



Language, Disinformation, and the Rhetoric of Post-Truth Politics

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Abstract

This article advances a linguistic and rhetorical account of the so-called post-truth condition, named word of the year by a major dictionary in 2016. Against the prevailing framing of post-truth as a deficit of facts to be remedied by correction, it argues that the condition is better understood as a crisis of the rhetorical commons: a migration of political language away from persuasion toward the strategic manufacture of doubt and affect. Synthesizing philosophical work on indifference to truth, the cognitive theory of framing and conceptual metaphor, critical discourse analysis, and longstanding claims about debased political language, the article isolates a recurring rhetorical architecture in which form displaces reference. It then examines how repetition exploits the illusory-truth effect, how emotional saturation substitutes for evidentiary adjudication, and how computational propaganda, bots, and astroturfing industrialize these mechanisms at scale. The central claim is that post-truth speech differs categorically from the ordinary political lie: where the liar still honors the authority of truth by concealing it, post-truth discourse erodes the audience's very appetite for adjudication. The article concludes that media literacy must be reconceived as rhetorical literacy, teaching citizens to read frames rather than merely verify facts, if democratic discourse is to be repaired.

Keywords:- Post-Truth, Disinformation, Critical Discourse Analysis, Framing, Conceptual Metaphor, Computational Propaganda, Populist Rhetoric, Media Literacy

Introduction

When Oxford Dictionaries selected post-truth as its word of the year for 2016, it defined the term as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief," noting that usage had risen roughly two thousand percent over the preceding year amid the British referendum on European Union membership and the United States presidential campaign. The lexicographers had registered something more consequential than a fashionable coinage. The prefix is telling: post-truth does not name a world without truth so much as one in which truth has been displaced from its former office, demoted from arbiter to optional accessory. The condition it describes is not primarily epistemological but rhetorical. What has changed is less what citizens are able

to know than how political language solicits their assent, and the locus of that change lies in the structures of discourse itself.

This article argues that the post-truth moment is best understood not as a sudden scarcity of facts but as a transformation in the relationship between language and referential accountability. The dominant public response, embodied in the proliferation of fact-checking desks, has assumed that the problem is informational and that the remedy is correction. Yet the persistence of disinformation in the face of relentless correction suggests that the diagnosis is incomplete. Drawing together the philosophy of truthfulness, cognitive linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and the empirical study of computational propaganda, I contend that post-truth politics operates by privileging rhetorical form over propositional reference. Its characteristic moves, framing, repetition, and emotional saturation, are designed not to win an argument about a particular fact but to dissolve the shared procedures by which facts are collectively adjudicated. The lie, paradoxically, pays homage to truth; post-truth speech withdraws that homage. Understanding the linguistic mechanics of this withdrawal is the precondition for any serious defense of democratic discourse.

Naming the Condition: Post-Truth Beyond the Lie

The philosophical groundwork for distinguishing post-truth discourse from ordinary mendacity was laid, well before the term entered common use, by Harry Frankfurt. In his slender treatise *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt draws a now-famous contrast between the liar and the figure he names the bullshitter. The liar, he observes, remains oriented to the truth, for he must know it in order to lead his audience away from it; deception of this kind "presupposes a certain awareness of the truth itself." The bullshitter, by contrast, is indifferent to whether his statements are true or false, attentive only to their effect. It is for this reason that Frankfurt concludes "bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are" (Frankfurt 61). The distinction is indispensable for naming the post-truth condition with precision. The political actor who circulates a claim about crowd sizes or migration statistics, untroubled by its falsity and undeterred by its refutation, is not engaged in lying in the classical sense. He is performing a sovereignty over reality in which the truth-value of an utterance has become beside the point.

Lee McIntyre's *Post-Truth*, the most influential book-length treatment of the phenomenon, develops this insight into a political thesis. McIntyre traces the condition through science denial, cognitive bias, and the postmodern academy to the contemporary ecosystem of partisan media, and arrives at a definition that resonates with Frankfurt's: post-truth, he argues, is fundamentally an "assertion of ideological supremacy" by which its practitioners compel belief "regardless of the evidence" (McIntyre 13). The decisive word is supremacy. Post-truth discourse is less a claim about the world than a claim about who has the power to define it. To insist on a falsehood in the teeth of overwhelming counter-evidence is to demonstrate that loyalty to the tribe outranks fidelity to the facts, and to dare one's opponents to object. The falsehood functions as a loyalty test rather than a description.

