



ANALYSIS

POST-TRUTH AND NATIONAL SECURITY: BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS FOR A NEW ADMINISTRATION

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Why This Matters

“Post-truth” describes an information environment characterized in particular by “truth decay,” to use a term coined by RAND scholars, in which verifiable facts are widely ignored or distrusted—replaced by opinion if not outright invention.¹ In this author’s larger analysis, the major components of our post-truth environment are (1) the embrace of “narratives” rather than fact-based accounts of the world, (2) increasing “tribalism,” and (3) a breakdown of corrective institutions, leading to the “entrenchment” of these conditions on a massive scale.² See Figure 1 for a summary graphic useful throughout this paper.

The 2024 U.S. presidential election campaign displayed all of these components. It eschewed competing policy ideas almost entirely in favor of competing narratives—pitting “save democracy” against “save America.” It appealed to the most virulent tribalists on both sides rather than aiming for voters in the remaining center. And it took place in entrenched information silos composed almost entirely of epistemic partisans rather than objective reporters. But now the campaign is over. As president, Donald Trump faces even greater stakes than he did during his first term—when he already became a major victim (via the “Russia collusion” hoax, for example) and a major player (via his 2020 re-election claims, for example) in the post-truth information environment. The new Trump administration needs to sort fact from torrents of fiction—or face potentially immense consequences. Where U.S. national security is concerned, the challenges and risks of post-truth continue to grow apace. Impressionistic, social-media-borne understandings of conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, for example, already have as much influence on U.S. policy as verifiable information and longstanding national or alliance interests. The next administration will face constant decisions about whether to ignore, manage, or try to shape a digital information environment full of alternative realities.

Rising to the challenge will require long-absent bipartisanship. Neither party’s entrenched attitudes about the information environment—with Democrats focused on “fighting disinformation” and Republicans on “protecting free speech”—offer an effective roadmap for navigating post-truth. Robust national security policies amid a digital cacophony remain possible but require commitments to transparency, consensus-building

¹ See Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Rose of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” RAND Corporate Research Report RR-2314-RC (2018).

² Gary L. Geipel, *Reality Matters: National Security in a Post-Truth World, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/reality-matters-national-security-in-a-post-truth-world/>.



between parties and tribes, and political leadership—all of which have been sorely lacking in broader U.S. policymaking for a generation.

This paper builds on earlier work by this author.³ It will provide an update on post-truth conditions and their impact on national security, consider other recent analyses, isolate the most pressing challenges for the United States, and offer responses that could be effective and practical for an incoming administration.

Background and Recent Examples

Figure 1: National Security, Post-Truth – Definition

Definition	General Threats	National Security Scenarios
Narratives	Information Accuracy	Designed Crises / Ignorance
Tribalism	Decision Quality	Epistemic Coups
Entrenchment	National Resilience	Fatal Distractions

The large-scale narratives that power online information exchange consist of individual assertions that cohere into a larger notion of how some aspect of the world works. However, narratives are not collections of evidence put forward for questioning and eventual reassessment in the manner of scientific paradigms. Today's dominant narratives usually emerge from dramatic events and fragments of information but evolve quickly into rigid dogmas—rigged elections, systemic racism, the power of the Deep State, catastrophic climate change, the Great Replacement, and Settler Colonialism are examples—to which any verifiable evidence must conform if it is considered at all.

The notion of what constitutes “news” itself has been upended in this environment, as the assembly of narrative-conforming storylines by “influencers” replaces anything resembling objective journalism. As political scientist Jon Askonas aptly describes it: “Today, journalists sell compelling narratives that mold the chaotic torrent of events, Internet chatter, and information into readily understandable plotlines, characters, and scenes. ... Like Scheherazade, if they can keep subscribers coming back for more of the story, they will stay alive.”⁴

Tribalism, meanwhile, describes the sorting of more and more individuals into antagonistic groups based on cultural, ethnic, and religious affinity, partisan alignment, and/or geographic proximity. Social media platforms encourage—indeed compel, via powerful algorithms—the clustering of these tribes into silos where the only available information confirms the particular narratives to which they have subscribed or succumbed. In this environment, many institutions that once offered correctives—such as traditional news organizations, universities, and even scientific organizations⁵—have taken the path of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jon Askonas, “How Stewart Made Tucker,” *The New Atlantis* (Summer 2022), available at <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/how-stewart-made-tucker>.

