

Post-truth (a review)

Original work by Evan Davis published by Little Brown 2017

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In an age of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-facts’, Evan Davis’s *Post-Truth* is a useful guide for teachers and researchers in language media analysis, discourse analysis, developing critical awareness and critical thinking skills. Evan Davis is a leading British broadcaster and presenter of current affairs programmes on TV and radio and is an experienced and informed interpreter of ‘fake news’. In his introduction, he writes that post-truth is ‘an expression of frustration and anguish from a liberal class discombobulated by the political disruptions of 2016’, referring to the Trump presidency and the British BREXIT vote.

The book is divided into three sections. Section 1 usefully defines the key terms of fake news, post-truth, alternative facts and ‘bullshit’. He identifies five types of ‘bullshit’, explains each type and gives examples. In Section 2 he asks how it happens. A key issue in reporting is time. It may be possible to fool people in the short or even

medium term but in the long term, the truth normally comes out. Section 3, the final section, discusses the culture of ‘fake news’ and how it can become the norm and also how we can improve our response to it. As Davis explains, ‘Communication can be informative even if is not true; it can be persuasive even if it is not informative; it can be effective in the short term even if it is not persuasive in the long term. And, if everyone is doing it, it can be irresistible, even if it is not effective.’ The final chapter of the book, entitled ‘The Discerning Listener’ explores what we can do about it and how to develop our own critical analysis skills. The book is in the same group of recent media analyses including Harold Evans, former Editor of the Sunday Times’ *Do I make myself clear?* reviewed in TLC Issue 4, and Mark Thompson, former Director General of the BBC’s *Enough Said* reviewed in TLC Issue 3.

So, what do we mean by ‘bullshit’, now translated

into 'fake news', 'post-truth' and 'counter facts'? In fact, the term itself is quite old but was given respectability in Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit*, published in 2005. The term means to talk nonsense, typically with intent to deceive. In the first section of the book Davis identifies five forms of bullshit: lies, near lies, selective facts, spin and self-deception leading to delusion. Lies is simply untruth, opposed to the facts. What makes it bullshit is that telling a complete lie can create publicity and, as we know, there is no such thing as bad publicity. However, lies are dangerous if found out they can lead to legal consequences.

More common are what Davis describes as 'near lies', using the right words to convey a false impression. Davis quotes the famous British Brexiteers' claim that leaving the EU would release £350 million a week for Britain's National Health Service. Not an outright lie but a misleading statement. The figure undoubtedly existed as a component in Britain's contribution to the EU budget but it had no specific connection to healthcare.

The third form of bullshit, described by Davis, involves leaving out relevant information. The term, first used by British philosopher Edmund Burke in 1776, means being 'an economy of the truth', purposely ignoring facts that might damage your argument. The term has now transformed into 'being economical with the truth'. Advertising and

politics are two professions notorious for misleading the public by quoting only facts that support their case and ignoring others that might give a fairer basis for decisions. Spin is the art of manipulating information to the advantage of the organisation putting it out. After an interview or a press conference politicians will often go into the 'spin room', where their advisers discuss the best way to 'spin' what they have said to get best press and media coverage. Finally, says Davis, there is self-deception through self-delusion. This is a situation where someone actually believes something is the case although he or she is actually wrong. Many argue, for example, that former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's accusation that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, leading to Britain's participation in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not based in fact but Blair wanted to believe it and went ahead anyway. No weapons of mass destruction were discovered after the invasion.

The question is how do we delude ourselves into accepting information which is partial or not true? That's what Davis addresses in the second part of *Post-Truth*. We are impressed by empty assertions about events designed to make an impression on us rather than convey facts of what actually happened. We allow ourselves to be confused by obfuscation, too many words. Using flowery language or gibberish, nonsense language. Davis gives the example of former Italian President

Matteo Renzi's address to the World Trade Organisation at Davos. He said, *'I am not here to present a future of tomorrow. For my country, the future is today not tomorrow.'* What? That's nonsense! But it's also emotionally very powerful and carries meaning and is intended to inspire and motivate the audience.

But it's not just words that matter. How you look, what you do, your facial expressions and your gestures also influence how your message is received and whether or not you are believed. For example, movie stars are often used to sell products in TV advertising and on posters. We like the movie star so we buy the product. If they say it's good, it must be good, whether it is or not. Language also influences what we decide to believe. This is a hidden message. Is a company that issues Parking Solutions better than one that issues Parking Fines? The language used seems to suggest it is. Positive 'solutions' is better than negative 'fines' but that's not how the people paying the parking fines necessarily see it.

Another example of misleading information is what Davis calls 'psychological pricing'. The commonest in British stores is £5.99. Realistically, the product costs about £6 but psychologically £5.99 sounds more like £5.00 plus a few pence. It sounds cheaper but it isn't really.

Davis goes on to discuss why we are so easily

persuaded. It's psychology really. The way a message is framed, a story is told, a phrased is used, the culture that you appeal to, a 'bandwagon' effect as employed in 'Everyone else is doing it, why not you?' all appeal to the emotions and reduce rational thought. It is these techniques that politicians like Donald Trump, though not only him, use with effect to label what they don't like as 'fake news' and post-corrections to their own statements as 'post-truth' or 'counter facts' and many accept it because it appeals to their emotional needs.

So, what can we do about it, if anything? In the opinion of Evan Davis, fake news is greater now than it has ever been although it has always existed. In particular he cites 2016, the year of the US presidential election and the British Brexit referendum as the beginning of a peak bullshit period. It was also when the Oxford Dictionary of English selected post-truth as its 'word of the year'. Davis identifies two key factors in restoring more balanced and honest representation of facts and issues. One is media the other is what Davis calls 'the discerning listener.'

In Davis's opinion, the media's job is to keep on doing its job. To do so it needs to do three things. One is to distinguish clearly between news and comment. Comment disguised as news does no one any favours in the short term and can be damaging to reputation and editorial integrity in

the long term. Secondly, it is important to have a diversity of media outlets ranging across the political spectrum and reaching different parts of the population. Thirdly, he thinks national media platforms recognised by everyone as a national focus for news is important. In the UK, he says, the BBC still fulfils this function.

What about the discerning listener? We are in danger of arriving at a point where we believe nothing; institutionalised cynicism, as it were, always looking for the 'real' motive behind a story, event or political utterance. Instead we can be more positively discerning, able to see through the hype and be more aware of the role our own emotions in deciding what we accept and reject. Foreign language teachers have a key role here. We can use authentic texts, articles, headlines and illustrations to analyse more critically what we read in a foreign language, compare different

versions of the same story and discuss in class. Students can be invited to compile their own stories using the sources they have studied and review their efforts for the inclusion of 'fake news' and emotionally charged language. This can be done at simple levels from Council of Europe CEFR level B1 and upwards. Teachers can also use tweets and Facebook and Instagram messages to analyse the way in which bandwagons are created through repeated messaging.

In this way, we can encourage greater discrimination in our students, better critical analysis and critical thinking skills and a more objective approach to what they read and spread on social media. Although I personally would have liked more examples of how 'post-truth' influences our thinking, Evan Davis has provided some really useful frameworks to help us understand different forms of fake news and how it can affect us.