Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies

Jayson Harsin
Department of Communication Studies, Baruch College, New York, NY 10010, USA

Across multiple societies, we see a shift from regimes of truth (ROT) to “regimes of posttruth” (ROPT) characterized by proliferating “truth markets.” ROT corresponded to disciplinary society, tighter functioning between media/political/education apparatuses, scientific discourses, and dominant truth-arbiters. ROPT corresponds to societies of control, where power exploits new “freedoms” to participate/produce/express (as well as consume/diffuse/evaluate). These developments further correspond to postpolitics/postdemocracy, where issues, discourses, and agency for sociopolitical change remain constrained, despite the enabling of a new range of cultural and pseudopolitical participation around, among other things, truth. ROPT emerge out of postpolitical/postdemocratic strategies common to control societies where especially resource rich political actors attempt to use data-analytic knowledge to manage the field of appearance and participation, via attention and affect.

Keywords: Truth, Attention Economy, Participatory Culture, Critical and Cultural Theory, Societies of Control, Big Data, Political Communication.

doi:10.1111/cccr.12097

Popular claims about a “postfact society” and neologisms such as “truthiness” speak to a cultural shift. The media and political apparatuses Michel Foucault once thought dominant in the circulation and maintenance of truth regimes have been transformed in the last 30 years. However, this has not led to the demise of truth regimes but rather to a more complex reorganization of functions, among which are efforts to mobilize new digital “participatory culture” to proliferate truth games— that is, to generate an overall regime of posttruth (ROPT).

Regimes of posttruth, some facts

There are in fact (or “in gut,” “gut-checked,” according to John Kerry) many sites and events across society where one can observe ROPT at play. Consider the litany of news...
media misrepresentations, hoaxes, plagiarisms, and subsequent apologies and resignations over the last 20 years (Harsin, 2006, 2010). The explosion of fact-checking and rumor-debunking sites is also striking. None of them is of course able to reestablish any ultimate gate-keeping and truth-telling authority, despite periodical technological and rhetorical attempts to the contrary (consider Facebook’s “satire” tag or the site Emergent, which attempts to assert absolute epistemological and fiduciary order by labeling breaking stories false, unverified, or true—in real time).

Another portal into regimes of posttruth is rumor, as despite varying definitions, it always involves a statement whose veracity is in question (Harsin, 2006). Many scholars have viewed rumor (and cultural forms such as parody) as laying bare mechanisms of truth production, perhaps even as a “weapon of the weak” (Baym and Jones, 2012; Scott, 1987). Yet today rumors and similar truth claims come just as commonly from resource-rich political and economic actors. Developing the theory of rumor bombs, I have analyzed cases such as “Obama is a Muslim with a fake birth certificate,” “John Kerry is French,” “François Hollande is supported by over 700 mosques,” and “the French socialist government has imposed new gender theory instruction in primary schools, including masturbation instruction” (Harsin, 2010, 2014). All are news items that have taken up considerable space in the attention economy.

What happened? While the historical correlation with the arrival of new media technologies, channel proliferation, and so-called information overload is a common explanation (and necessarily part of my own), it is not sufficient. Nor are explanations that once saw the condition largely instigated by war-on-terror developments (Bratich, 2004; Harsin, 2006). I want to return to Foucault’s regimes of truth (ROT) to think about how we are undergoing a “regime-of-truth change” (Bratich, 2004) toward what I call a ROPT characterized by “truth markets.”

**Regimes of truth, regimes of posttruth**

“Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth,” Foucault famously claimed. “That is,” he continued, “the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (Foucault, 1976/2000, p. 130).

Foucault further theorized that news media and other apparatuses had key functions in ROT. In a rare moment, Foucault speaks of “news media” (*les médias*): “it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad in the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations).” Furthermore, “it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, and media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation (‘ideological’ struggles)” (Foucault, 1976/2000, p. 131).
However, the dynamics between apparatuses and discourses that form those regimes shift historically. Given globalizing media technology, political economic (market/policy), political communication (professionalization/marketing), ideological (neoliberal) changes, we may be witnessing significant “regimes-of-truth change” across many contemporary societies, with culturally specific variations (Anderson, 2014; Dalziel, 2013; Harsin, 2014). To help understand those changes, we should update Foucault’s concept of truth regimes, whose historical emphasis nevertheless remains useful.

