

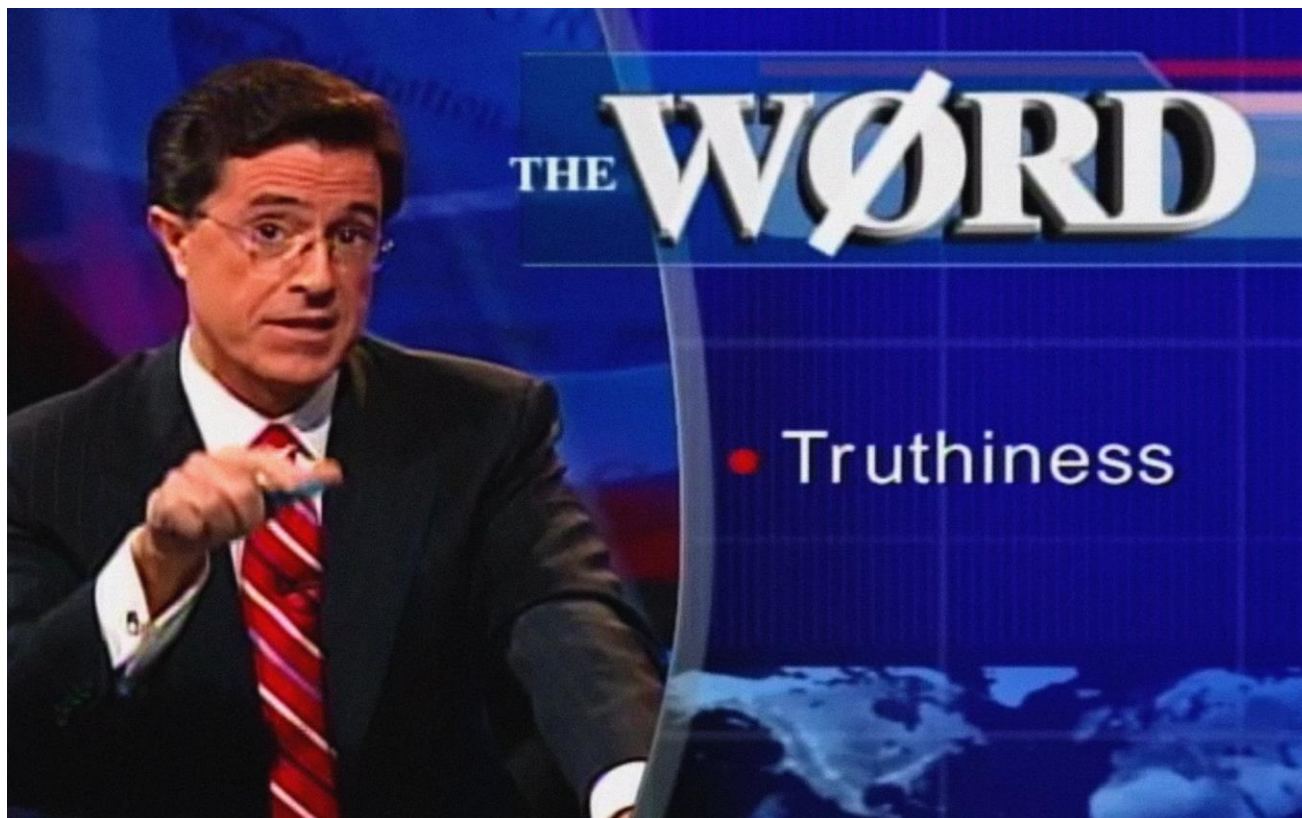
Beyond the Imaginary Politics of Objective Facts

BY

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PART OF SERIES



Stephen Colbert coins the term "truthiness" on *The Colbert Report*, October 17, 2005

Inspired by Werner Herzog's [Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema](#), and his [2017 addendum](#) to that 1999 manifesto, this essay is part of a four-part series of commissioned writings addressing the question, "What is truth in an age of 'alternative facts'?"

Personally, I think an obsession with the “truth,” or the return to it, only takes us so far. It can even be a distraction. This point is actually even more crucial at a time when “fake news” is an obsession, when conspiracy theories circulate with unusual intensity.