⁵ Geipel, op. cit., pp. 16-18, 43-44.

least resistance and greatest profit to protect and further entrench narratives and tribalism rather than to challenge them.⁶

As described in previous work,⁷ the general threats to national security arising from the current information environment center on (1) the accuracy of information in widespread circulation; (2) the quality of decision-making amid epistemic chaos; and (3) the ultimate resilience of a nation operating without a shared fact base. Examples of these growing threats include “designed crises,” “epistemic coups,” and “fatal distractions,” respectively. Examples continue to multiply. Consider the relationship between major narratives and official U.S. policy on today’s two most serious military conflicts.

Designed Ignorance 1: The Middle East

- On October 7, 2023, Iran-backed Hamas forces executed a surprise attack that killed 1,200 Israelis, most of them civilians, and took an additional 200 hostages. The bolt-from-the-blue terror attack was the largest in the history of Israel, a U.S. ally—the proportional equivalent of an assault killing 45,000 Americans in a day (15 times the September 11, 2001, death toll).
- Within hours, a narrative thread emerged in a letter from student groups at Harvard University—describing Israel as “entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.”⁸ The statement faced significant criticism on and off the Harvard campus but established the outlines of a larger narrative that spread quickly. By October 14, an “open letter” had appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, signed by dozens of progressive writers and artists, already labeling Israel’s limited actions at that point a “crime” in which “governments of the USA, UK, France and others are participating.”⁹
- Fueled by disinformation on social media platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and X, ignorance of Hamas’ actions and criticisms of Israel’s military response rapidly dominated progressive information silos.¹⁰ Within months, anti-Israel protest encampments appeared at dozens of universities across the United States and strident criticisms of Israel spread to numerous other settings.
- According to recent polling by the Pew Research Center, four in 10 American adults under 30 believe that “the way Hamas carried out its attack on Israel” (note: this

⁶ See, for example, Martin Gurri, “Journalism Betrayed,” *City Journal* (Winter 2021), pp. 12-19.

⁷ Geipel, op. cit., pp. 34-51.

⁸ *The Harvard Crimson* (October 10, 2023), available at <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/10/10/psc-statement-backlash/>.

⁹ “An Open Letter from Participants in the Palestine Festival of Literature,” *New York Review of Books* (October 14, 2023), available at <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/10/14/an-open-letter-from-participants-in-the-palestine-festival-of-literature/>.

¹⁰ Brian Fung and Claire Duffy, “The Israel-Hamas war reveals how social media sells you the illusion of reality,” CNN (October 16, 2023), available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/14/tech/social-media-misinformation-israel-hamas/index.html>.

included the targeted killing of civilians, including children, and sexual assaults¹¹) was “acceptable” (9%) or describe themselves as “not sure” (32%).¹² In another large poll only weeks after Israel’s initial response, fully 55% of American adults in the under-30 age group said that they believe that Israel’s treatment of Palestinian Arabs in Gaza constitutes “genocide.”¹³

- An Anti-Defamation League poll in early 2024 found that more than 50% of Gen Z Americans “somewhat” or “strongly” agree that they would “be comfortable being friends with someone who supports Hamas” while 40% of Americans across all age groups strongly or somewhat agree that Israelis “intend to cause as much suffering to Palestinians as possible.”¹⁴
- These and other widespread beliefs are at odds with easily accessible and verifiable information on the details of the October 7 attacks, the actions and positions of Hamas, Israeli efforts to minimize civilian casualties during its recent Gaza incursions, the liberal and multi-cultural nature of Israeli society, and the very definition of the word “genocide.”
- Polls show that overall U.S. support for Israel remains relatively strong. In this information environment, however, the U.S. Government—while initially clear and forceful—has wavered increasingly in its backing of Israel’s efforts to destroy Hamas’ capacity for further terror attacks or even to negotiate with Hamas from a position of strength.
- Recently, as Israel retaliated with precision against the Iran-backed leadership of the Hezbollah terrorist organization in Lebanon (with which the U.S. itself has been at odds since the 1980s), U.S. officials interspersed demands for a ceasefire¹⁵ with a statement calling the result of these actions “a measure of justice.”¹⁶ America’s regional adversaries and allies must struggle to make sense of Washington’s actual position.

¹¹ “I Can’t Erase All the Blood from My Mind,” Human Rights Watch (July 17, 2024), available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/07/17/i-cant-erase-all-blood-my-mind/palestinian-armed-groups-october-7-assault-israel>.

¹² Laura Silver, et al., “Views of the Israel-Hamas War,” Pew Research Center (March 21, 2024), available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/2024/03/21/views-of-the-israel-hamas-war/>.

¹³ Jamie Ballard, “Has genocide been happening in either Israel or Gaza?” YouGov.com (January 19, 2024), available at <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/48442-has-genocide-been-happening-israel-gaza-americans-split-holocaust-native-americans-ukraine-poll>.