Hannah Arendt anticipated the political stakes of this reorientation decades earlier. In "Truth and Politics," first published in *The New Yorker* in 1967 and collected in *Between Past and Future*, she warned that the organized, systematic lying of modern politics aims not merely to deceive about particular matters but to destroy the very faculty by which citizens distinguish the true from the false. The consistent substitution of falsehood for factual truth, she argued, does not lead audiences to accept the lie as true; rather, it destroys the sense by which people take their bearings in a shared reality. The deliberate manufacture of cynicism, the erosion of the public's confidence that any shared account of reality is attainable, is the political achievement that post-truth rhetoric seeks. It is in this sense that the prefix is exact: the condition arrives after the question of truth has ceased to organize the contest, leaving only the question of power.

Framing and the Architecture of Political Reality

If post-truth rhetoric is to displace reference, it requires linguistic instruments capable of doing so, and the most powerful of these is the frame. George Lakoff's cognitive theory of framing, elaborated across *Moral Politics* and the widely circulated handbook *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, holds that political language activates pre-existing conceptual structures, mental scaffolds that determine what counts as common sense before any argument is joined. Lakoff's signature demonstration is deceptively simple: the instruction not to think of an elephant is impossible to obey, because the word evokes the frame regardless of the negation attached to it. The political consequence is that to argue against an opponent's terms in the opponent's vocabulary is to reinforce the very frame one wishes to defeat. When a speaker repeatedly couples taxation with the language of relief, he installs a frame in which taxes are an affliction and their reduction a rescue, and the opposing party, by adopting the same vocabulary to defend taxation, ratifies its premise.

The deeper mechanism, in Lakoff's account, is conceptual metaphor. Abstract political domains are understood through concrete source domains, and the choice of metaphor silently structures judgment. To speak of a nation as a household governed by a strict father, or alternatively as one nurtured by caregivers, is to import an entire moral system under the cover of an apparently neutral description. Lakoff argues in *Moral Politics* that the durable coherence of conservative and progressive worldviews derives precisely from such competing family metaphors, operating largely beneath conscious awareness. For the analysis of post-truth politics, the significance of this claim is that frames do their work prior to, and independently of, the truth or falsity of any particular assertion. A frame cannot be fact-checked, because it is not a proposition; it is the grid through which propositions acquire meaning. The post-truth communicator who controls the frame has already shaped the audience's reception of the facts before the facts arrive.

This linguistic insight finds its critical counterpart in the work of Teun van Dijk, a founder of critical discourse studies. In *Discourse and Power*, van Dijk theorizes the way dominant groups reproduce their authority through control over public discourse, managing what he calls the "mental models" through which audiences interpret events. Power, on this account, operates not chiefly through coercion but through the management of context, access, and definition: those who control the platforms and the vocabulary of public deliberation control the cognitive resources with which citizens make sense of the world. Framing, in van Dijk's hands, is not a rhetorical embellishment but an instrument of social domination, and the manipulation he analyzes consists precisely in the production of mental models that serve the interests of the powerful while presenting themselves as the neutral common sense of the community.

Critical Discourse Analysis and the Grammar of Populist Fear

The populist rhetoric that has flourished in the post-truth moment exhibits a recognizable discursive grammar, and no scholar has anatomized it more thoroughly than Ruth Wodak. In *The Politics of Fear*, Wodak traces the trajectory of right-wing populist parties from the margins to the center of European politics and identifies the linguistic strategies by which they normalize what was once unsayable. Central among these is the construction of a homogeneous people menaced by threatening outsiders, an opposition between an authentic us and a dangerous them that organizes the populist worldview. The threat may be migrants, elites, foreign powers, or the media, but the syntactic structure is constant: a beleaguered national body requires protection from contamination, and the populist leader presents himself as its sole authentic defender. Fear is not an incidental tone but the load-bearing affect of the entire construction.