First, the relationship between a news apparatus (Foucault does not speak of film and TV but of “the media”/news media) and other apparatuses he mentions, such as the university and military, was never worked out to the degree it deserved. But it is worth noting how Foucault’s understanding of news may stem from his experience in France. France’s postwar media policy was marked by heavy state (partisan political) control, which became an object of French left critique. It was only in the 1980s, during Mitterand’s socialist reign, that that postwar media policy was overturned: “The Socialists recognized that French television suffered from a legacy of political control, whereby [conservative] governments had pursued their own interests to the detriment of the implementation of the public service ethos” (Kuhn, 1995, p. 155). Within such a media system, the links among government, education, military, and other apparatuses that circulated discourses of truth appear much tighter than they do today, and certainly more so than those of the postwar United States. Foucault outlined these characteristics of a “political economy of truth” in 1976.

Today, in France as in the United States and many other countries, we are witnessing a breakdown of fiduciary status in truth-telling and confirmation/judgment and coordination of apparatuses in a so-called regime (witness climate change denial, among countless others). Foucault’s theory appears attached to an age of mass communication, a society of the spectacle. In such a period, fewer channels could be assumed to circulate similar statements and more confidently capture the attention of a mass citizenry. Those days are of course long gone; new self-mass and old mass communication technologies coexist, but with ever fragmenting audiences.

The news “apparatus” is today a many-headed hydra (for each newspaper that dies, 2,000 new blogs, Facebook, and Twitter feeds are born!), with literally millions of channels, websites, social media feeds, in addition to the golden age network news channels and national newspapers one could (in most countries) count on one hand. In that sense, the geography of news and truth has shifted as has the temporality of news consumption: no longer delivered in morning and evening, or broadcast at six or eight—it is composed of millions of beeps and vibrations, revolving tickers that shape-shift and/or disappear by the second, and news unfolds in a highly affectively charged attention economy of constantly connected cognition (Harsin, 2014). Add to this new temporality and spatiality of news production, circulation, and consumption (wherein truth would be “operationalized”) the relationship with scientific discourses/research and popular political communication. What we find is (again, perhaps especially in the United States but with many signs of globalization)
a regime-of-truth change. With such fragmentation, segmentation, and targeted content, perhaps it makes more sense to speak of “truth markets” deliberately produced within an overall ROPT. The fact that populations corresponding to beliefs and opinions are planned, produced, and managed by big data-driven predictive analytics and resource-rich strategic communication (often with fascinating [dis-]articulations between institutions and discourses as with, say, religion, energy business, and education with regard to climate change; Stenger [2013]) suggests that they are often more like markets than citizens in the driver’s seat of their issues and discourses. That is, they are fundamentally different from the self-organizing and reflexive forms of expression and participation described by Michael Warner (2005) and others as publics and counterpublics, even while the same “truths” circulate between them. This is all in significant contrast to Foucault’s moment of enunciation. What could a ROT look like in these conditions?

**Posttruth societies of control**

What else characterizes the shift from ROT to ROPT? I have discussed a number of convergent shifts in cultural production, journalism, political communication, speed, affect, and cognition at length elsewhere (Harsin, 2010, 2014). I wish to further point out the importance of marketing, algorithms, epistemic loops, and the impetus to participate digitally, through user-generated content, liking, and sharing—the latter especially associated with societies of control.

Foucault’s ideas of modern truth regimes correspond to his theories of disciplinary society, which many thinkers claim has been increasingly superseded in some societies by a society of control (Deleuze, 1990). The shift is important for understanding how media and cultural practices now function with regard to truth.

ROT assumed a central state apparatus that has been replaced by dispersed power in control society. According to Deleuze (1990), mass/individual distinctions collapse into “dividuals,” data, and market segments. Our social relations are continuous orbits and networks. Unlike discipline (“long-term, infinite, discontinuous”), control is short-term, under “heavy rotation.” Marketing has become the “corporation’s soul” and a primary form of social control. Institutions are widely in crisis. Furthermore, decline of institutional enclosures corresponds to a hyper-segmentation of society, and increasing dependency on algorithmic power and predictive data-analytics.

