

## **Abstract**

Online networks have had and continue to have an irrefutable impact upon the way humans interact with knowledge and information. The question is raised- how have online networks altered the way society perceives information? Applying a postmodernist lens and using the 2016 US Presidential Election as a case study, this conference paper shall investigate this notion, arguing that social media has actively weakened objective standards of truth, adding to post-truth discourse.

## **Introduction**

In the age of technology and mass media, society has become increasingly saturated with information. Amongst the most significant contributors to this phenomenon have been digital media and, in recent times, social media. As of 2021, over half of the world's population have access to some form of online network (Tankovska, 2021). Initially forming a niche to bolster human connectivity, social media has expanded to become one of the primary modes for distributing facts and information.

Humans are inherently curious creatures, and online networks allow us to access information at an unprecedented level. With the continued connectivity and reliance on the internet and social media, new forms of persuasive media have emerged, such as biased coverage and 'fake news' (Gavin, 2018). Therefore, social media provides an unregulated distribution network, which has caused unprecedented effects on global events. Resultantly, online networks have had and continue to have an irrefutable impact on the way humans interact with knowledge and information.

This conference paper shall investigate how online networks have weakened objective standards of truth, exacerbating post-truth discourse. Hence the name of this conference paper – *Post Truth. In Colour!* To investigate this, I shall draw from luminary philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and his work *The Postmodern Condition*, applying a postmodernist lens to contextualise the impacts of online networks upon society. In doing so, this essay will depict how the current degradation of truth follows an observable trend.

To support these findings, I will employ the 2016 US Presidential Election as a case study, exploring how online networks provided the ideal platform to disseminate misinformation surrounding the election. Furthermore, I shall focus on the way in which Donald Trump manipulated online networks to further his electoral campaign. To begin this conference paper, however, I shall first set about establishing a framework that will support my argument, focusing on postmodernism's arguments on technology.

### **Postmodernism: an ideal lens**

Postmodernism emerges as the most suitable theory to investigate the impact of online networks on broader society. In the opening of his work *The Postmodern Condition* Jean-François Lyotard (1979, xxiv) defines postmodernity "as incredulity towards metanarratives". For Lyotard, the modern period of 'grand' narratives, or overriding central themes that had underpinned society had now ended.

Instead, a postmodern era was burgeoning, whereby narratives were now small, fragmented and localised. He attributed this occurrence to the advancement in science and technology- citing the computerisation of society as the driving force behind the breakdown of knowledge and truth (Lyotard 1979, 5-6). Specifically, he suggests computerisation is fragmenting the communicative structures of society, in turn, affecting society's ability to denote a single objective standard of truth.

From this, a conceivable trend emerges. Whereby, postmodern society is typified by people whose notions of truth and objectivity are constructed from many different mediums and sources (Bauman, 1992). Thus so, online networks can be perceived as a tangible continuation of Lyotard's arguments concerning computerised societies. Postmodernism, therefore, avails itself to investigating the effects of online networks upon objective standards of truth.

### **Online Networks: the new normal**

Online networks, primarily social media, have become so ingrained within our daily lives that we now rely on them to socialise, keep up to date with news, purchase goods and services, be educated and work. As of January 2021, over 4.66 billion humans used the internet, and of that,

a staggering 4.2 billion frequently log in and use social media platforms (Tankovska, 2021). With technology now seemingly integrated into our lives, humans have begun to adapt and change within these new settings. Fellow postmodern theorist Martin Heidegger stated as far back as the 1960s “a new era of culture and sense of self were emerging, and the ‘modern way-of-being’ was gradually being replaced by the ‘technological way-of-being’ (Kop and Walters 2009:280)”. Again, we see a common thread emerging, in which postmodernists posit technology as being a key determinant upon the change in society.

As engagement with online networks increases, so does their profitability. With capitalist forces impressing their influence upon online networks, interactions with media and information have begun to shift accordingly (Hirshberg 2021, 9). Now conglomerates like Facebook and Instagram enjoy the majority share of social media markets, they now can influence millions of consumers via their online networks. Utilising algorithms that track and target consumer behaviour, these companies can actively increase their viewership by manipulating streams of information (Hirshberg 2021, 9). In doing so, knowledge itself has been commoditised, further adding to the breakdown in objective standards of truth.

In fact, Lyotard alludes to this process, stating “transformation in the nature of knowledge, then, could well have repercussions on the existing public powers, forcing them to reconsider their relations (both de jure and de facto) with the large corporations and, more generally, with civil society (1979, 6).” Despite, mass media being an existing force upon society, online networks have rapidly expedited the process of information dissemination. Combine this with an aggressive profit-led business model and truth becomes secondary to consumer product. This was shown in 2016 during the US Presidential election, when the power of online networks in breaking down standards of truth, became fully realised.

### **2016 US Presidential Election: an unprecedented spectacle**

The election between Donald John Trump and Hillary Rodham Clinton stands as a defining moment in the complex relationship between knowledge and online networks. Trump reprising his role as a showman embodied the notion “the only ‘truth’ is that you can’t be boring (Jordan, 2016)”. By maintaining a robust media presence, he was able to disseminate propaganda to the

masses. It was here where Hilary Clinton gravely miscalculated. Relying on traditional forms of media and dismissing both Trump and online networks, she allowed her opponent to dictate the narrative of the election campaign. Upon careful reflection, the election results no longer seem like the doings of an incensed madman.

