

Confronting the “Post-Truth Era”

2016 was an era of upheaval in global politics, bringing us both Britain’s withdrawal from the EU and the presidency of Donald Trump in the US. In the same year, “post-truth” was selected as word of the year. This word gives expression to a situation in which objective facts are sidelined and emotional appeals possess greater political influence.

This issue of My Vision considers the effect of a state of “post-truth” around the world and the roles demanded of politics and the media in such an era, seeking suggestions as to just how we should respond to such a situation.

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Examining tension between politics and the media

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Keywords...Polarization of politics, development of Internet media, divisions among the public, echo chamber effect, increasing information literacy

Expert Opinions

Confronting the “Post-Truth Era”

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The Internet: Dividing and connecting society

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Keywords...Internet, filter bubble, division of society, fact-based verification of information

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About this Issue

Examining Tension between Politics and the Media



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The Divisions among the Public at the Root of “Post-truth” Politics

Oxford University Press chose “post-truth” as its Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2016. “Post-truth” was defined as an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

“Post-truth” had existed as a term for some time prior to its selection as word of the year, but it was the British referendum regarding the nation’s withdrawal from the European Union and the US presidential election in 2016 that brought the term into wider usage.

Prior to the British referendum, the pro-Brexit side employed the slogan “We send the EU £350 million a week. Let’s fund our NHS instead.” The BBC reported that the British government’s expenditure on the EU was actually £160 million per week, representing a little more than 1% of government expenditure. However, this fact was only vaguely apprehended.

In the US, the Trump administration is still frequently the subject of controversy as a result of inaccurate or inappropriate statements. The benchmark for these was provided by the Counselor to the President in responding to queries regarding the veracity of the official claim that the crowd attending Trump’s inauguration was the largest ever – a comparison of photographs taken from the same vantage point clearly showed that the crowd attending Obama’s inauguration was larger – when she indicated that the Press Secretary had been presenting “alternative facts.”

In their interviews in this issue, Professor Takako Imai of Seikei University, a specialist in British politics, and Rentaro Iida, a Project Researcher at The University of Tokyo and a specialist in US politics, indicate that the result of the British referendum was not influenced by the Leave campaign, and that Trump’s lies and exaggerations did not increase his support. In separately conducted interviews, what both scholars emphasize is the recognition that as one aspect of political polarization, the development of Internet media has made it possible for supporters of either side to take in only the information that suits their position, and that the division among a public that does not give attention to the existing media or differing opinions is the issue at the root of “post-truth” politics.

This leads to what is known as the “echo chamber effect” in political communication theory. The spread of cable television and the Internet has made it possible for individuals to selectively tune in to only discourse that matches their political inclinations – a conservative, for example, might read newspapers with a conservative editorial orientation, listen to talk radio programs on which the conservative hosts strongly disparage liberals, watch television programs on which conservative commentators appear, and exchange opinions in conservative chat rooms and on

conservative message boards on the Internet. The result of this is that the same voices reverberate endlessly inside these people, as if they were in an echo chamber, and their opinions become further solidified. Furthermore, what matters in this case is whether or not the information matches the individual's prejudices; the degree of truth or falsity of that information is a secondary consideration.

But what is the situation in Japan? As indicated by the phrase "*netto uyoku* ("online right-winger")," the spread of Internet use has certainly also increased the visibility of right- and left-wing discourse in Japan. However, political polarization at the level of the electorate has not advanced to the extent that it has in the US or Europe. The influence of "fake news," in the sense of bolstering partisanship among the public, is small, but in the opinion of Associate Professor Iwao Osaka of Komazawa University, precisely because Japan has such a high percentage of non-affiliated voters, exaggerations in the mass media and on the Internet can radically alter public opinion, and at times can even affect the fate of an administration. To the extent that falsehoods and exaggerations are highly persuasive, their potential impact can be even greater in Japan.

We must increase Information Literacy

How then do we oppose "post-truth" politics?

The first response that can be indicated is fact-checking - verifying whether or not the statements of politicians correspond to facts, and informing the public of the results. A body known as the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) was founded in 2015. In Japan, newspapers including The Asahi Shimbun and the Tokyo Shimbun have commenced publishing articles related to fact-checking. Koji Sonoda, a political reporter with The Asahi Shimbun, who was a pioneer in this area, positions fact-checking as a method of enabling the mass media to fulfill its role as a social watchdog, and projects the aspiration for the media to offer professional journalism, presenting carefully corroborated facts, with the orientation of the media itself as the "fourth estate" also coming under scrutiny. A movement in this direction is already underway in Internet media. BuzzFeed Japan's Founding Editor, Daisuke Furuta, introduces an advanced experiment in "debunking," in which information spread on SNS and in other forums is subject to verification and lies are exposed.

