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Post-Truth Infodemic of COVID-19: Discursive Practice of Trust and Distrust in Mediapolitics

Dr. Adnan Tahir* 1   Ayesha Ghulam Ghous2   Awais Shafiq3

1. Associate Professor, Department of English, Emerson University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Visiting Lecturer, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, Department of English, Multan Postgraduate College, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

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Introduction

Post-truth may be interpreted in terms of "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (OxfordLanguages, 2016). The emerging phenomenon of post-truth has us focus on the conditions of truth instead of objective truth. Presently, in the context of prevailing pandemic discourse of Covid-19 and this game of reality construction, the state actors along with their media partners discursively construct the shared interpretation and strive to propagate their narrative as objective truth, viewing the post-pandemic era shaped as per their agenda. Another opportunistic perspective is quite observable when the internal system of communication weakens and the institution loses its control to respond the crisis timely or sometimes rather inappropriately; leaving the doors open for the other undesirable actors to enter and frame the scenarios as per their social and political agenda (Jose & Lugo, 2020). Interestingly, the post-truth climate, in place of

rationality and objectivity, is marked by the wave of emotions and acceptance of widespread beliefs, even when they are contradictory to statistics and rational facts (Llorente, 2017).

The structure of post-truth is based on the emergence of a widely shared world, discursively constructed due to insignificance of the factual truth prevailing as a public or global media discourse. The phenomenon is, in fact, based on the media-economy-politics complex. In fact, today's media, owing to its mixed environment of entertainment, politics, information and education has developed an air of mistrust in public about media itself. According to Zarzalejos, (2017, p. 12), the shared realities are subjectivized and thus the room is left for the political actors, to enter and capitalize the TV programs and thus ultimately start manipulating the public discourse. The emotional discourse acquires supremacy pushing the truth into the relativization and subjectivation of truth itself. Gooch (2017) has remarkably explained the present phenomenon saying, "seizing the opportunity that digitalization offers us to channel our collective intelligence, thus avoiding the drift towards collective stupidity" (p. 14). This collective stupidity will lead to a disaster where "Post-truth distorts the basic principles of human coexistence, such as the cult of truth and honesty (Rosales, 2017, p. 49)". However, the term of the post-truth may be new but the ideas goes back to the beginning of humanity when "The temptation to replace reality with appeals to emotions and personal beliefs—which is how blogger David Roberts has defined post-truth—is as old as humanity itself (Pinedo & Pino, 2017, p. 53).

Post-Truth Media Politics

A new scenario that the post-truth era has developed is the end of hegemony of globalization, and the re-emergence of hypernationalism (Peter, 2018). The United States of American, Britian and other European states reflect this strong nationalistic egocentrism in their policies. However, Peter argues that "it is a chilling realization that Trump's election to power and Brexit are both, in part, reputedly a result of a series of information interventions in the internal democratic political processes of the US and Britain (p. 1161)". He further assets that "information is the new warfare both against civil society and other countries (p. 1163)". Likewise, Rovetta and Bhagavathula (2020) have identified infodemic as "as a term, query, hashtag, or phrase that generates or feeds fake news, misinterpretations, or discriminatory phenomena".

The evident examples of post-truth politics are the popular rhetoric of influential politicians who use outright lies with complete assertion and certainty, tragically perhaps sometimes unconsciously, for serving their politically oriented agendas directing to both the opponents and their ideological supporters. Furthering to this, with the help of their sensationalist media partners, including both traditional and social media, they can deny the obvious and evident and even can create an event that never occurred (Zarzalejos, 2017, p. 12). Interestingly, the half-truth or even lies are presented with complete self-confidence and assurance. The main support to this assertion is provided by the emotional, hypernationalistic rhetoric where it is established that national existence and security is, in fact, associated with their narrative (Zarzalejos, 2017, p. 12). For instance, Gooch (2017, p. 15) quotes the examples of this so-called post-truth with reference to the previous presidential in the United States and the referendum in the United Kingdom. Looking at the politicized media, one can think the friends of yesterday become the foes in today's headlines.