¹⁴ Center for Antisemitism Research, “Antisemitic Attitudes in America 2024,” ADL (February 29, 2024), available at <https://extremismterms.adl.org/resources/report/antisemitic-attitudes-america-2024>.

¹⁵ “US and allies call for an immediate 21-day cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah,” *Associated Press* (September 25, 2024), and “Biden calls for ‘a cease-fire now’ amid Israel’s strikes in Lebanon,” *Associated Press* (September 30, 2024).

¹⁶ Aamer Madhani and Matthew Lee, “Biden and Harris call the Israeli strike killing Hezbollah’s Nasrallah a ‘measure of justice,’” *The Washington Post* (September 28, 2024), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/09/28/biden-hezbollah-nasrallah-israel-lebanon/3237d14c-7db9-11ef-980d-341a84fdff8f_story.html.

Designed Ignorance 2: Ukraine

- Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine—unprovoked except in the fevered propaganda of Russian President Vladimir Putin's government—has led to more than one million casualties and constitutes the largest European land war since World War Two. Playing out on the borders of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the war naturally raised European security concerns. It spurred U.S. financial and material support for Ukraine (though no direct U.S. military intervention).
- Soon after the invasion, former President Donald Trump described Putin's initial moves as "genius," explained Russia's intention as wanting "to rebuild the Soviet Union ... where there was a lot of love,"¹⁷ and claimed that the attack would not have happened had he remained president. Combined with vitriol about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky¹⁸ and a recurring image of Putin as a bulwark against Western decadence,¹⁹ a persistent narrative emerged among supporters of Trump in which Russia's actions are justifiable and regardless can be shut down quickly. As Trump told the September 2024 debate audience: "I will get it settled before I even become president."²⁰
- More recently in the presidential campaign, Trump praised Russia's historical military record, said the United States must "get out" of Ukraine (though it is not involved directly), and claimed erroneously that "every time Zelensky comes to the United States, he walks away with \$100 billion."²¹
- According to polling by the Pew Research Center, fully 10% of Americans say they have at least "some confidence" that Putin "will do the right thing regarding world affairs." About a third of all Americans and half of those who "lean Republican" believe that the U.S. is providing "too much" support for Ukraine.²²
- Polls show that overall U.S. public opinion still favors Ukraine. However, Congressional support for aid appropriations and military deliveries to Ukraine has wavered in this information environment. Passage of the most recent (April 2024)

¹⁷ Alexandra Hutzler, "What Trump Has Said About Putin Since Russian Invasion of Ukraine Began," *Newsweek* (March 14, 2022), available at <https://www.newsweek.com/what-trump-has-said-about-putin-since-russian-invasion-ukraine-began-1687730>.

¹⁸ David French, "The Oddly Intense Anger Against Zelensky, Explained," *The Atlantic* (December 23, 2022), <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/12/ukraine-aid-right-wing-republican-anger/676541/>.

¹⁹ Lionel Barber et al., "Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete,'" *Financial Times* (June 27, 2019), available at <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

²⁰ "Trump promises to 'settle' war in Ukraine if elected," PBS.com (September 11, 2024), available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-trump-promises-to-settle-war-in-ukraine-if-elected>.

²¹ "Trump praises Russia's military record in argument to stop funding Ukraine's fight," *Associated Press* (September 24, 2024).

²² Richard Wike, et al., "Views of Russia and Putin," Pew Research Center (May 8, 2024), available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/08/views-of-russia-and-putin/>.

foreign aid package, for example—which ultimately bundled U.S. aid for Israel, Taiwan, and Ukraine—required complex procedural maneuvers. More than half of all House Republicans voted against the Ukraine portion of the package—including the body’s only Ukrainian immigrant member, Rep. Victoria Spartz, in apparent deference to the narrative that prevails among her Indiana constituents.²³

U.S. Foreign Aid: Dodging an Epistemic Coup

Post-truth narratives on the Gaza and Ukraine conflicts afflict American perceptions across party lines. These perceptions, in turn, influence national security decision-making in profound ways—mirror-imaged along the partisan spectrum. Figure 2, for example, summarizes U.S. House votes by party faction on the April 2024 aid package. Almost 20% of Democrats (on aid to Israel) and more than 50% of Republicans (on aid to Ukraine) voted in line with prevailing narratives that emerged on the fringes of their respective parties as just described—leaving the diminished ranks of “other Democrats” and “other Republicans” to take a broader view of the available facts and corresponding U.S. interests.