Naturally, issues remain in the area of fact-checking. Accurate verification of the facts before a falsehood is spread necessitates speed and involves a burden of cost. It will also frequently produce articles that are anything but easy to read, showing which part of some specific information is correct, which part exaggerated, and which part mistaken. In addition, individuals who filter information based more on its compatibility with their attitudes than its authenticity will not necessarily accept the results of fact-checking.

Just as overcoming a disease requires both the development of medicines and the diffusion of preventative measures, in addition to systemic responses including fact-checking and the requirement for responsibility from the providers of information, in responding to the pervasiveness of inaccurate information it will also be necessary, while it may be a less direct approach, to make ongoing efforts in order to increase information literacy.

Professor Taniguchi is a Professor of Political Science in the Graduate Schools for Law and Politics, The University of Tokyo. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from The University of Tokyo, and specializes in the study of political science and contemporary Japanese politics.

The Collapse of Faith in Politics and the Establishment



Takako Imai

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Brexit. The outcome of the June 2016 British referendum, Britain's withdrawal from the EU, is etched in our memories as a historical event. There has been speculation that "Leave" voters were deliberately misguided by the leaders of the pro-Brexit camp, who appealed to the emotions through exaggeration, distortion and even falsification of facts.

While this may be the case, however, it is not to say that those who voted for Brexit simply acted on a fleeting impulse as a result of manipulation in this fashion. Surveys of public opinion following the referendum showed that the majority of voters had made up their minds well before the campaign commenced, and almost 90% of "Leave" voters indicated that they would vote the same way if the referendum were to be held again. Prior to polling day, politicians and experts desperately pointed out the facts in relation to the tremendous damage that leaving the EU would cause to Britain. A considerable number of "Leave" voters refused to be convinced by these facts. This is an instance of the type of situation that is referred to as "post-truth." But surely it can also essentially be regarded as indicating the advent of an era of "post-trust," in which there has been a fundamental loss of trust in the establishment. In a society in which people barricade themselves within a cocoon of information that they want to believe and shield themselves from opinions that differ from their own, from counter-arguments, and even from verification of facts, the foundations of trust are crumbling away.

The roots of the prevailing distrust go deep. Situations that have negatively affected trust in political elites have come one after another – political "spin without substance," the invasion of Iraq against public opposition, which was later discovered to have been executed based on "flawed intelligence," "cash for honours," MPs' misuse of public funds, and the list goes on. Meanwhile, despite the banner of the "Inclusive Society" or "One Nation" advocated by its Prime Ministers, Britain is increasingly divided into "5-75-20:" 5 percent of the secure rich, 75 percent of the insecure, and 20 percent of the excluded. As if to administer a coup de grace, post-financial crisis financial austerity directly affected essential daily-life infrastructure, and the unexpressed dissatisfaction and anxiety of workers who felt themselves to have been "left behind" came to be directed towards elites (who were seen as estranged from human feelings) and immigrants.

During the campaign for the general election held in June 2017, austerity became the keyword. The Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn, extensively criticized the austerity measures of the Conservative government. This strategy was sufficiently successful to enable the party to increase their seats against expectations. By contrast to Labour, Theresa May's intention of securing a parliamentary majority proved to be a total miscalculation. The Conservatives suffered an embarrassing defeat and were forced to form a minority government. Arguably, what was at question in this election was policy debate more substantial than mere mantras. We could argue that the voters urged politicians to look at the facts, i.e. the real lives of the public. This can be understood as a significant first step toward the rebuilding of trust.

Takako Imai is a professor in comparative welfare politics at Seikei University, specializing in contemporary British Politics and comparative welfare systems. She holds a Ph.D. from The University of Tokyo. Professor Imai took her current position in 2012 after serving as an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics, Faculty of Law, Seikei University. She has also been a visiting research fellow in the Department of Politics and International Studies of the University of Cambridge and at the European University Institute's Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies.

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Translated by Michael Faul

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The Spurring of Political Divisions by Partisan Polarization



Rentaro Iida

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The phenomenon of politicians telling lies can be observed in all ages and places. In the US itself, we can point to the Watergate scandal during the Nixon presidency and the Lewinsky scandal involving former president Bill Clinton, among other examples. However, even by comparison with these examples, the disregard for facts and willingness to lie displayed by Donald Trump has overstepped the bounds.

Among President Trump's lies and exaggerations, there have been those with the strategic intention of expanding his support. However, I do not believe that these actually boosted his rate of support. Nor was it a denial of inconvenient objective facts and scientific findings, and impulsive statements made in anger, which expanded his support. What won Trump the support of his constituency was the appeal to the feelings of the individual, the fact that he inspired a feeling that the individual was not forgotten. In this sense, we may consider the phenomenon of "post-truth" and the presidential election to be quite separate.

