authoritarian regimes appeal to those who have abandoned values based on reason. Convinced that there is no such thing as objective truth, they are embracing subjective identities based on group belonging—tribe, nation, religion, race—and their moral reasoning is shaped by these loyalties.

How did our relationship with truth become so troubled?

Many blame social media—Twitter, Facebook, Google, YouTube—for our “post-truth” crisis. Online networks provide a powerful platform for the dark, irrational impulses of the human psyche. The obsession with clicking, liking, commenting, sharing, and retweeting has unleashed a

vortex of slander, hatred, falsehoods, and lies. The internet has pushed opinion toward the fevered extremes where conspiracy theories thrive and irrational arguments overwhelm reasoned discourse. The result is a polarized culture of distrust, anger, even violence. Democratic elections are manipulated, sometimes by agents of foreign states, by spreading disinformation on Facebook. Political advertising, once a game of familiar boasts and exaggeration, is now a sinister sphere of viral deception and lies. The solution, many believe, is to regulate social media by policing speech and banning falsehoods. But who decides what is true and false?

Others attribute our “post-truth” crisis to distrust in experts and institutions. Putting trust in professional elites was no small achievement in modern societies. Trust is essential for social cohesion because it establishes a consensus about collective truth. We count on trusted sources—teachers, doctors, scientists, judges, journalists, priests—to tell us the truth. Today, however, people are suspicious of truths that come from experts. The devastating consequences of global financial crises on the lives of ordinary people, and the cynical spectacle of political corruption, exacerbate these attitudes. People are also distrustful of the media, which they lump in with the elites that they deeply resent. Donald Trump’s tirades against “fake news,” and his promises to “drain the swamp,” tapped into these hardened feelings of distrust toward the establishment. The terms *fake news* and *post truth* have become weaponized in a bitter culture war between the disenfranchised and the entitled.

Still others point to the influence of “postmodern” culture to explain our disavowal of truth. In the postmodernist worldview, there are no objective truths. Its adherents claim that the only thing we can rely on is our subjective perspective. They reject the rationalist foundations of the Enlightenment—reason, facts, objectivity—as a coercive system of Western “neoliberal” domination. Even scientific truths are suspect. The evidence behind climate change and vaccinations is disputed. Many today, especially young people, have embraced this cultural hostility toward objective truth. They have retreated into personal beliefs, subjective feelings, emotions, and group identity as the basis for truths they feel they can trust.

If this seems despairing, it might be asked: What is wrong with subjectivity, feelings, and emotions? No one disputes that modern rationalism has produced great achievements in science, medicine, and technology. Yet rationalism has also driven us to dominate the natural world to satisfy our own selfish aims. The social consequences of unbridled capitalism, the catastrophe of climate change, the devastation of forests and wildlife, the horrors of factory farming—all are the brutal legacy of uncontrolled rationalism. Perhaps our grave error has been to neglect our subjective, instinctive, and emotional connection with the world we inhabit. Like reason, emotions have a cognitive basis in the human psyche. Our imagination and feelings provide access to profound truths, self-transcendence, and the sublime. When we engage with works of art, we are immersed in deeply subjective experiences. Reading the poems of

Baudelaire and the novels of Virginia Woolf, listening to the symphonies of Mozart and Mahler, contemplating the paintings of Van Gogh and Edward Hopper—all bring us just as close to truths about life as scientific knowledge does about the objective world. As the German romantic poet Goethe wrote, “Each sees what is present in their heart.” The entire thrust of the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century—which gave us the poetry of Byron and the symphonies of Beethoven—was an emotional rebellion against the excesses of rationalism. If poetry, art, and romantic passions belong to the realm of unreason, surely it is an irrationality that we cannot easily live without. Artists are the most powerful commanders of human aspirations because they create values and truths. As the poet Shelley famously asserts, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

It may be comforting to know that these questions have been debated for a very long time. We have been attempting to understand the nature of truth—and the temptation of lies—since the cradle of every civilization.

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