Figure 2: U.S. House of Representatives – Vote Tallies on U.S. Aid to Israel, Taiwan, and Ukraine (April 19-20, 2024)

How Different Factions Voted

Vote	Progressive Democrats 99 reps.		Other Democrats 114 reps.	Other Republicans 174 reps.	Hard-right Republicans 44 reps.	
	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	
Rule (whole package)	63	34	102	148	38	
Israel aid	64	33	109	168	25	18
Ukraine aid	97		113	98	72	40
Taiwan aid	96		111	162	16	26
TikTok ban / Iran sanctions	66	30	108	165	21	21

Note: Progressive Democrats are members of the House Progressive Caucus. Hard-right Republicans include members who were supported by the House Freedom Fund during the 2022 midterms, opposed Kevin McCarthy’s election as speaker in January 2023, or voted to oust Mr. McCarthy from the speakership last October. The fund is the campaign arm of the House Freedom Caucus, a hard-right faction founded in 2015.

Source: Catie Edmondson et al., “How the House Voted on Foreign Aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan,” *The New York Times* (April 20, 2024).

²³ Catie Edmondson et al., “How the House Voted on Foreign Aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan,” *New York Times* (April 20, 2024).

Occasional grassroots opposition to some aspects of U.S. national security policy is not new. In previous decades, however, it was limited mainly to situations in which the U.S. had sustained military casualties and large-scale expenditures over many years (as in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars). Opposition arose due to verifiable “facts on the ground.” In contrast, today’s post-truth information environment inflames poorly founded opinions of overseas conflicts with little direct U.S. involvement—inventing “facts” (see Israeli “genocide” and Ukrainian “decadence”) that do not exist on the ground. American officials may experience considerable personal dissonance when making decisions in this environment but have not pushed back consistently against post-truth cascades. The resulting U.S. policy tends toward vagueness and indecision. Hamas and Hezbollah, their Iranian backers, and the Putin regime—some of America’s most potent adversaries—have been the beneficiaries.

Additional Insights

This ongoing research effort remains unique in focusing on the national security implications of a post-truth information environment. However, several additions to the broader understanding of post-truth appeared in the past year, which have important implications as we consider effective policy responses.

Realities Proliferate

Most analyses of the post-truth environment focus on the larger-scale narratives shared by the most visible tribes, such as the Israel- and Ukraine-critical narratives described earlier. Perceptions of reality in today’s hyper-online society are exponentially more diverse, however, as disinformation expert Renée DiResta explains in a recent book:

State actors, terrorists, ideologues, grassroots activists, and even ordinary people now compete against each other in a war of all against all to shape public opinion. This collision, combined with social media’s restructuring of human social networks, ... enables bespoke realities. ... [S]ome news outlet somewhere has written the story you want to believe; some influencer is touting the diet you want to live by or demonizing the group you also hate. ... Whereas consensus reality once required some deliberation with a broad swath of others, with a shared epistemology to bridge points of disagreement, bespoke reality comfortably supports a complete exit from that process.²⁴

As more and more Americans trade “consensus reality” for “bespoke reality,” there are at least three broad implications for national security. First—and particularly if the United States were to confront a large-scale military crisis—it is difficult to imagine a unified and resilient home front emerging from millions of self-curated realities. Post-9-11 and post-

²⁴ Renée DiResta, *Invisible Rulers: The People Who Turn Lies into Reality* (PublicAffairs, 2024), p. 41.

Pearl Harbor America would have behaved differently without at least some shared beliefs about the threats at hand and the nature of their adversaries and allies. Second, the U.S. national security field must pay attention to how individual narratives gain force and accumulate followers in a digital environment. Three hundred million bespoke realities create a resilience problem. Meanwhile, especially in a democracy, even a handful of widely held falsehoods can create a decision-making crisis. Third, the downsides of bespoke realities for their adherents may hold some clues about how to overcome them. DiResta writes that living in a false reality “may eventually result in a harsh confrontation with the laws of physics or biology.”²⁵ Helping Americans avoid these harsh confrontations would be a public service.

An Old Game

Post-truth describes the widespread detachment of individuals from objective reality and the failure of once-trusted institutions to help us understand reality. The term suggests deterioration from a longstanding norm but that is not quite right. What we face is more like a return to the *status quo ante*. For most of human history, our default condition was to believe the stories told by people like us, whether they were trying to understand the weather, explaining a sickness, or bad-mouthing the tribe over the hill. We could rarely check the evidence (if there was any) and had access to very few second opinions. However, as we gathered in larger numbers and had time to do more than survive, people tried new approaches. These involved recording information in some form for later reference—and establishing institutions and mechanisms to determine (or to decree) what was true. During the last 200 years, we have become fairly good at this in some parts of human society, thanks to open intellectual inquiry, the scientific method, and burgeoning amounts of information available to test. Our recent Enlightenment is a fragile achievement, however, and the sheer quantity of information is a curse as much as a blessing in determining what is true.