Post-truth may be interpreted in terms of "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (OxfordLanguages, 2016). Discourse may be understood in a broader perspective than merely taking it as the text comprising the linguistic features; it is rather a wider social practice that involves the contextual and social features, e.g., social ideologies, intertextuality, discursive construction of social realities. Having the power of influencing the thinking and behaviors of individuals and social groups, discourse is manipulated by powerful groups and institutions, e.g., media and political institutions. During the 2020 global pandemic, social media has become an ally but also a potential threat (Venegas-Vera, Colbert & Lerma, 2020). To analyze the discourse as discursive practice, it is significant to know the manner of production of discourse and how it is consumed in the society. In the present scenario of COVID-19 pandemic narrative, this discursive practice mainly gets its support from emotional, hypernationalistic rhetoric. This study analyses, in the specific context of COVID-19, how the world of post-truth through digitalization of information in media (state media and social media) is expanding every hour and becoming a serious threat to humanity trust in media and political institutions.

Literature Review

Post-truth Media Infodemic Discourse of COVID-19

Loftus (2020) puts forward the view that "in crises, there is no room for 'post-truth.' Denying facts and the truth endangers lives. Peddling misinformation for political purposes proves too reckless, even for populists". The situation is so lamenting as the distrust of the public in the institution has been in vogue now and generally, they believe that media and intelligentsia simply provide a platform to the establishment to establish and control their narrative in the society. However, the journalists employ various techniques to enjoy their audience, e.g., news values and (simulated) journalist–audience interaction are used as main tools to capture audience engagement (Feng, 2020).The statistical figures related to the number of infected patients, the number of deaths, the required number of medical equipment and other related information regarding imposition of lock down, closures of business activities and other remedial and protective measures are being viewed with doubts and uncertainty. Such content on social media has undermined the credibility of scientific expertise (Hartley & Vu, 2020). The dominating leaders of the world are faced with the questions on their paradoxical statements. For instance, the U.S. presidents and other right-wing U.S. media earlier declared the Coronavirus pandemic as simply a "hoax" but later on when the country was caught up, the discourse related to pandemic Corona was changed altogether and even the international political blame game started between U.S. and Republic of China (Loftus, 2020). Here in Pakistan, the PM, Imran Khan changed his statement many times regarding the severity of the Pandemic Corona and the imposition of lockdown in the country, changing from smart type to the strict type. The public of Pakistan is still undecided what to believe, in Government of Sindh statements or the Federal Government statements related to Covid-19 controlling measures, number of deaths, available facilities in the hospitals and other related issues. Paradoxically, when the Pakistani Government intends to relax the imposed lockdown in the country, the doctors come on the roads and address the press about the dire need of imposition of strict lockdown. Likewise, the religious section of the society is also offended to seeing the crowed markets and the closed mosques (Sindh-center tension, 2020). This

prevailing post-truth situation is quite damaging and reckless for the societal trust in the institutions.

Post-Truth Conspiracy Theories of COVID-19

The post-truth about COVID-19 has shaped the world politics in conflicts and contradiction. The world leaders are expressing paradoxical reactions on the truth about Corona pandemic. When Jair Bolsonaro distrusts the scientific community, blames them for generating false information, and thus encourages the public not to be worried about the simple "cold", the governors of Brazil are imposing the lockdown exercising their discretionary powers (Loftus, 2020). The international politics in smeared with the hot blame war of Covid-19 as a curse from nature or man-made bioweapon to use against enemies. The post-truth environment becomes worse amid a long list of conspiracies theories ranging from accidental leakage theory to various bioengineering deliberately planned theories. The US president clearly labelled it as Chinese biological weapon and the issue involves the war of economic powers where human lives are vulnerable and at the mercy of biological attacks from the state (Gittleson, 2020). On the other hand, Chinese supporters declares it as CIA creation to teach a lesson to China, the emerging hegemonic economy of the world (China's rulers see the coronavirus, 2020). The post-truth conflict is restricted not only to the political world but also to the religions. The Muslim world believes that it is the Zoinist elements that has created this deadly biological weapon to suppress Iran (Frantzman, 2020). Likewise, the Indian Muslims related this with their government conspiracy against Tablighi Jamaat religious gathering (Silva, 2020). Similarly, the Asians experiences various kinds of discrimination during pandemic (Yu, Pan, Yang & Tsai, 2020). A flood of international conspiracy theories has exaggerated this post-truth dis/infodemic: e.g., population control scheme, 5G mobile phone networks (Broderick, 2020; Cellan-Jones, 2020). Valadier (2017) has rightly labeled this environment of conflicts and distrust a great danger to democracy, even if the post-truth is only a slogan. The condition worsens when the post-truth is mishandled for the political purposes; it is reckless. Anyway, the racial prejudices associated with the cause of virus discouraged the collaborative efforts of the scientist to reach the solution soon (Anwar, Malik, Raees & Anwar, 2020).