Instead, they reflect the actions of a master manipulator who demoted truth and incited dissent to bolster his electoral campaign. Evaluating political spectacles from a postmodernist perspective, Murray Edelman (1988) comments:

The critical element in a political manoeuvre for advantage is creating meaning: the construction of beliefs about events, policies, leaders, problems, and crises that rationalise or challenge existing inequalities... The key tactic must always be the evocation of interpretations that legitimise favoured courses of action.

In 2016, Trump was able to seed discontent in the body politic of both democrat and republican parties by reconfiguring meaning.

He did this by centring himself as the ultimate reference for truth and perpetuating harmful, often baseless propaganda outward via media outlets and online networks. Matthew Jordan (2016) comments Trump “beguiled old and new media into covering him by saying outrageous things – truth be damned – knowing that controversial statements draw immediate overage.” In doing this, he broke down objective standards of truth in order to confuse and mislead the public, thus beginning the world’s descent into a truly post-truth era.

### ***Post-truth. In Colour!***

Post-truth is a term that aptly summarises the surreal events of the 2016 Presidential Election. So much so, the Oxford dictionary deemed it 2016’s word of the year, defining it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (2016)”. From this summation, it is evident why Donald Trump and post-truth are synonymous with each other. Relying heavily on emotional communication in lieu of objective facts, he aimed to distract public attention and interrupt conventional politics (Keane, 2018). This fact was only heightened due to online networks providing an instantaneous platform for Trump’s emotive messaging to be distributed.

If post-truth had not yet experienced a better medium in online networks, then nor had it found a better vessel in Donald Trump. With the latter existing as the personification of profit led digital media, whereby profits and consumption outweigh the importance of reporting truth (Jordan, 2016). As a business man and reality T.V show host, Trump was well positioned to capitalise on the environment online networks provided him. In turn, recognising the selling power of a chaotic political environment with Trump at its epicentre, Facebook deployed algorithms to increase views that added to their bottom line (Jordan, 2016). Thus so, both Trump and online media were engaged in a mutualistic relationship throughout the election period.

When Donald Trump first uttered the now-infamous words 'fake'-news, he did so in retort to a journalist's line of questioning towards him. By co-opting the term fake news, Donald Trump dismissed the legitimacy of mainstream media and, in so doing, removed the standard of truth (Keane, 2018). In turn, he forced his voter base to seek alternative sources of information, again centring himself as the centre for truth, or alternately within online communities of likeminded supporters.

These communities, at times drifted beyond the realms of reality, with some even espousing radical conspiracy theories. As Brendon O'Connor (2019) comments "new information technologies have not just fuelled greater understanding in the world – as some of the utopian founders of the internet had hoped – they have also given more power to the obnoxious and ill-informed". Within these partisan echo-chambers, standards of truth were no longer maintained. Instead, dissatisfaction in the mainstream media and government led topics of often toxic debate.

Both post-truth and fake-news are a symptom of a particular postmodernist process Lyotard describes as 'language games'. Referring again to metanarratives, the issue arises from a fundamental breakdown in the communication of knowledge, in which, meaning is fragmented, created and adheres to localised sets of rules (Lyotard 1979, 65). Put simply, objective standards of truth are relative to communities they are created, circulated and sustained in. The 2016 Presidential election is yet evidence of this process. With Trump establishing himself

as the basis for truth, his supporters unwittingly participated in the distribution of misinformation.

Furthermore, the addition of technology serves to hasten the effects of language games. As (Harms and Dickens 1996, 211) attest, pluralistic media saturation causes one to become disoriented. In online networks, the rate of disorientation is heightened, severely altering people's ability to form objective opinions. The industry norm of 24-hour news cycle only adds to this issue, causing standards of truth to be no longer fixed.

### **Conclusion: horizon scanning for an online future**

With all this information set before us, there can be little doubt of the immense impact of online networks within our lives. In particular, how these networks have directly attributed to the breakdown of objective standards of truth. By utilising the studies of Jean-François Lyotard and fellow postmodernists, I was able to frame these affects within a conceptual base. In particular, I hoped to depict how the convergence of science, technology and society adheres to a specific postmodernist schema.

Postmodernists present compelling arguments framing the effects of technology upon standards of knowledge and truth within society. Central to the validity of this conference paper, were the notions of localised narratives and language games. If we refer back to the case study of the 2016 Presidential election, Donald Trump's actions were synonymous with both categories. In particular, the emergence of post-truth was a key indicator of how Trump exploited localised narratives to seed discontent in his voter base. Additionally, language games reflected how he was able to fabricate truth, with no broad repercussions, as truth was created and sustained within his community of proponents.

This essay has shown the demonstrative dangers the forces of online networks forces play upon the pillars of our civilisation – knowledge and truth. This being so, with technology ever advancing, postmodernists' predictions will become increasingly more relevant to our society. And with that, the ability to define truth will become increasingly difficult. With standards of

truth no longer set in stone and shifting within localised environments, online networks will come to play a pivotal role in the way humans conceive and consume truth in the future.

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