

Book Review | Post-Truth: How We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It by Evan Davis

In Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It, Evan Davis analyses the rise of a post-truth environment, its historical antecedents and the cultural factors that enable it to flourish in the contemporary moment. Ignas Kalpokas praises this book for combining journalistic flare, accessibility and substance to offer a multi-faceted understanding of how post-truth functions in society today.

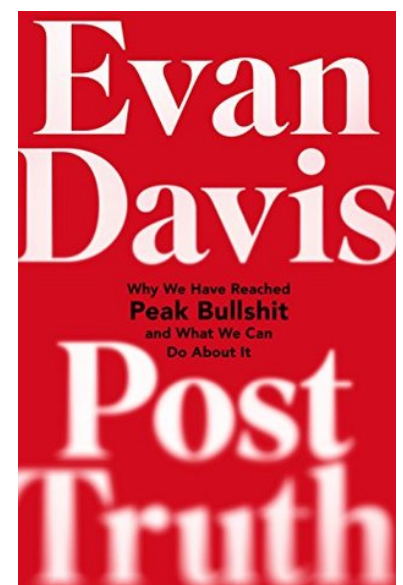


Image Credit: Author Evan Davis at LSE Institute of Public Affairs and Polis Lecture on 'Post-Truth', 18 October 2017 (© LSE in Pictures)

Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It. Evan Davis. Little, Brown. 2017.

Over the past few years, the concept of 'post-truth' has been attracting increasing attention in both scholarly and journalistic circles. It is, of course, primarily associated with the success of Donald Trump as well as with the UK Brexit referendum campaign. As a result, it is no coincidence that 'post-truth' was chosen by Oxford Dictionaries as the ['Word of the Year'](#) in 2016 nor surprising that there has been a proliferation of books on the subject (of which, publications by [James Ball](#), [Matthew d'Ancona](#) or [Julian Baggini](#) are perhaps the most notable). While someone with an interest in post-truth might find it difficult to choose a worthwhile read, if one was to select just one book out of those currently available, Evan Davis's *Post-Truth* would undisputedly top the list.

A potential reader must be forewarned that there are things which this book does not do. If one's interest in post-truth does not stretch beyond the anecdotal or juicy Trump stories, then the advice would be to go for other titles. Likewise, one should look somewhere else for catchy doom-and-gloom stories or easy answers and solutions. Instead, *Post-Truth* is one of the first, and by far the most successful, analyses of post-truth in its context, its historical antecedents, the cultural factors that enable the post-truth environment and an insightful discussion of its implications.



Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the book is the author's broad-ranging engagement with 'bullshit', conceived broadly as the absence of any regard for truth whatsoever (in contrast to the mere lie, which still has a relation to truth as an attempt to hide or obfuscate it). Bullshit is seen in this book as one of the key features of our culture and as permeating everything from everyday norms of civility through quotidian artefacts, such as advertisements and product reviews (perhaps including this book review as well), to high-level diplomatic negotiations.

Certainly, such everyday bullshit should not be perceived exclusively negatively – and Davis is very good at demonstrating numerous cases of positive, or at least neutral, bullshit, such as 'white lies' in complimenting a friend for a dessert they have ruined in order not to offend their feelings – but it still piles up, demonstrating that, actually, bullshit is all around. Indeed, as Davis states in the introduction, post-truth is nothing other than carefully calculated strategies to attract attention in a bullshit-permeated environment, and is therefore 'rooted in styles of communication that we are familiar with and we all use' (xiii). Hence, bullshit – the enabling factor of post-truth – is a collusion in which everyone participates.

The structure of the book is composed of three core building blocks. The first is the exposition of bullshit as a phenomenon and the different forms that it takes. Here, the author is capable of extracting forms of bullshit from the most banal actions, such as smiling in photos or sharing selfies. Effectively, Evan Davis demonstrates how bullshit is one of the key threads that hold the fabric of our society together in the forms of politeness (not hurting somebody's feelings); as a way of not telling the truth without lying outright; as gaining the attention of your customers with slogans nobody believes in anyway; and as a means for service providers to conform with the public's expectations of overstatement, as well as myriad other ways.

Having established the basic manifestations of bullshit, Davis moves to its explanation, providing four kinds in total: indirect honest manifestation, when an exaggerated claim allows the communicator to claim a particular ground (e.g. [a voter may not have agreed with Trump that Mexican immigrants are 'rapists and drug dealers'](#) but they will have memorised that Trump is against immigration); psychological manipulation, i.e. manipulation of audience fears and expectations in order to trick them into adhering with a post-truth narrative; short-term rationality, referring to a propensity to utter false claims if future debunking is not an issue; and the social rewarding of bullshit.

The account of the latter particularly demonstrates how we all collude to entrench bullshit as deeply as possible: paradoxically, we ourselves seem to encourage and incentivise people to spread bullshit if they want to proceed with even the most innocent of goals. After all, if everyone overstates or obfuscates the truth, and audiences come to expect outlandish statements (the more outlandish, the greater attention ostensibly given), an honest person, abiding by the rules of well-reasoned discourse and avoiding unsubstantiated claims, will be at a disadvantage, their claims being seen to demonstrate a lack of commitment. Taken in sum, these four explanations provide a comprehensive account of why bullshit (and post-truth as its manifestation) prevails in contemporary societies.

Finally, the third section of the book deals with possible improvements, once again starting bottom-up, focusing on what we ourselves can do to improve the situation and make bullshit less sustainable. The measures offered include raising the (self-)awareness of communicators, the promotion of greater authenticity among politicians and efforts to involve the public as discerning listeners rather than passive recipients. However, as with any project for improving the public's mores and tastes, this part does read as rather speculative and far-fetched. In particular, change actors and factors are not elucidated clearly enough. Nevertheless, this part still broadens the understanding of post-truth and bullshit by delving deeper into political and journalistic practices, e.g. when aiming to demonstrate how efforts to keep a message on the agenda through permanently repeating it regardless of the context (another example of bullshitting) should eventually backfire by tiring out the audience. In other words, even this, perhaps the weakest part, is still a worthy read.

Overall, Evan Davis's *Post-Truth* manages to combine journalistic flare and accessibility with the substance you would expect from a scholarly volume. Admittedly, that substance does come at some cost: those expecting quick answers will be slightly disappointed as the author's ambition is obviously to go beyond the trivial. However, those capable of dedicating the necessary amount of time (but not necessarily patience – Evan Davis is a great storyteller) will be rewarded with a multi-faceted understanding of how post-truth has emerged and functions in our societies. One will come to understand, among other things, that bullshit is a long-standing and deeply embedded issue; that we all contribute to it through spreading it and encouraging others to do the same; that bullshit can play a positive role since, when considered carefully, even bullshit can reveal something honest; and that bullshit (and, by implication, post-truth) can offer a welcome escapist fantasy. In short, there is more to bullshit than the conventional use of the term might suggest.

This review gives the views of the author, and not that of Democratic Audit. It first appeared on the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).

If you are interested in this book, you may like to [listen to a podcast](#) of Evan Davis's lecture, 'Post-Truth: How We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It', recorded at LSE on 18 October 2017.

Ignas Kalpokas is currently assistant professor at LCC International University and lecturer at Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania). He received his PhD from the University of Nottingham. Ignas's research and teaching covers the areas of international relations and international political theory, primarily with respect to sovereignty and globalisation of norms, identity and formation of political communities, political use of social media, political impact of digital innovations, and information warfare. He is the author of *Creativity and Limitation in Political Communities: Spinoza, Schmitt and Ordering* (Routledge, 2018). [Read more by Ignas Kalpokas](#).

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