Post-Truth Dis/Infodemic through Powerful Media

The scope of post-truth is not only limited to the political arena, it has also developed in corporate environment where media recklessly and arbitrarily promotes the commercial advertisement. These advertisements, with full media power, promote, along with superficial knowledge, the dispelling hoaxes, substitute versions of reality, rumors, unverified anecdotes, and even sometimes the medicinal and nutritious untruths, and exaggerated facts. Gallotti, Valle, Castaldo *et al.* (2020) have found in a study on a very scale where more than 100 million Twitter messages were analyzed which were posted worldwide during the early stages of epidemic spread across countries (from 22 January to 10 March 2020). They identified that early warning signals of infodemic were mainly counted towards misinformation. Today, with the journal intermediation, the post-truth in politics and business have deprived the society of defense against post-truth. According to Zarzalejos, (2017), the latest electronic technology with the journalistic intermediation has demoralized the journalistic ethics and the truth values have been shattered.

Material and Methods

Theoretical Framework

Discourse as Power

Power, the core concept in CDA studies, is defined by Fowler (1985) as, "the ability of people and institutions to control the behaviors and material lives of others" (p.61). Language works as a great tool of power to control the behaviors of others by manipulation their thinking with discourse. According to van Dijk (1998), the power associated to any social group is, in fact, determined by having the control over the intermittent social resources including particularly the capital, eminence, knowledge, information and military force, etc. He asserts that the biggest of all this is the ability to manipulate the thinking and behaviors of other communal groups in the society. Such powerful groups, for instance, the politicians, media, intellectuals, rich and etc., get the control of the dominant discourse and narrative prevailing in various form in public discourses. This power of discourse is, in fact, embedded with the text structure of discourse. For different power context or social groups people have different linguistic choices through which they can manipulate the other people's thoughts and discursively construct the reality as they actually want the people to see the reality.

Discourse as Social Practice: Fairclough's Explanation

Fairclough (1989) believes that language is a form of social practice, "Discourse refers to the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part" (p. 24). That is why, Fairclough asserts that the CDA is not only related with the text structure, but also with process of text production, its dissemination and interpretation. It is significant to know how the text is linked with the other texts, the intertextuality, production process and the particularly, the social context which has created a discourse. Founded on these fundamentals, Fairclough (1989; 1992; 2003) presented a three-dimensional model as a framework for critical discourse analysis. He believes that any communicative event should be analyzed from three perspectives: the level of text (any form of oral, written and visual or combination of these); the level of discursive practice that is linked with the production and consumption of text; the level of social practice that relates a text with social ideologies and thinking process.

Discursive Practice and Institutional Context

Fairclough believes that discourse refers not only to the linguistic text but it is, in fact, a social practice and it must be viewed in its whole. He adds a very significant aspect in understanding the discourse, that is, discursive practice or level of interpretation which he describes as, "interpretation is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction with seeing the text as the product of a process of production, and as recourse in the process of interpretation" (1989, p.26). At this level, the analyst should synthesize the text with it manner of production and how it is consumed. Instead of merely taking discourse as the text and it linguistic features, it should be considered as a discursive practice and how it is related with the other contextual features, e.g., speech act, intertextuality. At this stage of text as discursive practice, two processes need to be deliberated. The first process is related with institutional context, e.g., the editorial process, while the second process is related with alteration from which a text is passed through in it production and consumption. At this stage, the main idea is of intertextuality which is helpful in

explaining discourse practice. This perspective, in fact, deals with exploring the text in relation to the other texts, and settings. At this point, it is important to know how people react to the news and information and how they interpret the discourse. At this interpretive stage, the source of information and the channels of reporting news should be considered in understanding the discourse itself (Fairclough, 1995).