Wodak's most unsettling observation concerns the management of transgression. Right-wing populist actors, she argues, deliberately violate norms of acceptable speech and then exploit the ensuing scandal, alternating provocation with denial, apology, and reframing in a choreography she terms the "discourse-historical" cycle of calculated ambivalence. A xenophobic statement is floated; when challenged, it is recast as a joke, a misunderstanding, or an act of courageous truth-telling against a censorious establishment. Each cycle shifts the boundary of the sayable a little further, and the provocation itself generates the media attention that the strategy requires. What Wodak names the "arrogance of ignorance," the populist's defiant celebration of common feeling over expert knowledge, completes the structure: appeals to the authentic wisdom of ordinary people are weaponized against the institutions, scientific, journalistic, juridical, whose authority depends on procedures of verification that post-truth politics seeks to discredit.

Van Dijk's analysis of the discursive reproduction of prejudice supplies the micro-level complement to Wodak's account. He documents how the "ideological square," the systematic emphasis of in-group virtues and out-group vices alongside the suppression of in-group faults and out-group merits, structures political talk about immigration and minorities at the level of pronouns, presuppositions, and rhetorical concession. The familiar disclaimer, "I am not a racist, but," exemplifies the pattern: a positive self-presentation guards the speaker's face while licensing the negative characterization of the other that follows. These are not aberrations of an otherwise rational discourse; they are its constitutive techniques. Critical discourse analysis thus reveals that the post-truth politics of fear is built from concrete, describable linguistic resources, and that its persuasive force survives the refutation of any particular factual claim because it never depended on facts in the first place.

Orwell's Long Shadow: Debased Language and the Preemption of Thought

No account of language and political deception can dispense with George Orwell, whose two great interventions remain startlingly pertinent. In the essay "Politics and the English Language," published in *Horizon* in 1946, Orwell advances the thesis that the corruption of language and the corruption of politics are reciprocally entangled. Vague, stale, and mechanical prose, he argues, is not merely an aesthetic failing but an instrument of evasion: "political language," in his memorable formulation, "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." Orwell's particular target is the euphemism, the abstraction that severs a word from the concrete reality it names so that atrocities may be contemplated without being pictured. When the bombardment of villages is rendered as pacification, the speaker has not lied about a fact but dissolved the listener's capacity to grasp it. This is the post-truth maneuver in embryo: the displacement of reference by a verbal form that forecloses thought.

Orwell's deeper and more radical claim, dramatized in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is that language conditions the very possibility of cognition. The invented language of Newspeak is engineered to shrink the range of expressible thought by eliminating the words in which dissent might be conceived; its purpose, as the novel's appendix explains, is to make heretical thought "literally unthinkable" by destroying the vocabulary required to formulate it. Alongside Newspeak stands doublethink, the disciplined capacity to hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously and to accept whichever the Party currently demands, and the slogans, war is peace, freedom is slavery, that weld opposites together until contradiction ceases to register as such. Orwell grasped that the most effective censorship is not the suppression of statements but the impoverishment of the conceptual resources with which citizens might frame them. The contemporary resonance is direct. When a leader brands unwelcome reporting as fake news, the phrase does not merely dispute a story; it installs a frame, in precisely Lakoff's sense, that

preemptively discredits an entire institution of verification, supplying audiences with a single portable word that renders inconvenient evidence unthinkable in advance.

It would be a mistake, however, to read Orwell as merely a prophet of totalitarian censorship, for the post-truth condition realizes his insight under conditions he did not foresee. Where Newspeak imagined a scarcity of words imposed from above, the contemporary information environment produces an overwhelming abundance of them, and the effect Orwell described, the preemption of thought, is achieved not by deletion but by saturation. The citizen drowning in contradictory claims, exhausted by the labor of adjudication, arrives at the same incapacity to think clearly that Newspeak was designed to enforce. Orwell's enduring contribution is the recognition that the integrity of public reason is a function of the integrity of public language, and that an assault on the latter is necessarily an assault on the former.

The Mechanics of Doubt: Repetition, Emotion, and the Manufacture of Plausibility

If framing structures perception and debased language forecloses thought, repetition supplies the engine that drives a falsehood toward acceptance. The psychological foundation is the illusory-truth effect, first demonstrated experimentally by Lynn Hasher, David Goldstein, and Thomas Toppino, who found that subjects rated repeated statements as more probably true than novel ones regardless of their actual veracity, with validity judgments rising for repeated items across successive sessions (Hasher et al. 107). The mechanism is processing fluency: a claim encountered before is easier for the mind to process, and that ease is misattributed as a feeling of truth. The implication for political communication is profound and disquieting. A falsehood need not be argued; it need only be repeated, across enough channels and with sufficient frequency, until its very familiarity lends it the texture of established fact. Correction, which introduces the false claim anew in order to deny it, can paradoxically reinforce the fluency it seeks to dispel.