Let me explain.

“**Post-truth**,” of course, was the Oxford English Dictionary’s Word of the Year for 2016, reflecting how the Brexit campaign in the UK and the 2016 election in the US rattled mainstream certainties. The term beat out such important contenders as “alt-right” and “woke,” “hygge” and “adulging.”

We live in an “age of post-truth politics.” That phrase has a nice, philosophical sound to it. The “post-” part marks a clear break, reflecting the sense that something seems to have broken in 2016, some tipping point was passed.

But there are precedents.

Back in 2006, Oxford rival Merriam-Webster tapped the strikingly similar “**truthiness**” for its own Word of the Year pick. Defined as “what one wishes to be the truth regardless of the facts,” the Stephen Colbert coinage crystallized the liberal disdain for the cowboy rhetoric of the George W. Bush administration. (It beat out such zeitgeisty contemporaries as “podcast” and “sudoku.”)

As a matter of fact, the whole craze for crowning Words of the Year kicked off way back in 1990, courtesy the American Dialect Society. The ADS’s pick for that inaugural Word was “bushlips,” defined as “insincere political rhetoric” (it’s sort of a slant rhyme with “bullshit,” in case you didn’t get it). The now arcane insult was a dig at president George H.W. Bush, who infamously uttered the words “Read my lips: No new taxes,” before being forced to raise taxes. (Another coinage of that year, “technostupidity,” may be better placed for a comeback.)

Reality, Colbert once joked, has a notoriously liberal bias. So, evidently, do Words of the Year.

The point of this historical hiccup is not to say “‘twas ever thus.” But the pattern may hint at something about the specific hangups of mainstream punditry in the recent past, the way disagreements of (positive) ideology have been displaced into (negative) questions of hypocrisy and deceit.

The official definition of “post-truth” is actually worth reading more closely. Here it is: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

With Donald Trump’s seemingly unstoppable lies and appeals to the basest of instincts as a reference point, it is clear why this resonates. So clear, in fact, that it might be easy to miss what is most extraordinary here: The definition of “post-truth” seems to imply, as the norm from which we have deviated, a world in which data points unpolluted by “emotion or personal belief” rule our political life.

Such a “politics of objective facts” corresponds to no politics that I know of.

Politics *is* the work of inspiring people, of connecting with their emotions as well as their minds, and making them believe in a vision worth fighting for. No matter what facts you have on your side, you cannot win unless you mobilize people around them.

What this worldview *does* describe neatly is the self-conception of people who think of politics as an essentially technocratic affair. And, as Antonio de Velasco has argued, from Bill Clinton on, the liberal mainstream of politics in the US reorganized itself around “[centrist rhetoric](#),” the idea that the problem affecting public life was not the

absence of principles but the excess of ideology—on all sides. The way forward was pragmatically “triangulating” left and right.

Thus, it was easier to mock Bush I for breaking his word on taxes than to make binding economic promises at a time when Democrats were actually converging with Republicans on economic policy.

It was easier to mock Bush II for being reckless with the truth than to commit to ending the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

And it is easier to mock Trump for his opportunistic relation to the facts than to articulate a credible, positive alternative vision to his promises.

Such displacements are felt beyond the narrow realm of political rhetoric. Indeed, recently, another “post-” has taken some blame in the recriminatory fallout from 2016: postmodernism.

“Instead of ‘the truth,’ which was to be rejected as naïve and/or repressive, a new intellectual orthodoxy permitted only ‘truths’—always plural, frequently personalized, inevitably relative,” [Andrew Calcutt argued](#) in *Newsweek*. “[F]or as long as we have been postmodern, we have been setting the scene for a ‘post-truth’ era.”

Having stigmatized stable old Enlightenment truth as naïve and repressive, the story goes, the intellectuals and the artists left the door open to the new onslaught of ignorance and repression. Yet what exactly the “return to truth” would mean remains unspecified.

Certainly, some versions of postmodern philosophy were sophomorically relativist. Pomo jargon has indeed lately found its way to global warming skeptics and the cleverer set of

conspiracists (just as a resurgent white nationalist right has rebranded itself by adopting the mantle of “identity politics”).