Results and Discussion

Media Shaping the Political Narratives

Viewing from this perspective, we can see that news media, an important social institution, is closely related with the government policies and political narratives prevailing in the specific social context (Thussu, 2006). Customarily, the media is directed by the national ideologies and general social narrative to produce specific kinds of news to construct or support the beliefs and shape the majority of people's mind accordingly. Though, the changing of mind is enormously difficult and any unwanted interruption in one's established schemata, contrarily, prompts endorsement to more extreme views (Kuhn, Cummings, Youmans, 2020). In this scenario, it becomes significant to explore the institutional context because the features of organizations become as meaningful as they refer to the implicit background knowledge behind the production and consumption of news. Describing the propaganda model of mass media, Herman and Chomsky state that "serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity" (1988, p. xi). For instance, according to them, American media is dependent on commercial advertisement for it profit; it has to rely on government official for sources; it remained frightened with right-wing pressure groups; it is overwhelmed with anti-socialist ideology. Therefore, the discursive practices of American media are highly dominated by the government policies with reference to ideological context.

Digitalization of information on Social Media

In today's world, the availability of informative content, its access and the amount is unprecedented. In a study, Moscadelli, Albora, Biamonte *et al.* (2020) have found that links that contained fake news were shared 2,352,585 times, accounting for 23.1% of the total shares of all the articles reviewed. This new biggest revolution of digitalization has enabled the common persons to produce the information themselves; they are not merely the consumers of information but the producers. This massive scale information is available on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit and Gab which work for rumors' amplification (Cinelli, Quattrociocchi, Galeazzi, *et al.,* 2020). The media, which once was governed and controlled and manipulated by powerful groups, has become social now. The phenomenon of citizen journalism has become not only popular now but also more trustable due to its involvement of common people who can better guard their interest than the media groups that can be controlled and manipulated easily by bigger power structures. For instance, according to an estimate, more than 60% of the Americans depend on social media for keeping them updated with the world around them. However, the tragic paradox is that the more we become informed, the more, in fact, we become misinformed (Gooch, 2017). An interesting example of this misinformation is the front cover of *The Economist* (September 2016) as "*Art of the Lie*" dedicated to the prevailing phenomenon of post-truth. The inside pages highlighted a graph showing the results of frequency of Facebook content sharing carrying misinformation equal to the

number of times as of true information. According to Viner (2016), the Chief Editor of *The Guardian*, in the present time of infodemic, the virality precedes the quality and ethics. In fact, the emotional aspect, though not new, has added some more effective tactics so that it can "reinforce prejudices" (Berckemeyer, 2017, p. 26).

Post-Truth Contradictory Statistics about Covid-19

It is very tricky to determine the accurate cause of death, even when one is suspected to be affected with Covid-19. The coronavirus is a serious threat to only those people who are old, say above 60 years of age, and already suffering with comorbid situation of having some other form of chronic illness, like diabetes or cardiac complications. It is a mere generalization to ascribe every death in the pandemic time due to Covid-19 (Paulos, 2020). Blake (2020) counts 12 contradictory statements of Trump about the nature and spread of coronavirus. For instance, before 26 February 2020, Trump was of the view, "This is a flu. This is like a flu." "Now, you treat this like a flu." "It's a little like the regular flu that we have flu shots for". However, after 31 March 2020, Trump cries, "It's not the flu. It's vicious." and on April 22 says, "Flu is very different from corona". Niburski and Niburski have found that from March 1 to April 30, 2020, Trump made 11 tweets about untested therapies and mentioned these therapies 65 times in White House briefings, especially about hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine. Likewise, the Hong Kong researchers in their study claim that the coronavirus cases in China might have been four times the official figure given by the Chinese government (Davidson & Beaumont, 2020). Similarly, according to the Hong Kong researchers, the corona diagnostic criteria was very limited, and China's national health commission revised it seven times between the dates from 15 January to 3 March 2020. The researchers claimed, "The true number of infections could still be higher than that currently estimated, considering the possibility of under-detection of some infections, particularly those that were mild and asymptomatic, even under the broadest case definitions" (p.???). The similar conflicting situation can be seen in UK where the government's daily figures (count of death only in hospitals) were different from the figure weekly announced by the Office of National Statistics, which added the deaths in the community. The same conflicting situation was reported in Spain where federal government and the Madrid's regional government presented the contradictory figures. The US president, Trump, has repeatedly amplified the conspiracy theories of the origin and escape of virus from Chinese labs (Russell, 2020). Such controversies are in full swing with the nations. Trump claims that the director of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Robert Redfield, had been "totally misquoted" whereas, Redfield, standing by Trump at the podium, told reporters: "I'm accurately quoted in the Washington Post". Similarly, Iran's health ministry announces a figure of 194 death that was contradicted by the health minister's representative to have more than 200 deaths only within Gilan (Fazeli, 2020). In Pakistan, the center-Sindh tension has worsened the situation; it has been more than three months the first Covid-19 patient was identified but Pakistan is still finding a national direction how to fight with this deadly pandemic. Even today, the issue of lockdown or smart lockdown has not been decided between the federal government and the Sindh province government (Dawn, 2020). All these conflicts and controversies, immersed with political prejudices have promoted the post-truth environment, which ultimately leads to blurred and untrusted information for the public.