The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari codifies these insights in a new “history of information networks from the Stone Age to AI.”²⁶ He debunks the notion that information is necessarily an attempt to represent reality—calling this “the naïve view of information.” Instead, Harari argues, the raw information that surrounds all of us has been processed for millennia in a tug-of-war between “mythmakers” (think: the creators and weavers of narratives) and “bureaucrats” (think: authorities that collect, organize, and adjudicate information) in networks that have grown larger and faster over time. Only fairly recently in the rise of human information networks has the possibility of error and the need for correction been taken seriously in this tug-of-war—and “truth” remains an incomplete rendering of reality in the best cases.

Harari’s compelling assessment explains quite a bit—for example, why the patent falseness of information is no barrier to its acceptance and why bespoke realities proliferate

²⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (Random House, 2024).

when any of us can be mythmakers and error-conscious bureaucrats leave the field. From a national security perspective, it helps to explain why seemingly powerful decision-makers are no less cowed by mythmakers than by experts—and why most “experts” are little more than information bureaucrats themselves, with agendas and biases often linked to preserving their power. For those of us concerned about the future of reality-based foreign and security policies, Harari’s insights are sobering but quite helpful in ruling out responses based solely on glorifying the mythmakers or empowering new bureaucrats.

New Inorganic Players

Previous work in this series outlined the additional national security risks posed when post-truth meets artificial intelligence (AI) and “virtual reality” technologies allow people to join digital worlds even more completely.²⁷ Other analysts are helping to flesh these concerns out. Harari devotes much of his new book to considering the implications of AI for the evolution of human information networks: “Silicon chips can create spies that never sleep, financiers that never forget, and despots that never die.”²⁸ His key insight: “Whereas printing presses and parchment scrolls offered new means for connecting people, AIs are full-fledged members in our information networks, possessing their own agency ... bound to change the shape of armies, religions, markets, and nations.”²⁹ Some AI enthusiasts hope these inorganic players will be wiser in their judgments and curate information into truth more often than humans do, but there is little basis for this hope. AIs can process information faster and more comprehensively than humans. Still, they draw on the same inchoate raw material and will be subject to the biases and mistakes of their human designers—and eventually their own. Error-correction mechanisms will be more important—and more difficult to establish—than ever before.

As the agency of inorganic entities and networks grows, the losers almost certainly will be the “organic” players: individual citizens. In a recent essay, the indispensable Canadian media theorist Andrey Mir describes the subtle dance between digital platforms and their users that has played out in less than two decades. Hundreds of millions of Americans have created (and often recreated) our digital personae in rich detail—encompassing our beliefs, biases, friends, and enemies, as well as our likenesses, performances, travels, and buying habits—all of which the platforms now control:

Platforms have ushered in the era of digital biopolitics, allowing us to grow our digital bodies but not to own them. Offering social rewards, the platforms own us without exercising real coercion. So far, the most disturbing social consequence has been the unfreedom of digital speech. But this is just the beginning. The environmental power of the platforms over our digital personalities is limitless. Shadow-banning (the canceling of one’s digital presence on behalf of the regnant

²⁷ Geipel, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-83.

²⁸ Harari, p. xxxi.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

ideology) and un-personing (disabling one's ability to participate in, say, digital banking) have already shown us the contours of the future. The next stage of digital biopolitics will involve social scoring: we will be obliged to live an approved digital life—or pay the price.³⁰

What Mir calls “the unfreedom of digital speech” has been documented in this author's previous work and elsewhere: the recent “epistemic coups” in which accurate and relevant information on political candidates, public health, and other topics has been kept from users by some of the major digital platforms—independently or in coordination with public officials.³¹

In August 2024, Meta (Facebook) CEO Mark Zuckerberg unexpectedly acknowledged examples of this in a public letter:

In 2021, senior officials from the Biden Administration, including the White House, repeatedly pressured our teams for months to censor certain COVID-19 content, including humor and satire, and expressed a lot of frustration with our teams when we didn't agree. ... I believe the government pressure was wrong, and I regret that we were not more outspoken about it. I also think we made some choices that, with the benefit of hindsight and new information, we wouldn't make today.³²

Zuckerberg's sincerity has been roundly debated—and was met with particular scorn by anti-disinformation activists who favor precisely the sorts of interventions he regretted.³³ Ultimately, however, the epistemic coups of 2020-21 left little doubt that the silencing of viewpoints and more draconian “un-personing” described by Mir already are within the power of digital networks—individually and certainly when they act (or are compelled to act) together. This puts a large premium on preventing the homogenization of these platforms—in terms of their biases and ownership—and salvaging whatever vestiges of individual control their human users can muster.

