



Stewart Gowans, commentator and fake-news specialist delves into the truth about... 'truth'.

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Fake News The New Normal?

Of all the challenges facing researchers in the next decade, fake news is probably the most worrying, potentially the most challenging – and certainly the most fun.

It's been around forever, of course, going under various guises; i.e. lies, disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, etc. Propaganda was perfected by that wicked man, Josef Goebbels, who successfully persuaded the German people that Hitler was "a good thing". It didn't end well.

Propaganda was usually easy to spot; you knew where it came from, or could easily find out, and you could make an educated guess as to what motives lay behind it. Doing so was helped by the fact that, until

very recently you needed considerable resources to spread propaganda or fake news; basically you needed to own a radio or TV station, a magazine, or a great big hulking newspaper. Today, all you need is a mobile phone on which you can create a fake website, Twitter storm, or Facebook post, and send it around the world in milliseconds. It's slightly slower in Norfolk, of course.

No absolutes

The point about propaganda is that it's intentional, and is usually driven by either financial or political gain. So far, so straightforward, but for the researcher there is a bigger problem – relativity – not the sort Albert Einstein kept banging on about, but cultural relativity. There is, in fact, a philosophical underpinning for fake news which can be found in the works of foxy French philosopher Michel Foucault, who claimed that there could be no absolutes, that everything was subject to cultural conditioning and needed to be seen in the context of social relationships, and above all, of power structures. This is dead brainy stuff (only three people on the planet understand Foucault, and I'm not one of them) but basically it means that everything comes with baggage and – a bit like Donald

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Trump's hair – everything is a “construct”, and shouldn't be taken at face value.

This strand of thinking caught on big in academia and has had a huge (and not always acknowledged) impact on wider society. It's the mother of clever stuff like post-modernism, post-structuralism, and is the grandmother of today's buzzword . . . post-truth. “Post-truth” was Word of the Year 2016, defined by the Oxford English

Dictionary as... "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". In other words, if you felt something was true – or simply wanted it to be – then it was true. Oh dear.

Post truth

The recent American Presidential election brought "fake news" and "post truth" into sharp focus. The election generated an unprecedented cavalcade of fake news sites, hoax stories, bogus claims, and phoney tweets of false information. With over 60% of Americans using social networks as a source of news, and approaching half of them primarily using Facebook, the silliest story spread faster than cold sores during a University Freshers' Week. Things were made worst by the "filter bubble", the phenomenon of social media showing users only things that they like or tend to agree with, and hiding those that they don't – a sort of software driven confirmation bias. This fake news tsunami was created by well-funded ersatz news agencies, spotty kids in their bedrooms, and red-faced gun toting religious fundamentalists. The ability of social media to share stuff is perhaps its greatest power, and to paraphrase Winston Churchill... "never has been so much rubbish generated and shared with so many by so few". It was the perfect storm, and it was fun.

While it was no surprise that interest groups and individuals wanted to generate and spread fake news, the real showstopper was candidate Trump's innovative efforts in the area. Once, he tweeted that...

"Fake news media... is the enemy of the American people". To be fair to him, he was really alluding to the undoubted fact that the media (and cultural entities such as Hollywood) is controlled by the American



Stewart Gowans is a writer, speaker, trainer, facilitator and commentator on workplace culture. He has over 20 years' experience helping private, public and third sector organisations meet their marketing and communications challenges. Stewart is particularly passionate about qualitative research and the 'soft' issues that affect organisational performance.

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coastal elites based New York and Los Angeles who – if they don't actually have a covert agenda – certainly have a lot of baggage. Essentially, they see the world very differently from a farmer in Ohio, or most people in the “flyover states”.

Trump's truth

So far, so sort of normal. The more worrying use of post-truth is when politicians and commentators use it to mean anything they disagree with. Donald Trump said recently that “Any negative polls are fake

news”. This is dangerous, as was Trump aide, Kellyanne Conway's now infamous allusion to “alterative facts”.

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This is serious because, expertise is precisely what is the research sector is selling. Few clients believe that they are paying a research company for absolute truth; instead they expect information – whether it is about their customers, competitors, products, or services – backed by evidence, presented with expert interpretation, and with integrity. To the degree that the post-truth meme becomes the norm and undermines clients' faith in research, we all have a problem.

Research's truth

According to a statistic I've just made up, thanks to “post-truth”, 67.2% of researchers just coming into the sector, or in their early years of their career, will be challenged by clients in ways their more senior colleagues never have been. What to do? Well, we can't let post-truth become the new normal, there has to be a fight back, it's up to everyone in research to go the extra mile to bolster methodologies, sharpen their analytic skills and be more vocal about the fact that there is skill, there is professionalism, in everything they do. After recent, knocks, I'm tempted to paraphrase Trump and say, after recent events, that we need to “Make Research Great Again”.

There's probably never been a more challenging time to be in research, but there's certainly never been a more exciting one. The “truth” may be an increasingly nuanced concept – but it's out there.