I believe that the increasing seriousness of the problem of "post-truth" in the US is a result of the polarization of political parties that formed the background to the presidential election and the strong media partisanship that reflects this situation. While both the Republican and Democratic parties were formerly centrist, since the 1970s their ideologies have diverged significantly, making compromise and cooperation difficult. A strongly partisan mass media has exacerbated these political divisions.

Renouncing the strongly partisan reportage of the 19th century, the US media was extremely aware of the necessity for fair and neutral reportage from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1970s. Since then, however, the spread of cable television and the dramatic increase in the number of channels has seen the appearance of media that make extreme claims in order to distinguish their channels from competitors. In response, there has been a progressive decline in trust in the media, to the extent that survey results have shown that the majority of Republican voters trust Donald Trump more than the news media.

It will be extremely difficult to break out of this situation, but the role of the media in doing so will naturally be a significant one. The media must fulfill its role of monitoring and correcting the administration. The key will be whether or not the conservative media in particular can be made to play its role of criticizing and controlling the orientation of the administration.

Dr. Iida is a young and talented researcher specializing in the field of contemporary American politics. He studies the transformation of party politics in the contemporary US and related social movements. Following graduation from Keio University's Faculty of Policy Management, Dr. Iida completed coursework in the doctoral program of The University of Tokyo's Graduate Schools for Law and Politics without taking a degree, prior to becoming a doctoral candidate at Georgetown University in the US. He has held his present position since 2014.

Strengthening Party Structures and Enhancing Journalism



Iwao Osaka

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In Japan, public opinion reacts immediately to exaggerated news in the media or on the Internet, and the political arena comes under attack. Up to the present, numerous prime ministers and politicians have been compelled to resign, unable to resist the power of the media.

In the sense of politics being influenced by the media, Japan has led the US and the UK, the springboards of the phenomenon of “post-truth,” and we can point to Japan as being in the midst of a crisis of democratic politics.

The significant expansion of media influence in Japan came about as the result of a dramatic change in election results with a growth in the number of non-affiliated voters against the background of a weakening of political party structures. Given the possibility that the support of non-affiliated voters could change administrations, it was only natural that politicians would consider attempting to control the media, which was able to influence those non-affiliated voters.

At the same time, in recent years on the journalistic side we have seen a sense of distance from administrations and differences of emphasis reflected not only in editorials but also in articles and reportage, at the level of entire media enterprises. The political significance of journalism is to monitor the political environment and the exercise of political power on behalf of the constituency, and to report on its findings. It is not the job of journalism to topple or create administrations, or to realize political assertions or goals. What is necessary is for journalism to become able to confront political authority by means of fully corroborated scoops.

At the same time, change is also necessary on the political side. If politics is to gain the power to resist the media, it will be necessary to strengthen party structures and ensure that grassroots movements are solid and on course. Observing President Obama’s campaign activities in the US, I saw that it was ultimately door-to-door canvassing that enabled candidates to obtain information about their constituents. We should lift the prohibition on door-to-door canvassing during election periods in Japan, and enable politicians to hold direct dialogues with their constituents at precisely the period during which the public is thinking most often about politics and political discussion is most vigorous.

Incorrect or unbalanced information distorts politics. Japan experienced this during the 1930s and 1940s. Today, when the Internet and smartphones make it possible for anyone to be involved in journalism, we must exercise ingenuity to ensure that every member of the public considers the importance of information and that we do not repeat the same mistakes again.

Specializing in contemporary Japanese politics and political communication, Associate Professor Osaka conducts research in areas including the relationship between politics and the media in contemporary Japan and the communication strategies of political parties and politicians. He has also served on numerous occasions as a coordinator for public forums held by candidates during elections. Following graduation from The University of Tokyo’s Faculty of Law, Associate Professor Iwao entered the doctoral program in the university’s Graduate Schools for Law and Politics, and completed coursework without taking a degree. He holds a Master’s Degree in law. Associate Professor Iwao took up his present position in 2017, after holding positions including teaching assistant at The University of Tokyo and Assistant Professor in Rikkyo University’s College of Sociology.

Increase Trust in Facts through Fact-checking and Verification of the Validity of Reportage



Koji Sonoda

Political Reporter,
The Asahi Shimbun

The spread of SNS has sparked an information revolution, allowing individuals to have their voices heard by society. One side of this is that people tend to choose information that matches their specific preferences, and opinion is becoming divided between the extremes of left and right. While the media may attempt to offer neutral and objective reportage, this appears to people on both poles to be slanted, and criticism of the media is growing stronger. This situation has generated distrust in the conventional media.