Calls to Action

Our post-truth information environment and its growing impact on national security raise three urgent considerations for policymakers. First, America's elected officials must prioritize this challenge. Second, responses to post-truth must transcend rather than reinforce partisan and tribal divides if they are to have a chance of success. Third, the United States should elevate the goals of transparency and individual human agency in responding to post-truth—to remain true to our American values in a world of powerful adversaries.

³⁰ Andrey Mir, “The Platform Paradox,” *City Journal* (Summer 2024).

³¹ Geipel, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-47.

³² Mark Zuckerberg, Letter to the Chairman of the Committee on the Judiciary of the U.S. House of Representatives (August 26, 2024).

³³ See for example Nina Jankowicz, “Let's talk about Mark Zuckerberg's letter ...,” thread on X.com (August 27, 2024).

Prioritize This

Rarely have challenges with a clear impact on the security and well-being of the nation been relegated to such policy-political backwaters as those associated with the post-truth information environment. As a result: far from questioning the epidemics of deception, hostility, and smugness in our recent public life, more and more Americans regard this state of affairs as normal. The effects of post-truth are not fevers that will pass with time. The choice to live entirely outside the digital realm is a choice that most Americans can no longer make. Much of our citizenship and our professional and social lives take place in the online cacophony. We must make the best of it—yet we have not really tried.

Though ubiquitous, the effects of post-truth are not impervious to leadership and human engagement. Like other serious challenges, however, addressing them begins with acknowledging them.

Transcend the Policy Divide

The harmful manifestations of the post-truth information environment afflict all Americans and can only be addressed in a framework of reasonable consensus.

One of the most harmful impressions about post-truth—reinforced constantly in most academic and media coverage of disinformation—is that it is a problem primarily or solely of the American Right. This author’s previous work presented numerous examples to show that no education level, professional class, or geography—let alone ideological orientation—inoculates one against mindsets and behaviors hard-wired into all of humanity.³⁴ The ideologically blinkered way post-truth has been discussed contributes significantly to the standoff around potential responses.

On the one side—associated with the Democratic Party and the progressive Left—responses focus on identifying and reducing the online flow of “disinformation,” understood as false information capable of causing harm. On the other side—associated with the Republican Party and the populist Right—responses focus on assuring “free speech” as an antidote to groupthink. Not unreasonably, some conservatives believe that it is their free speech that is most at risk from restrictions on disinformation, which too many on the left define as information contrary to progressive dogma.

Ironically, effective responses to the post-truth information environment can be found precisely in the synthesis of these two views—but not in either of them alone. Disinformation is the often-dangerous manifestation of post-truth while free speech sets the guardrails within which disinformation should be confronted.

Seen this way, an effective synthesis begins with acknowledging that disinformation cannot simply be purged. As DiResta describes in her recent book, “[I]f we boot off the bad actors, filter nasty speech, or kill off the algorithms that help wild conspiracy theories trend, will we return to a less polarized, more harmonious way of relating to each other? No. That’s

³⁴ For example, Geipel, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-27.

because the content itself reflects real opinions. Real demand.”³⁵ That is a breakthrough insight worth emulating—from someone closely associated with the anti-disinformation side.

The free-speech imperative raises another serious question about the anti-disinformation approach: who will decide what is disinformation and what to fight? One of the most bizarre and frightening ideas in response to post-truth is to appoint a federal government “reality czar”—as discussed in a typically one-sided *New York Times* assessment in 2021.³⁶ Though the progressive Left in particular struggles to accept this, one person’s “reality” can be another’s coerced dystopia—as America’s experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic should have made clear. No “czar” can sort these views into right and wrong in a free society.

At the same time, digital free speech without an understanding of risks and the possibility of error-correction also is a path to bad outcomes. Enjoying the freedom to speak does not equal the freedom to speak without challenge or rebuttal. The government cannot supply that pushback, however. Not even the digital platform companies can. It will take an army of citizen-users of information platforms—better enlightened about what they are dealing with.

Encourage Transparency and Individual Control

Beyond preserving free speech, the other key considerations in a response to post-truth should be to maximize transparency and to expand the choices and tools available to individual citizens.

