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Truth, Lies and Conspiracy in the 2016 Election

By Stacy Keltner
October 6, 2016



The use of terms like “truthiness,” “post-truth,” and “post-factual” has risen during the 2016 election season, especially in media coverage of Donald Trump, who has become the poster boy for what David Roberts earlier coined “post-truth politics.” Trump himself (or his ghost writer, depending on who you believe to be more truthful) has described his own rhetorical strategy as “truthful hyperbole,” an innocent and effective form of exaggeration. In the recent presidential debate between Clinton and Trump, Clinton cashed in on the image of Donald-in-Wonderland — rolling her eyes, smiling, laughing, dismissing his claims and positions as baseless imaginative

meanderings, and urging us to check the facts through a fact checker on her website. Of course, those cracking ceilings in glass houses...

Truthiness is not unique to Trump or the current election season. In his 2004 work, *The Post Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, Ralph Keyes succinctly sums up the contemporary sense of truth in what he calls the *post-truth era*: “In the post-truth era we don’t just have truth and lies, but a third category of ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie. Enhanced truth it might be called. Neo-truth. Faux-truth. Truth lite.” Harry S. Truman justified this kind of “truth” by distinguishing between the “real truth,” which depends on accuracy, and “political truth,” which depends on one’s intentions (which Truman claimed should at least not be corrupt) and the ability to utter the “truth” with believable conviction. Consider Ronald Reagan’s expression of regret during the Iran-Contra scandal: “My heart and my best intentions still tell me that is true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.” Or, Bill Clinton’s own heart-felt and confident statement that [h]e “did not [depending on how you theorize being and nothingness] have sexual relations [depending on how you define sexual relations] with that woman.” And, don’t forget all of those weapons of mass destruction that G. W. Bush and his entourage were sure... or, well, believed were... or, well, must be... or, well, might be (near the oil) in Iraq. Politicians are notorious for playing fast and loose with the truth, especially when an election is at stake, and this election cycle may have created the most stunningly post-truthful climate yet.

One of the most interesting phenomena this election cycle has been the increase in conspiracy theories. Compounded by the 24-hour news cycle and the prevalence of digital and social media to be sure, conspiracy theories have proliferated. Some are fueled by fake websites and news stories; some by partisan fantasies; some by people just trying to make sense of politics; and some by the candidates’ own campaigns (e.g., Russian espionage, the birther movement). Some are serious and sinister; some are funny; and, some are based on loose connections and the truthiness of feeling, longing, and the ability to keep a straight face. Conspiracy theories are not new, and they range in legitimacy. At times, they serve an important function. Born of a public trying to make sense of a phenomenon or event that just doesn’t make sense in light of the facts, conspiracy theories are a manner of grappling with truth. Yet, the sheer volume of conspiracy theories (as well as all of the discussions labeled conspiracy theories) this election season has left reason reeling.

Trump himself is, admittedly, one of the biggest fans of juicy conspiracy theories and touts a lot of them, sometimes just for the sake of an interesting discussion, which is one of the main sources of his Donald-in-Wonderland image. Clinton surrogates have complained that the mainstream media does not hold Trump accountable, allowing his multiple conspiracies (e.g., see here, here, and here for a start) to circulate as if they are legitimate. At the same time, Clinton’s surrogates have given flight to conspiracy theories of their own, (e.g., Trump the Kremlin puppet). Anti-Clinton surrogates on the left and the right have complained that the mainstream media has given Clinton a pass in not pressing her to answer important questions about her private email server and the Clinton foundation, ultimately leading to speculations and discussions dismissed as themselves conspiracy theories. The rationality used to explain (or, evade) basic facts is no help either. According to our current standards of truth: through an analytic process, facts are to be distinguished into their most discrete elements; then, we must

conclude, those facts cannot be put back together without direct admissions of their connections (e.g., foreign governments donating money to a private foundation is a fact distinct from that government receiving benefits, which is also distinct from the fact that the one receiving funds and giving benefits is the same person; and, those three facts cannot be correlated according to our analytic reason without a fourth fact that admits the connection. – To suggest otherwise is to engage in conspiracy theories). Whatever the origin of the conspiratorial atmosphere of the 2016 election – the result of Trump’s and/or Clinton’s candidacies, the death of investigative journalism, or the fate of analytic reason itself – political life is losing sight of any reality principle. Engrossed in the virtual, fictional reality of conspiracy theories, any search for the truth can be debunked as itself conspiracy theory.

Jaded by the ubiquity of political truthiness, trust in the current candidates and the political process itself worsens daily. This election season, both candidates are struggling in the polls with respect to honesty and trustworthiness. In response, the Clinton and Trump campaigns, as well as all of the journalists and commentators supporting them, are intent on deflecting our focus from one to the other (e.g., Clinton’s private email server, Trump University LLC) or at least to someone or something else (e.g., “Russia,” “cyber-terrorists,” “biased media,” “extremists”). The consequence of all this political truthiness is the complete loss of confidence in any kind of stabilizing element, like truth, rendering facts and reason frail, if not obsolete.

Hannah Arendt claimed in her famous 1971 *New York Times* article “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” that “[t]ruthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings.” Lying in politics is nothing new. Yet, Arendt noted, there is something distinctly new about the political lies exposed in the Pentagon Papers; namely, political lying plays a new role in the modern world. The traditional function of lying in politics has always been the furthering of a political end. Political lies to this individual or another and about this thing or that traditionally function to attain a political end. However, as the Pentagon Papers show, political lying has come to serve something else: a completely fictitious reality. According to Arendt, the ultimate goal of the war itself was to create and legitimize an image of U.S.-American “omnipotence,” depending less on actual power than on the *image* of power, effecting a spectacularly “defactualized world.” The Pentagon Papers did not reveal something *unique* that came to pass, but a structural reality of modern political life.

Though the defactualized or post-truth world of politics is not new, and its virtual actuality has been exasperated through technological developments and the rise of digital and social media, the political imaginary this election cycle has taken on an exaggerated and schizophrenic form, demonstrated dramatically by the rise of conspiracy theories. The most unfortunate consequence is the ease with which critical analysis and questioning is now so easily dismissed. Consider Joseph Uscinski’s recent claims about the rise of conspiracy theories this election season – an exemplary case in point. According to Uscinski, an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Miami and co-author of a scholarly book on American conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories are most effective when employed by “outsiders, electoral losers and statistical minorities.” For Uscinski, the “two outsiders” of Sanders and Trump created an environment that has made even the establishment insider, Clinton, have recourse to conspiracy theories. Uscinski claims (1) Trump’s conspiracy theories forced Clinton to “push back” with her

own conspiracy theories about Trump's connection to Russia, and (2) referencing an article by senior staff writer Michael Grunwald of *Politico* as evidence, Clinton has had "to give lip service" to what Uscinski calls "Sanders' economic conspiracy theories," which includes, according to Grunwald, a "doom and gloom" vision of America based on the "complaint" that the economic system is rigged and the political system is corrupt. Thus, one of the central theses of the left (which includes millions of academics, activists, students, and workers the world over) concerning the economic inequalities of U.S.-American neoliberalism is a "conspiracy theory" of Bernie Sanders.

If the consequences of the surge of conspiracy theories are dire for critical thought, its benefits for Clinton and establishment politics are clear. Establishment insiders can deflect all critiques as equivalent to the imaginative meanderings of a 3 a.m. Trump twitter storm. Reducing critique to conspiracy is the biggest and most dangerous conspiracy theory yet.