

# Donald Trump's use of post-truth double-think politics is a threat to liberal democratic norms.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/02/09/donald-trumps-use-of-post-truth-double-think-politics-is-a-threat-to-liberal-democratic-norms/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/02/09/donald-trumps-use-of-post-truth-double-think-politics-is-a-threat-to-liberal-democratic-norms/)

2/9/2017

*The election of Donald Trump to the presidency has sparked new debates over the nature of “truth” as the new administration uses “alternative facts” to support its own narratives. [Simon Kaye](#) and [Clayton Chin](#) write that the wider implications of this new discourse about truth have been largely missed. They argue that Trump and his followers’ use of “alternative facts” is an anti-democratic refusal to engage in liberal democracy under its established norms.*



In his extraordinary dystopian novel *1984*, George Orwell wrote that double-think is “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them”, premising his account of totalitarian government on the psychological state that we now call cognitive dissonance. With nearly the opposite sentiment, F.Scott Fitzgerald wrote in 1936 that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” Note also Niels Bohr, in 1934: “There are trivial truths and the great truths. The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true.”



Contemporary politics demands that we address our own relationship with the possibility of contradictory truths. Donald Trump’s rise to power is forcing the re-assessment of many previously such inviolable pillars of our establishment. Most crucially, it brings into relief the growing struggle over truth itself: its creation, its critical mediation by news sources and the world of new and social media, and its use by politicians and other political actors. A pattern is emerging where the established ways of mediating alternative views – through media discourse and regular democratic interaction – are directly subverted by the propagation of wilful untruths and selective reportage.

Trump and his campaign’s seemingly calculated, intractable and surprisingly effective use of blatant non-truths to contradict both his political opponents and the mainstream American media’s accounts of him have occurred so frequently that most of us have not had a chance to consider how such a strategy is made possible or its potential effects on our political lives and institutions. Kellyanne Conway, Trump’s spokesperson and political advisor, attracted a massive response when she defended Sean Spicer’s misleading accounts of the numbers attending Trump’s inauguration with the explanation that they were merely “alternative facts” – an insalubrious phrase that might, like the even more recent reference to a [non-existent “massacre”](#), have been easily forgotten had it not worked so readily as a brand-name for Trump’s brand of political communication.

This has generated a flurry of comparisons, connecting such use of language and (non)factual claims to George Orwell’s *1984* and its portrayal of a totalitarian state that systematically makes use of non-truths (or, at least, a state of indeterminate truth) to coerce and indoctrinate its population. Such a comparison is at least publicly compelling too, given the rush of sales of the book *1984* in the wake of Trump’s [inauguration](#).

While there is much to these observations on Trump’s use of language in the “post-truth era”, his rejection of a disagreeable news media system is quite familiar in the scope of a contemporary politics which is changing drastically under the pressure of growing public hostility to expertise and the influence of the internet on knowledge with its [facilitation of “confirmation bias, group polarisation effects, and information “filter bubbles”](#). Yet, arguably the wider implications of the ‘alternative facts’ discourse on our public democratic culture have been missed.

Trump refuses the basic premise of modern democratic government: the commitment to reason together, to exchange our motivations and understandings of the world, and so to produce at least approximately collective and legitimate decisions.

- Simon Kaye and Clayton Chin

Trump and his followers' use of mistruths is not simply an attempt to distort facts about his popularity, past or intentions. It is an anti-democratic refusal to engage in liberal democracy under its established norms. Trump refuses the basic premise of modern democratic government: the commitment to reason together, to exchange our motivations and understandings of the world, and so to produce at least approximately collective and legitimate decisions. Rather, his politics revolves around confusing the accounts of opponents while feeding an ever-more sequestered and biased worldview for his own supporters. From this standpoint, every objection, protest, and counter-argument becomes self-defeating fuel for a kind of conspiracy theory epistemology. We can see similar trends in the UK in the carved-off political support of Jeremy Corbyn or Paul Nuttall as well.

Substantive democratic politics is a difficult thing to achieve. Representative liberal democracies are, even at their best, only an imperfect expression of such democratic ideals. But the wilful attempt to subvert the democratic willingness to at least consider contradictory points of view with the 'mainstreaming' of untruths is a very dangerous trend.