Transparency should take at least three forms. First, the United States should greatly increase transparency about the post-truth problem itself. This begins with elected officials willing to acknowledge that we are struggling to trust information and that the problem afflicts all of us—not just the usual suspects in the other party.

Second, transparency about the federal government’s response to post-truth is essential—especially where national security is concerned. Any new commissions, laws, and offices created to deal with the problem should be rolled out with maximum detail and visibility—unlike the Biden Administration’s ill-conceived roll-out of a Department of Homeland Security “Disinformation Governance Board” in 2022.³⁷ As citizens, Americans should know not only what their government is doing but also who is involved, how the work is conducted, and how to access the assistance and tools that exist.

Finally, transparency is vital where the U.S. Government’s own “fact base” is concerned. In an information environment where versions of reality can vary so widely as to prompt completely different responses, knowing in real time what its leaders believe and consider

³⁵ DiResta, op. cit., p. 317.

³⁶ Kevin Roose, “How the Biden Administration Can Help Solve Our Reality Crisis,” *The New York Times* (February 2, 2021).

³⁷ “Disinformation head Nina Jankowicz resigns after DHS board is paused,” *NBC News* (May 19, 2022), available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/dhs-disinformation-head-resigns-board-paused-rcna29578>.

important is healthy for an open society. This is not as simple as pointing to long-standing “Freedom of Information” options. Nor is it as complicated (indeed impossible) as trying to capture every data point in the federal government’s decision process on myriad issues. But especially when national security is involved—when alternative realities multiply and collide—knowing what presidents and their teams know, to the extent practicable, can be clarifying for all concerned.

Presidential addresses to the nation during a crisis served this purpose in the recent past and still could help. Today, however, something akin to the Ukrainian government’s “pre-bunking” efforts before the February 2022 Russian invasion is needed as well. As assessed by RAND, Ukraine’s efforts to share with domestic and international audiences what it knew about Russia’s intentions—and to debunk Russian disinformation in advance—contributed significantly to understanding and support for Kyiv.³⁸ Except in rare instances—in which delicate “sources or methods” actually would be at risk—classification should not be a barrier to similar transparency in the United States. The topic of U.S. Government information security exceeds this brief. This author shares the view of political scientist Jon Askonas, however, that “reforms to the government secrecy system that serious critics from both political parties have demanded for fifty years, and a true recommitment to openness, can restore Americans’ faith in their institutions.”³⁹

For similar reasons, the U.S. Government and its citizens would benefit from information tracking efforts that do not rely on classified sources at all. New private-sector tools, for example, promise an ability to track the content, origins, and reach of digital narratives—giving decision-makers time to assess and respond to such information flow and citizens a better sense of what is being discussed outside their siloes.⁴⁰ Recently, for example, a tool created by the firm Edge Theory compared “narrative slants on nuclear doctrine”—and other live topics—originating with Western media and “foreign malign sources.”⁴¹

In addition to transparency, post-truth responses that play to the historical strengths of American society should encourage individual control over online engagement. One such effort—largely funded by investor Frank H. McCourt, Jr.—seeks to establish a new, open-source “Decentralized Social Networking Protocol (DSNP)” that “enables users to reclaim and control their data and can support a healthier digital ecosystem, where apps are interoperable, data is portable, and platforms must adhere to [individual users’] terms.”⁴² To demonstrate the viability of this new protocol and user-centric platform policies on a

³⁸ Todd C. Helmus and Khrystyna Holynska, “Ukrainian Resistance to Russian Disinformation - Lessons for Future Conflict,” *RAND Research Report* (September 3, 2024), available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2771-1.html.

³⁹ Jon Askonas, “An America of Secrets,” *The New Atlantis* (Summer 2023), available at <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/an-america-of-secrets>.

⁴⁰ See for example, “What is Narrative Intelligence,” EdgeTheory.com, available at <https://edgetheory.com/narrative-intelligence>.

⁴¹ Available on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/posts/activity-7233983714278391808-CmCY>.

⁴² See “5 Insights From Our Biggest Fight,” available at <https://ourbiggestfight.com/key-insights/>, and Frank H. McCourt, Jr., *Our Biggest Fight: Reclaiming Liberty, Humanity, and Dignity in the Digital Age* (Crown, 2024).

large scale, a McCourt-affiliated non-profit entity called Project Liberty is organizing a “People’s Bid” to acquire the TikTok social media platform.⁴³

Somewhat more modestly, a growing group of academics focuses on so-called “middleware” to enhance the power of platform users. Barak Richman and Francis Fukuyama elaborated on this approach in a 2021 essay: “A spate of third-party companies would create and operate software to curate and order the content that users see on their digital platforms, according to the users’ preferences. Users could insert their preferred middleware as plug-ins to the platforms and thus choose their own trusted intermediary to sort their news, rank their searches, and order their feed.”⁴⁴ Middleware has been criticized as little more than an additional siloing mechanism that could increase self-segregation. Its advocates push back that—if combined with greater transparency about the harms of deception on digital platforms—middleware tuned to accuracy could become attractive to more and more users in the manner of proven career or investment advice. The argument for middleware hinges on the possibly optimistic notion that truth will be recognized as more valuable than its alluring alternatives.