A clarification of terms is warranted here, for the public vocabulary of fake news obscures distinctions that matter for analysis. In their influential report for the Council of Europe, Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan propose a tripartite framework of information disorder that separates misinformation, false content shared without intent to harm, from disinformation, falsehood deliberately fabricated and circulated to deceive or injure, and from malinformation, genuine information weaponized through selective release or decontextualization. The taxonomy is valuable precisely because it foregrounds intent and circulation rather than mere falsity, and in doing so it confirms the argument advanced here. The blunt phrase fake news collapses these categories and, worse, has itself been captured as a frame, repurposed by the very actors who traffic in disinformation to discredit legitimate journalism. The post-truth predicament is thus not reducible to the presence of false statements in the information stream; it concerns the strategic intentions that animate their production and the social dynamics that govern their spread.

This insight has been operationalized as a deliberate strategy of statecraft. The RAND Corporation analysts Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, studying contemporary Russian disinformation, named its distinctive technique the "firehose of falsehood": a model characterized by high volume, multiple channels, rapidity, and a frank disregard for both objective reality and internal consistency. The firehose does not seek to construct a coherent counter-narrative that might be rationally contested. It seeks instead to flood the information environment with so many contradictory claims that audiences, unable to sort signal from noise, retreat into resignation or fall back on partisan loyalty. The strategy is a precise inversion of the classical ideal of persuasion: its goal is not to convince but to overwhelm, not to establish a truth but to make the establishment of any truth seem hopeless. Here Arendt's prophecy is

fulfilled by design, for the manufacture of generalized doubt, not the propagation of a particular lie, is the objective.

The affective dimension completes the mechanism. Post-truth rhetoric privileges emotional resonance over evidentiary warrant, and the empirical study of online information circulation suggests why this is so effective. In a landmark analysis of the diffusion of news on social media, Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral found that false stories spread "significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth" across every category they examined, and that falsehood was markedly more novel and more likely to elicit responses of surprise and disgust (Vosoughi et al. 1146). The architecture of the platforms, which rewards engagement, thus structurally privileges content engineered to provoke. Falsehood, unconstrained by the dull obligations of accuracy, can be tailored for maximal emotional impact in a way that truth, tethered to what actually occurred, cannot. The post-truth communicator who appeals to fear, grievance, and indignation is not merely indulging a rhetorical preference; he is exploiting the measurable dynamics of an information ecosystem that amplifies affect over accuracy.

Computational Propaganda: Automating the Rhetoric of the Crowd

The mechanisms described thus far, framing, repetition, emotional provocation, acquire vastly greater force when industrialized through digital automation. In the volume *Computational Propaganda*, Samuel Woolley and Philip Howard define their subject as the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to distribute misleading information across social media networks, and their country case studies document its deployment in democracies and authoritarian states alike. The decisive innovation is the manufacture of artificial consensus. Where the older propaganda of the mass-media age broadcast a message from an identifiable center, computational propaganda simulates the spontaneous agreement of the crowd, exploiting the deep human disposition to take widespread belief as evidence of truth. The rhetorical appeal at work is the ancient *argumentum ad populum*, the appeal to popularity, now generated synthetically and at scale.

Two techniques deserve particular emphasis for their linguistic significance. The first is the political bot, an automated account that masquerades as a human participant in order to amplify particular messages, inflate the apparent support for a position, and harass or drown out opposing voices. By manufacturing the impression that a view is widely and passionately held, networks of bots manipulate the perception of social proof that ordinarily guides individuals uncertain of where the public stands. The second is astroturfing, the orchestration of ostensibly grassroots expression by concealed sponsors, whose very name marks it as counterfeit grassroots sentiment. Both techniques are fundamentally rhetorical: they do not argue but perform, staging a spectacle of consensus designed to be persuasive precisely because it appears to issue from ordinary citizens rather than from interested parties. The illusory-truth effect operates here at the level of the social as well as the cognitive, for a claim repeated by a thousand seemingly independent voices acquires a credibility that no single source could confer.