Deepfake Representation of Reality on Social Media: Is seeing still Believing?

Galston (2020) has rightly predicted that, "if AI is reaching the point where it will be virtually impossible to detect audio and video representations of people saying things they never said…, seeing will no longer be believing". It is interesting to see how Covid-19 is creating the tons of kinds of information that are in fact the loads of fake news. For instance, the YouTube has uploaded dozens of vides revealing how fake information is being disseminated for the spread, causes and treatment of coronavirus (fake videos of covid-19). Even, the hoax videos extracted from already released movies are being uploaded showing the horrible death scenes and cruel disasters created due to Corona virus. The fake news about Covid-19 is spreading with the speed equal to the spread of the virus itself. A great number of home remedies (e.g., the garlic, ginger, alcohol etc.) are in vogue to protect against the virus; however, none is medically recommended by any recognized agency (DW News, 2020). Likewise, the stories about the celebrities who have been affected with Coronavirus, fake claims about the preventive and cure medicines are spreading fast throughout the world (Good Morning America, 2020). The social media is bombarded with the conspiracies of Covid-19, ranging from the intriguing plan to stop Brexit to the engineered man-made virus as a bio attack to stop Chinese globally increasing economy. Though the Facebook, being the largest social media hub with its over 2 billion accounts around the globe, has announced to remove the fake news related to the Covid-19 and promote the guidelines announced by World Health Organization, yet the task is much far away from it success (BBC Newsnight, 2020). Another instance, Tamil Nadu's Tiruppur police department has started a campaign to warn and create awareness for lockdown violators. The fake Covid-19 patients are being arrested and punished by the police department. The common person is confused to see the fake news about the disease and even the fake patients (Hindustan Times, 2020). Here, in Pakistan, The Pakistan Poultry Association is busy in eradicating the propaganda of fake news related to the rumors that chicken is unsafe due to having coronavirus (Warriach, 2020).

Conclusion

The world of post-truth is expanding every hour and becoming a serious threat to humanity trust in media and political institutions, which have earned this credibility over the centuries. It calls for all the public stakeholders to think, "We must wonder whether this situation will resurrect or destroy the public's faith in political institutions" (José & Lugo, 2020). However, the only remedy to these reemerging dark ages is once again the knowledge of truth. However, the situation is highlighting global fear and distrust, yet, "Times of fear are also times of rumors and misinformation; knowledge is the antidote" (Baldwin & Mauro, 2020, p.7). When the solution lies in knowledge, the role of educators increases manifold to counter this post-truth dis/infodemic. The credible information and knowledge about Covid-19 has a positive protective effect on fear of infection and the preconceptions associated with infected people and anxiety (Lee, Lee, Park *et al.*, 2020). The politicians and media try to bracket the public health (science) with their own ideological and nationalistic biases and beliefs. It must be realized these two are, though intertwined, different and separate from each other. Kester (2020) suggests the world should focus peace education in this pandemic era and the educators need to play a pragmatic role in this situation. They need to focus on developing critical thinking and philosophical thinking among their students. It is significant to teach the students the basic skills how to consume information, e.g., triangulation of data sources and demand of evidence. The need of using scientific thinking has become vital not only for the

people working in the field of science but also for the people working the fields of social sciences, humanities and public institutions (media). He believes that "In the end, hopefully the silver lining in this crisis is that it will expose the post-truth decay for what it is, and lead us once again to trust in our public institutions".

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