These and other means of equipping Americans to identify and resist disinformation may help them as individuals navigating a digitized society and as citizens concerned with national security.

Staying Free, Secure, and United in a Digital Public Square: A Practical Agenda

Earlier work identified three broad types of policy responses to the post-truth information environment—encompassing norm-setting, technology-based responses, and education efforts. This five-part agenda builds on that framework, for consideration by incoming federal officials.

One—Above all: elected officials beginning with the President of the United States should acknowledge the heightened challenges of opinion formation, decision-making, and national resilience created by the digital information environment—making clear the implications for national security. This should be done in a spirit of humility, emphasizing the susceptibility of Americans across ideological and party lines and committing the new administration to bipartisan problem-solving efforts. The issue warrants initial elevation to a State of the Union-type setting or even a stand-alone address but must be reinforced regularly by the President; the Secretaries of Defense, Education, HHS, and State; and Congressional leaders.

Two—Linked to the national security risks of post-truth: the dangers of “always-online” socialization should be elevated to a public health emergency, recognizing their close connection to mental health (especially among young people), economic productivity, and other aspects of general well-being. The U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic left many

⁴³ “The People’s Bid for TikTok,” www.projectliberty.io, available at <https://www.projectliberty.io/campaign/>.

⁴⁴ Barak Richman and Francis Fukuyama, “How to Quiet the Megaphones of Facebook, Google, and Twitter,” *The Wall Street Journal* (February 12, 2021).

Americans with a dim view of such drills but also provided essential lessons on transparency, citizen engagement, and course correction to improve large-scale efforts in the future. Virginia and other states have begun to test restrictions on smartphone use in public schools that should be given a chance.⁴⁵ Large-scale awareness and education efforts are as important as restrictions and will be taken more seriously in a widely recognized emergency.

Three—Education should be the centerpiece of America’s response to post-truth. In their online silos and embrace of alternative realities, Americans place not only their nation but also themselves and their families at serious risk—yet they remain largely in the dark about the nature of the problem or what to do about it. A new administration should lead efforts to develop and promulgate curricula that equip Americans from a young age (a) to understand the difference between information and truth, facts and opinions, and evidence and impressions; (b) to approach information critically; (c) to recognize deception and propaganda; (d) to identify reliable authorities and seek them out; and (5) to challenge and revise their conclusions. In a pervasively digital society, these skills are as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic. They must be imparted objectively to be effective—a daunting challenge for an education establishment notoriously one-sided in its ideological orientation.

Four—A new administration should encourage and invest in the rapid development of technology-based measures (a) to increase Americans’ control over their digital lives and (b) to track and understand virulent narratives likely to influence national security. Fact-based middleware and new social networking protocols are examples of tools that could enhance control, but additional approaches should be encouraged simultaneously. Where tracking tools are concerned, a new administration should make clear that its purpose is not to attack or outlaw competing views but to equip decision-makers (and ordinary citizens) to recognize and respond to information before millions have embraced it uncritically. Such technologies should not become shadowy additions to the government’s intelligence suite but public resources to help all Americans establish a shared fact base.

Five—The United States has allies in its response to the post-truth information environment—as in other military-security realms—and should work closely with them to deal with our common challenges. We can develop norms of digital truth-seeking together, and share ideas and best practices for education and technology-based responses. The United States has essential values of free speech and societal openness in common with other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries and our allies in Asia, Oceania, and elsewhere. In contrast, the governments of China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia deliberately control information inside their own countries—and will spread these models of control if given a chance.

This agenda is an outline requiring additional detail. It is exemplary rather than definitive. It is intended above all to call for action. America’s post-truth information environment and its impact on national security demand much higher-level, more even-handed, and more widespread attention than these problems have received from the handful

⁴⁵ See, for example, Suzanne S. Youngkin, “Protect Kids From Social Media,” *The Wall Street Journal* (September 25, 2024).

of academics and activists who engage with them today. Mastering the post-truth information environment without succumbing to authoritarianism or chaos will be an essential test of liberal societies in the 21st Century. It is time for the United States to meet that test.

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