Seen in this light, Spicer's first post-inauguration press conference, his refusal to engage with the media in the usual Q&A, only dictating to them, is a dramatic demonstration that this administration will feel free to directly distribute 'acceptable' interpretations of current events. The idea, made explicit in that first briefing, of "taking his message directly to the American people", suggests the ongoing use of modern communication technologies and social media to bypass the usual layers of criticism and media analysis that have been a marker for democratic politics since at least the end of the second world war.

Of course, fringe politics is often marked by such distaste for broadly centrist news-sources, but Trump can no longer be considered a fringe political figure. Neither is he the first successful political figure in a Western democracy to bemoan the state of the media and to seek to bypass or rein it in. In Britain, former Prime Minister Tony Blair was noted for his frustrations with [the 'feral beast' of media oversight](#) – a visible reaction to the obsessive newspaper-courting and poll-watching of 'third way' politicians on both sides of the Atlantic – and reported that his greatest "blunder" while in office was [the introduction of Freedom of Information legislation](#) in his first term. Former Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin's political career, who in hindsight now appears as a powerful harbinger of Trump's success, was marked by [her attacks](#) on the critical "lamestream media". Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the British Labour Party is marked by such rejections of the 'MSM' on his part and that of his supporters.

Can democratic politics flourish when only one source of truth-interpretation is acceptable to one or another political

tribe? Or when our basic democratic willingness to hear out 'the other' is manipulated to the point of the propagation of contradictory untruths? This is the real lesson of Orwell's *1984*. Mistruth and distortion are power-plays. Orwell characterised the state of 'double-think' as follows:

*To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget, whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself — that was the ultimate subtlety; consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed.*

The late American philosopher Richard Rorty, who was recently credited with [predicting Trump's](#) rise, argued that this is the real power and danger of O'Brien, Orwell's representative of totalitarianism who tortures the protagonist Winston in the final section of the book.

*In the view of 1984 I am offering, Orwell has no answer to O'Brien, and is not interested in giving one... O'Brien regards the whole idea of being "answered," of exchanging ideas, of reasoning together, as a symptom of weakness. Orwell did not invent O'Brien to serve as a dialectical foil... He invented him to warn us against him, as one might warn against a typhoon or a rogue elephant. Orwell is not setting up a philosophical position but trying to make a concrete political possibility plausible... He does not view O'Brien as crazy, misguided, seduced by a mistaken theory, or blind to the moral facts. He simply views him as dangerous and as possible.*

This is important for our understanding of Trump, his 'ultimate subtlety', and the post-truth era. Trump and his politics is not a turning point but a possibility created by the fabric of our society that has now manifested. And he is a possibility that in his essence derides and rejects the basic commitment of American and other democracies: the commitment to respect each other at least enough to give good-faith reasons and back-up our political claims with meaningful arguments.

The introduction of cognitive dissonance on a nationwide scale can only strengthen political demagoguery. Trump is making a vice of a virtue, of the human capacity to question apparent reality and experiment publicly with contradictory arguments.

Trump did not create the 'post-truth' era. Nor even is he its most dramatic manifestation. He is a natural consequence of a frustration with democratic conversation. And it is this that must be understood and acted upon if democracy is to be preserved.

Featured [image](#) credit: [duncan c](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-NC-2.0](#))

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp— American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2kvf4Ho>

## About the authors

### **Simon Kaye** – *King's College London*

Dr Simon Kaye is Teaching Fellow in the departments of [Political Economy](#) and [Liberal Arts](#), at King's College London. He works on democratic theory and political epistemology, researching the possibility of political theory that is realistic about the knowledge, beliefs, and pluralised objectives of actual democratic citizens. These ideas are explored through research and teaching in the areas of political theory, British politics, history, and academic methods. Simon tweets from [@stkaye](#).



### **Clayton Chin** – *The University of Melbourne*

Dr. Clayton Chin is Lecturer in Political Theory in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. His research focuses on the methodology of different traditions within political theory, particularly the relation between pragmatist political thought and the analytical and Continental approaches, and increasingly, issues related to multiculturalism and cultural diversity in contemporary liberal democracies.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP