

The post-fact world: six steps you can take to fight back

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*How did we come to be living in a 'post-fact' world? Who or what is responsible for the breakdown in trust in fact-generating institutions? Crucially, what can we do about it? In this edited extract from a lecture delivered at several US universities, **Mary Poovey**, author of *A History of the Modern Fact* and of the forthcoming *Finance in America: An Unfinished Story*, traces the assaults on factuality back to the 1960s and suggests practical ways to resist them.*



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Ever since Donald J. Trump launched his unorthodox campaign for President of the United States, we have been forced to confront a reality that few realised had already begun to materialise: the transformation of factuality. We are now beginning to understand what contributed to this world-historical event: the consolidation of a binary form of tribalism, in which two politicised sides vow to fight to the death, the self-affirming bubble worlds curated on social media, the discrediting of the mainstream media, and the proliferation of fake news (including fake news sponsored by foreign entities – Russia). Before 2016, commentators on the left and right had largely been oblivious to this transformation, even though assaults on factuality have been occurring since at least the 1960s.

Since Aristotle's time, we have seen four regimes of factuality, characterised by ancient facts, modern facts, model-facts, and—now—post-modern facts. Each regime has overlapped with its predecessor but each has gradually given way to a new version of factuality. Just to take the regime now under siege, we now see many challenges to model-facts. Even though economists (and climate scientists and so on) still rely on models, the producers of models are now under siege. Scepticism about economic models erupted after the 2008 financial crisis, and scepticism about climate-change models has always stalked that science, even as global temperatures continue to rise. Even more troubling than scepticism about model-facts, however, are more recent attacks on the sources—indeed, the very possibility—of facts in general. The three most important traditional sources of facts were scientists and other academic experts; the government (which includes not only elected officials, but also intelligence agencies and the professionals who make government work); and the news media. Each of these fact-generating institutions used methods that rested on shared assumptions and each existed in a network of checks and balances.

Scientists and academic experts based their authority on research, and their results were checked by a network of

peer review. The government based its authority on the popular will of the electorate and the training and expertise of its professional employees. The primary checks on the government were the popular will, expressed through elections, and the news media. The news media, in turn, derived its authority from a tradition of disinterested objectivity, combined with reliance on multiple sources to verify every story. The check on the news media came from the ethos of the profession, combined with the pressure exerted by revenue sources—subscriptions and advertising revenue, which, in turn, followed the people who provided the funds—subscribers, advertisers, and, ultimately, consumers.

So, the most recent phase of the fact-based world was subtended by a democracy of voters and a democracy of consumers, mediated by institutions such as universities and other credentialising organisations, the free market, and free and open elections.

Just as it is impossible to identify the moment at which modern facts were displaced by model-facts, so it is impossible to document to beginning of the end of factuality, the displacement of models by a post-modern condition of post-factuality. If one wanted an American origin, one might choose October 17, 2004, when an aide for George W. Bush (probably Karl Rove) scorned the “reality-based community.” People in this community “believe that solutions emerge from . . . judicious study of discernible reality,” Rove said. “That’s not the way the world works any more. We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” Or one could choose the 1960s, when the sugar industry launched a war on the science that linked sugar to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, claiming that saturated fat, not sugar, was the culprit and that all calories are alike. Or, if one wanted an international origin, one could choose 1999, when Vladimir Putin, former KGB operative, assumed the presidency of Russia and launched his non-linear war against Western democracies.

One of Putin’s chief advisers is a former avant-garde artist, Vladislav Surkov. Surkov has imported ideas from conceptual art into the political arena. Over the last few decades, Surkov has sponsored an eclectic mix of groups in Russia, ranging from Putin supporters to critics of the Russian president; and, most importantly, Surkov has repeatedly announced what he is doing. In the “non-linear warfare” exemplified by Russian support for Syria’s Assad, the annexation of eastern Ukraine, and Putin’s “bromance” with Donald Trump, Surkov is engineering

“a war where you never know what the enemy are really up to, or even who they are. The underlying aim . . . is not to win the war, but to use the conflict to create a constant sense of destabilised perception, in order to manage and control.”