The convergence of these capacities with the psychological mechanisms described earlier produces a propaganda apparatus of remarkable efficiency. Automation supplies the volume that the firehose model requires; algorithmic curation directs emotionally provocative content toward the audiences most susceptible to it; bot networks manufacture the repetition that breeds illusory truth and the false consensus that recruits social proof. Tellingly, the system requires no master narrative and no commitment to consistency, only the sustained production of doubt, division, and affect. This is the technological realization of the post-truth condition: a discourse machine optimized not for persuasion toward shared belief but for the erosion of the shared epistemic ground on which democratic deliberation depends. What Orwell imagined

as a centralized ministry has been distributed across networks, automated, and rendered deniable.

Toward Rhetorical Literacy: Repairing the Democratic Commons

The conventional response to this predicament, the expansion of fact-checking and the promotion of media literacy understood as the verification of claims, is necessary but, on the analysis advanced here, insufficient. If the post-truth condition were merely a deficit of accurate information, correction would suffice. But the foregoing has argued that the condition is rhetorical rather than informational: it operates through frames that fact-checking cannot touch, through repetition that correction may inadvertently reinforce, through emotional appeals indifferent to evidence, and through manufactured consensus that mimics the very signals of credibility on which citizens rely. The research of Gordon Pennycook and David Rand on the psychology of fake news points toward the difficulty and the opportunity alike: they find that susceptibility to misinformation owes less to deliberate partisan reasoning than to inattention and a failure to engage in careful, reflective thinking, and that even minimal prompts to consider accuracy can measurably improve the quality of what people believe and share (Pennycook and Rand 388). The problem is partly one of cognitive habit, and habits can be cultivated.

What is required, I argue, is a reconception of media literacy as rhetorical literacy. To check a fact is to evaluate a proposition after it has been received; to read a frame is to apprehend the structure that shapes reception before the proposition arrives. A rhetorically literate citizen asks not only whether a claim is true but what metaphor organizes it, whose interests its frame serves, what emotions it is engineered to arouse, and whether the consensus it invokes is genuine or manufactured. This is, in effect, the analytic competence that critical discourse analysis has developed as a scholarly method, translated into a civic capacity. Lakoff's account of framing, Wodak's anatomy of populist strategy, van Dijk's analysis of discursive domination, and Orwell's vigilance toward euphemism furnish not merely descriptions of the disease but the curriculum of its prevention. To teach citizens to recognize the strict-father metaphor at work in an appeal, to identify the us-and-them grammar of a fear-based narrative, or to notice when a transgression is being deployed to shift the boundary of the sayable is to equip them with defenses that no quantity of after-the-fact correction can supply.

Such a program faces real limits, and intellectual honesty requires acknowledging them. Rhetorical literacy cannot by itself counteract the structural incentives of platforms engineered for engagement, nor the asymmetry between the labor of producing falsehood and the labor of refuting it, nor the deliberate exhaustion that the firehose strategy seeks to induce. These demand institutional and regulatory responses beyond the scope of any individual competence. Yet the cultivation of a public capable of reading the rhetorical mechanics of its own manipulation is a precondition for those responses rather than an alternative to them, for democratic remedies depend upon a citizenry able to recognize that it is being manipulated. The defense of the democratic commons begins with the refusal to mistake the management of frames for the disclosure of facts, and with the restoration of language to its proper office as an instrument of shared accountability rather than of its dissolution.

Conclusion

The post-truth condition named by lexicographers in 2016 is not, this article has contended, a sudden eclipse of facts by feelings, but a transformation in the relationship between political language and referential accountability. Its rhetoric privileges form over reference: the frame that structures perception before evidence arrives, the repetition that breeds the felt familiarity of truth, the emotional saturation that outpaces accuracy in the

marketplace of attention, and the manufactured consensus that counterfeits the signals of credibility. What unites these techniques, and what distinguishes post-truth speech from the ordinary political lie, is their target. The liar, as Frankfurt and Arendt both understood, still honors the authority of truth by troubling to conceal it; post-truth discourse withdraws that homage, aiming not at the propagation of a particular falsehood but at the erosion of the audience's appetite for adjudication itself. Orwell glimpsed the endpoint, the preemption of thought through the corruption of language, and the computational propaganda of the present has industrialized it. If the analysis offered here is sound, then the repair of democratic discourse will not be accomplished by correction alone. It will require a citizenry literate in the rhetoric of its own deception, capable of reading the frames that govern what it is permitted to think, and willing to insist that language answer once more to the world it claims to describe.

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