Book Review: *Post-Truth.*

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In the opening pages of *Post-Truth*, author, Lee McIntyre, presents the reader with this astonishing on-air exchange from 2016 between CNN's Alyson Camerota and Newt Gingrich:

> Alyson Camerota (AC): Violent crime is down. The economy is picking up –
>
> Newt Gingrich (NG): It is not down in the biggest cities.
>
> AC: Violent crime, murder rate is down. It is down.
>
> NG: Then how come it's up in Chicago, up in Baltimore, and up in –
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> AC: There are pockets where certainly we –
>
> NG: Your national capital, your third biggest city –
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> AC: But violent crime across the country is down. We're not under siege in the way that we were in say, the 80s.
>
> NG: . . . The average American, I will bet you this morning, does not think crime is down, does not think they are safer.
>
> AC: But we are safer, and it is down.
>
> NG: No, that's your view.
>
> AC: It's a fact.
>
> NG: . . . But what I said is also a fact. . . I understand your view. The current view is that liberals have a whole set of statistics which theoretically may be right, but it's not where human beings are. People are frightened. People feel that their government has abandoned them. . .
>
> AC: . . . but hold on, Mr. Speaker, because you're saying liberals use these numbers, they use this sort of magic math. This is the FBI statistics. They're not a liberal organization.
>
> NG: No, but what I said is equally true. People feel it.
>
> AC: They feel it, yes, but the facts don't support it.

NG: As a political candidate, I'll go with how people feel, and I'll let you go with the theoreticians.

If such an exchange were an outlier, it would hardly be worth discussing. Unfortunately, as McIntyre reminds the reader, post-truth was Oxford Dictionary's word of the year in 2016, indicating that such an exchange has become commonplace. How did we get to the point where the privileging of feelings over facts is so widespread in our society? This is McIntyre's focus in his indispensable book, *Post-Truth*.

Lee McIntyre is a trained philosopher and research fellow at the Center for Philosophy and History of Science at Boston University. Additionally, he teaches ethics at Harvard Extension School. He has written several books, including *The Scientific Attitude, Respecting Truth*, and *Dark Ages*. In a book that could not be more appropriate for our time, *Post-Truth* (from The MIT Press), McIntyre set out to explain how our society has devolved to the point where facts and truth seem to matter less to millions of Americans than their feelings about any number of subjects.

McIntyre explains that the process by which facts are gathered has been corrupted in American society. It should be well understood that some things are valid irrespective of how we feel about them. In our post-truth moment, however, this is changing. Post-truth, according to McIntyre, refers to the bending of reality to fit one's opinions, stoking doubt in the existence of reality itself, and privileging feelings over facts. McIntyre argues that "Post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not." Many Americans are increasingly becoming more and more accepting of the idea that if they want something to be accurate, that desire trumps the evidence's weight. And what seems particularly dangerous about our current moment is not just the widespread dissemination of lies and misinformation but the ongoing assault against the idea of knowing reality and the existence of reality itself.

McIntyre quotes Hannah Arendt, who argued that "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction. . . and the distinction between true and false. . . no longer exist." While we may not be headed toward an authoritarian takeover in the U.S., the message is clear: allowing these post-truth currents to endure will likely continue to be profoundly and increasingly destabilizing for American society.

To understand our post-truth historical moment, McIntyre contends that we first need to understand cognitive biases that are hard-wired into human beings, including motivated reasoning and confirmation bias. As McIntyre notes, "One of the deepest roots of post-truth has also been with us the longest, for it has been wired into our brains for over the history of human evolution: cognitive bias." McIntyre explains that humans tend to change their beliefs to match their feelings instead of aligning their beliefs with the best evidence. Humans do not like to think badly about themselves, and it feels good to believe one is smart, capable, and well-informed. When confronted with information that suggests something we believe is untrue, we experience tension. We want harmony between our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and are uncomfortable when there is not. When they are misaligned, we seek a resolution that is not ego-threatening and preserves our sense of self-value. Because of the hard-wired nature of motivated reasoning, human beings selectively search for information that confirms their preexisting beliefs and assumptions, avoid information that does not, and interpret information in a manner compatible with their existing point of view. This is particularly true when it is in one's self-interest to do so or when the information at hand relates to one's deeply-held or deeply-emotional beliefs.

McIntyre is careful to explain that this is nothing new: these biases have always existed within human beings. So what happened to cause these tendencies to become so much more dangerous in recent years? He cites a few key events: the rise of postmodernism, the decline of traditional media, and the rise of social media.

McIntyre argues that postmodern thought played a role in developing our post-truth moment, with its questioning of objective truth, assumption that all claims of fact are a matter of one's perspective and numerous attacks on science. He notes that legitimate debates about objective truth have been taken to unreasonable extremes by those utilizing a postmodernist perspective.