The US boasts an enormous SNS arena, and this phenomenon is therefore very strongly marked in the nation, to the extent that during the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders both exploited distrust of the conventional media to expand their support.

This may be referred to as “post-truth,” but attacking the media while making use of it is also a trademark of populist politics. As the use of SNS spreads further in Japan in future, there is every possibility that the tendencies observed in the US will become more pronounced in Japan also.

One of the major innate roles of journalism is to monitor the exercise of public authority to ensure that it does not overstep boundaries. If the public loses trust in the media, it becomes unable to fulfill its role as social watchdog. What should we do to win back trust in the media? The key is fact-checking and steady and sober verification of the validity of reportage.

Fact-checking was pioneered in the US as a means of checking whether statements made by politicians accorded with actual facts. The Asahi Shimbun commenced fact-checking in October 2016. We have received a significant response, but we are still at the stage of trial and error. But this is also an era in which the orientation of reportage is news in itself. Even if our intention has been to engage in objective reportage, it remains important to verify whether the orientation of that reportage was appropriate. It will be necessary for us to recognize that the media itself is a form of power, and to constantly and honestly check and monitor the use of that power.

When monitoring of political power by the media becomes ineffective, democracy enters a state of crisis. Today, when people are concerned about “fake news,” what is demanded of the traditional media is to devote itself exclusively to a return to its fundamentals – the presentation of facts that have been carefully researched by professional journalists – while also incorporating fact-checking and other new methods.

Mr. Sonoda is a journalist covering topics including the Prime Minister’s Office, the Liberal Democratic Party and The Ministry of Defense for The Asahi Shimbun. He started a fact-checking section in the newspaper in 2016, calling for reader feedback. Mr. Sonoda graduated from Waseda University’s First Faculty of Letters, and joined The Asahi Shimbun in 2000, taking his present position in 2007 following terms in the newspaper’s Fukui and Nagano Bureaus and Seibu Reporting Center. Mr. Sonoda is a former Associate of the Program on U.S-Japan Relations at Harvard University for the academic year 2015-2016.

The Internet: Dividing and Connecting Society



Photo: Jun Tsuboike
/BuzzFeed

Daisuke Furuta

Founding Editor,
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There have always been arguments that are not based on facts. Today, this has gone beyond the limit – it is the era of “post-truth.”

The Internet is the origin of this. Anyone is able to send and receive information; the Internet connects people. The benefits of this are enormous, but it also means that the information that flies about is a mixture of the good and bad, and that people connect exclusively with those who hold opinions similar to their own.

The algorithms employed by Google and Facebook, which collect data on user preferences, accelerate this tendency. They create “filter bubbles.” People become surrounded by an invisible bubble, and before they know it, only selected information passes through the skin of that bubble. People who only take in opinions that are similar to their own become

politically biased.

The Internet, which was expected to connect people, has divided society. The 2016 US presidential election was the prime example of this. If you wrote articles cheering Trump and criticizing Clinton, they would be enthusiastically shared by Trump supporters, even if they were lies. This enabled the people who wrote the articles to earn Internet advertising revenue. The motivation was pecuniary.

The fact that this type of information has a significant effect on public opinion is dangerous. In a situation like this, the role that should be fulfilled by the media is verification of information. President Trump is able to bypass the media and make statements directly to several hundred million people via Twitter. In such an era, simply reporting politicians’ statements may mean reporting lies. What we need are media that check whether these statements are based on fact, and interpret their meaning.

At BuzzFeed, we are putting effort into “debunking” – investigating suspicious information and reporting on the results of our investigation. BuzzFeed’s watchword is to have a positive effect on peoples’ lives via reliable news and enjoyable content.

For humans, information is like food that nourishes intellectual and spiritual health. Unceasing efforts to increase the reliability of information are demanded of content providers that create articles (content) and the platforms that distribute them.

As indicated at the outset, arguments that are not based on fact have always existed. The same is true of social divisions. The Internet has made these more apparent. We can expect that attempts to overcome these divisions will also be born from the Internet.

BuzzFeed Japan is a digital media company launched in January 2016 as a partnership between BuzzFeed (US) and Yahoo Japan. The site offers a diverse range of content, including entertainment. The BuzzFeed organization works to verify news around the globe. In 2016, the BuzzFeed Japan site was instrumental in the early discovery of inaccuracies in certain Japanese curated content websites. After graduating from Waseda University’s School of Political Science and Economics, Mr. Furuta joined The Asahi Shimbun. Following a career including experience in social reporting, the Asia Office, the digital editions team and as the Bureau Chief of the company’s Singapore office, Mr. Furuta left the newspaper in 2015, and in the same year became the Founding Editor of BuzzFeed Japan.