In postweb 2.0 “always on” cultures, algorithms help measure and produce social groups, influencing them with predictive analytics in a new kind of archive based on data-mining surveillance that is not centralized in the state, but diffusely embedded in codes and software for quantifying digital behavior. As Amoore notes, “[i]n effect, algorithms precisely function as a means of directing and disciplining attention, focusing on specific points and cancelling out all other data, appearing to make it possible to translate probable associations between people or objects into actionable security decisions” (Amoore in Beer, 2013, p. 86). In this context, I have joined others who have begun to focus on the struggle to govern circulation and consumption
around the category of attention in a conjuncture markedly different from that out of which Foucault was making fleeting comments about news apparatuses that circulate truth (see Andrejevic, 2013; Beer, 2013; Citton, 2014; Crary, 2013; Dean, 2010; Terranova, 2004).

Key to regimes of posttruth is the proliferation of truth games, within big data-, predictive analytics-driven strategic communication (corporate-political) markets. Importantly, there is no authoritative Debunker, although the desire to debunk remains; there is a market/desire for it. As truth claims proliferate across fragmented networks, so, too, do upright citizen debunkers and entire organizations, which can never suture fragmentation through a judgment for an entire society, and certainly cannot endure temporally. Also key here is that these truth games seek only partly to appeal to conviction within ideological filter bubbles. The goals of various actors also appear to be about occupying the field of perception, the attention economy, to induce and manage participation in a way that collapses politics into Rancière’s (2001) figure of “the police”—the point being to avoid contingency/politics by predictive analytics and controlling/patrolling what appears and is heard. Truth remains welded to power, but the domination of truth regimes now demands popular attention to/participation in its discursive games (instead of just adherence to its products).

Postpolitical, posttruth regimes

While some documenters of truth-change blame new technologies and information overload, and others blame changing news values and journalism practices, few connect these phenomena to the (20th) century-long development of professional political communication, which has figured masses of citizens, in democratic and totalitarian regimes, as risks to be managed (Harsin, 2006). Deleuze presaged new forms of power based on surveillance in a society saturated with marketing techniques and predictive analytics (algorithmically driven), but he (like Foucault) had little to say about political marketing, its research and development with cognitive sciences to work not just on the body but on the brain, on attention and affect, which Bernard Stiegler has dubbed psychopower (Stiegler, 2010). Thus regimes of posttruth also emerge out of postpolitical or postdemocratic strategies (Crouch, 2004) common to control societies where especially resource-rich political actors attempt to use data analytics to manage the field of appearance and participation (even if it is important to watch closely what resource-poor political actors are doing with coding, algorithmic, and data analytic knowledge—Foucault did speak after all of a “political economy of truth”). This political apparatus depends on “participatory” social media politics.

Resource-rich elites have analyzed and attempted to manage the breakdown of mass audiences and markets, opting to exploit and encourage the recognition of skepticism toward cultural authorities in journalism, politics, and the academic disciplines, each with their experts. They multiply truth claims (often entertainingly tabloidesque) whose meaning, if not veracity, is not easily or quickly confirmed.
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The proliferating truth games extend biopower into psychopower—managing not simply ideologies, discourses, and bodies in institutional enclosures but attention itself. From telescope to zoom, in particular instances, we find the clash and historical resolution of truth games where subjects attempt to play strategically to their advantage and, somewhat differently, in which they demonstrate their truth claims are part of games in a regime (of posttruth) whose rules they have misrecognized as relative or universal, instead of historical—parrhesia and regimes of (post)truth. This phenomenon is about multiple marketed ROT (an overall ROPT) designed to manage citizen-consumers by having them (a) accept that there is no way ultimately to verify truth, (b) believe their own truth arbiters in their markets, and subsequently (c) engage in vigorous counterclaiming and debunking. The rush to debunk and counterclaim is usually to no avail, since there is no main venue in which a trusted authority can definitively debunk truths by suturing multiple audience/market/network segments, and since reaching most of them (associated with virality) in a short amount of time is very difficult. Above all, ROPT capture attention to de-mobilize political subjects by forging a realist acceptance of the status quo; or to mobilize them to create a managed spectacle of claiming, sharing, liking, debunking, and refuting “issues” that are ultimately designed to block the emergence of more inclusive social justice agendas or even the reorganization of the plane of political agency itself.

References