But there are aspects of the postmodern critique we might not want to junk so easily. You don’t have to cave to full-blown anti-science superstition to think that it is important to be attentive to how seemingly neutral truth claims can mask various agendas and biases, or are embedded in various distorting power structures and enabling narratives.

The events of 2016 prove as much.

After Brexit and the US election, a lot of wholly justified hand-wringing focused on “filter bubbles.” How did the press, the pundits, the experts, the odds-makers, and all the rest miss this, the political story of a lifetime?

And the answer, in part, was exactly that what they thought was a purely neutral way of thinking was in fact ideologically slanted. Ensconced in elite media and DC subcultures, pundits were blind—and helped blind us—to what was coming.

On election night, the *New York Times* put Hillary Clinton’s odds at 84 percent. After the election, its public editor [took it to task](#), saying it needed a new plan to get outside of its bubble. But evidently, “Not as Certain as We Used to Be” was a bad slogan to sell newspapers, because a few months later, the *Times*’s new ad campaign focuses on the panic around “fake news,” proclaiming “The Truth Matters Now More Than Ever.”

A side effect of centering the conversation on “truth” might be skipping over a reckoning, by exempting one’s own subjective position from scrutiny.

For this reason, to use a bit of jargon, philosophers make a distinction between political “criticism” and political “critique.” Here is literary theorist Terry Eagleton—who has himself provided one of the best internal critiques of postmodernism—on the distinction:

It is important to see that, in the critique of ideology, only those interventions will work which make sense to the mystified subject itself. In this sense, “ideology critique” has an interesting affinity with the techniques of psychoanalysis. “Criticism,” in its Enlightenment sense, consists in recounting to someone what is awry with their situation, from an external, perhaps ‘transcendental’ vantage-point. “Critique” is that form of discourse which seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from inside, in order to elicit those “valid” features of that experience which point beyond the subject’s present condition.

I find that bit of analysis relevant to the current “post-truth” panic. The attempt to claim an “external, perhaps ‘transcendental’ vantage-point” perfectly describes the imaginary “politics of objective facts.”

Noting that people are being mobilized by “fake news” is an important observation, perhaps, but it doesn’t really rise to the level of political critique unless it tries to explain *why*: Why is the fantasy attractive in the first place? What kernel of truth does it speak to that makes it sticky? How might it be combatted?

In the absence of such interrogation, the implied answer is always: because people are just dumb. And that implication really does reflect an elitist worldview, one more about affirming a self-image of enlightened superiority than about fighting to starve one’s enemy of new recruits.

In his classic 1964 essay “[The Paranoid Style in American Politics](#),” historian Richard Hofstadter offered a hypothesis

about what led to the deep hold that conspiracy theories have on the American political mind, a hold that far predates the fevers of the present moment. The “central situation conducive to the diffusion of the paranoid tendency,” Hofstadter wrote, “is a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise.”

Hofstadter’s essay itself something of a harbinger of the “politics of objective facts.” As Eve Sedgwick [noted](#), “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” represents the position of “complacent, coercive liberal consensus,” diagnosing paranoia on all sides, left and right, and inviting the reader back to the warmth of a “calm, understanding, and encompassing middle ground.”

And after all, today, it is not so hard to see evidence of “opposed interests which are totally irreconcilable.” You don’t have to be part of the lunatic fringe to think so: A few years ago, some professors from Princeton and Northwestern even wrote [a paper](#) arguing that the US best described as an oligarchy, not a democracy, because the rich seemed to get what they wanted no matter who was in office, whereas “average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.” In very recent history, we have passed through a historic economic crisis, only to see those who perpetrated it get off largely scot-free.

Even the most outlandish “post-truth” fables, ultimately, gain traction in the soil of real alienation.

Emphasizing too much a picture of things that makes the problem “emotion and belief” trumping “reason and facts” will tend to obscure this—and make it impossible to craft a strategy or line of argument that might actually provide a counter-narrative with some kind of real heft. In that sense, it will become complicit in the “post-truth condition” that it claims to decry.

Another way of putting it: Unless the criticism of “post-truth” really involves some self-scrutiny, then it really just is old-fashioned bushlips.