The point of all this, according to the BBC filmmaker Adam Curtis, is to transform representative democracy into what Surkov calls “managed democracy”—a sociality in which individuals can express themselves and enjoy the illusion of freedom without having any impact on the business of the state, which is managed by an authoritarian ruler and his agents. In this managed democracy, the only freedom is “artistic freedom,” and this reduces to self-expression—or selfies—without effect. (You can see Adam Curtis’s 5 minute film on Surkov [here](#).)

Whatever its origin and whether or not it is produced by a Vladislav Surkov-Steve Bannon-Donald Trump-Vladimir Putin cabal, our world is no longer overseen by the three guardians of facticity. In this world, ordinary citizens and parties with their own vested interests have begun to question the very possibility of facts. With little institutional support for factuality, when every claim requires belief, and every claim appeals to beliefs, there seems to be no way to distinguish between facts and opinions. As social consensus erodes—indeed, as more people increasingly desire social consensus less than they want to be proved “right” by others who agree with them, social cohesion deteriorates. In order for a heterogeneous group of people—like the American population—to achieve social cohesion, they have to want community more than self-affirmation. And for that to happen, people of all races and faiths and socio-economic and identity groups have to believe that the community in some important sense represents—has a place for—them.

Not everyone agrees with my analysis, of course. Some futurists, such as the MIT Media Lab's Joi Ito, insist that our "faster future" will be enhanced by new skills everyone can master. Some critics of the media scoff that the fourth estate has never played the policing function I have described. According to Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, the mainstream media is too centralised, too monopolised, and too corporatised to offer a range of perspectives. And some critics of modern society, such as Philip Mirowski, argue that the problem is not the erosion of facticity but the much more pernicious penetration of all democratic institutions by a neo-liberal cabal intent on commodifying politics, science, the media, and the very nature of identify in order to channel profits to the already-rich and soon-to-be-richer.

While I agree with Mirowski that the assault on facticity belongs to a larger cultural shift, I don't see the level of organisation and co-ordinated malice that he describes. While I agree that consolidation has altered the face of the media landscape in America, I worry more about blurring the boundary between entertainment and news than about corporate media mergers per se. And while I have some hope that compasses will prove more generative than maps, I remain deeply skeptical that digital platforms like Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Twitter will be able to resist the allure of market culture. It's just too appealing to use these platforms to sell something instead of encouraging users to explore their non-commercial potential.

So, what can we do if we want to resist the erosion of factuality? **I can suggest six steps that anyone can take.** And you will note that each of these involves either turning away from social media or supplementing the use of social media with more old-school forms of communication.

- Subscribe to the news sources you find most balanced. Or subscribe to numerous news sources, preferably those that articulate a range of points of view. And here I don't mean, check your Google newsfeed or other news aggregator often. I mean, pay money for a subscription, whether it's delivered digitally or in paper form. Good news is not free to produce, and the digital business model that has led us to take the consumption of free news for granted is hurting the very investigative journalism that is the basis of good news reporting. So subscribe.
- Lobby to make civics a required part of secondary school education, whether the school is a public school, a religious school or a charter school. The Common Core, with its emphasis on mathematics and language arts, has not helped promote basic knowledge about the institutional backbone of democracy. Our students need this knowledge. Our citizens do too.
- Find ways to promote face-to-face discussions in physical communities—your neighbourhood, your condominium complex, your church, your gym. Everywhere you regularly come into contact with other people, you are in a potential community, with issues you share and about which you and your neighbours may disagree. Learn to talk to people who don't share your opinion in these contexts. Learn to compromise. Learn to appreciate other points of view. (This will not happen in most internet chat rooms or Facebook friend groups.)
- When issues with public consequence come before Congress for debate, call your representative. Studies show that emails, Tweets, Facebook posts, and even letters tend to be overlooked by overworked and underpaid congressional staffers. But a ringing phone is hard to ignore, and everyone in the office can hear at least one side of the conversation.
- Donate to organisations that support the freedom of the press. John Oliver and Meryl Streep have named ProPublica and the Committee to Protect Journalists, but I am sure other organisations qualify as well.
- Finally, do not assume that consumption is a political act. Do not substitute consumption for participation. Do not confuse informed consumption with informed citizenship. If you spend more time deciding which set of headphones is likely to deliver the desired sound quality than knocking on your neighbours' doors when community issues are pressing, your priorities are misplaced.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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