While some may treat the notion of the right-wing weaponizing postmodernism as preposterous, McIntyre relies on the admissions of those who have done so to bolster his argument convincingly. He notes that Phillip Johnson, one of the founders of the intelligent design movement, admitted to describing himself in postmodernist terms to undercut the authority of evolution, saying, "On the radical postmodern view, science has no special privilege over any other views of the world even with regards to matters of empirical fact; every tribe may take its own story as the starting point for its other beliefs." He also quotes Mike Cernovich, influential pro-Trump social media personality, saying, "Look, I read postmodernist theory in college. If everything is narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative. I don't look like a guy that reads Lacan, do I?" Such admissions make it hard to deny the influence of postmodernism on our post-truth moment.

According to McIntyre, the most significant factors leading to the current post-truth era are the decline of traditional news and the rise of social media.

In the 1950s, Americans were likely to have a handful of trusted television news anchors who gave them 30 minutes of news each night. In 1950, there were paid newspaper subscriptions in 124 percent of American households (clearly some had multiple subscriptions), likely from the major paper in their city/region. By the end of the 1980s, newspaper circulation began to decline and has fallen sharply to 37 percent of households in recent years. This was no doubt hastened by the rise of cable news in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the Internet in recent decades.

During this time, several outlets (such as conservative talk radio and Fox News) positioned themselves as the conservative "correction" to supposed widespread liberal bias in mainstream media, while other outlets (such as MSNBC) became partisan news sources on the left. These outlets relied less on legitimate journalists and credentialed experts and more on partisans posing as trusted sources. They also blurred the lines between news and opinion.

In the face of the right's constant drumbeat about liberal bias, many media outlets attempted to appear balanced by presenting opposing viewpoints on all matters—even matters of fact. As McIntyre explains, this was a disaster for science matters, claiming a false equivalence between the weight of the evidence on one side and faulty opinions and conspiracy theories on the other. Rather than making newscasts more balanced, they had the opposite effect—they became more inaccurate. McIntyre argues that "By allowing 'equal time,' the media only succeeded in creating 'false equivalence' between two sides of an issue even when there were not two credible sides. . . The goal of objectivity is not to give equal time between truth and falsehood—it is to facilitate the truth. . . If you provide a counternarrative of falsehood to something that is true, it allows motivated reasoning to take root."

Take climate change as an example. The fossil fuel industry-funded many think tanks to conduct pseudo-science, which questioned the weight of the scientific evidence on climate change and bullied media outlets to allow them to present their work as legitimate science opposite actual experts in the split-screen of cable news. The fossil fuel industry was banking on the assumption that the public would accept a false equivalence between the credentials of an expert, such as a NASA climate scientist, and those of a nonexpert who has absolutely no authority speaking about such an issue, such as an (industry-backed) Heartland Institute fellow with a bachelor's degree in government and no expertise or training in climate science. Media outlets were often too afraid of the "liberal bias" attack to alert their viewers to the difference between this expert and nonexpert. In such an environment, "scientific results are now openly questioned by legions of nonexperts who happen to disagree with them." Rather than helping viewers understand what has been accepted as fact in the scientific community, media outlets helped propagate a non-existent scientific debate, sow the seeds of doubt in the public mind, and move the public further from truth and understanding rather than closer to it.

Along with the decline of traditional media and the proliferation of partisan media, the rise of social media fragmented the media landscape even further, creating "news silos" or "information silos." These silos channel partisans to media outlets that stoke their cognitive biases, presenting them with information that makes them feel good, aligns with their existing worldview, and exclude or reject information that does not. In such echo chambers, questionable claims are repeated endlessly until the audience internalizes them. The original source of the claim is obscured to the point where its legitimacy is no longer in question.

Today, a majority of Americans report getting their news from social media, which has proven to be a toxic mixture of legitimate news and complete nonsense. On social media, one faces an onslaught of information, much of which is either from very poor partisan sources (such as Fox News, Breitbart, MSNBC, or the Huffington Post) or, worse, is downright disinformation (such as InfoWars, OAN, World Truth TV, etc.). McIntyre asks, "With fact and opinion now presented side by side on the Internet, who knows what to believe anymore? With no filters and no vetting, readers, and viewers, these days are readily exposed to a steady stream of pure partisanship."

In a fragmented media landscape and social media environment where Americans face an unrelenting stream of information that spans the entire gamut from fact to disinformation, cognitive biases are unleashed to have their most destructive impact.

In the final chapter of *Post-Truth*, McIntyre suggests that we fight back in a variety of ways. He notes that social media sites could be vigilante in stamping out fake news but often provokes a conservative backlash. He says we could also flood the zone with good news sources but is doubtful of this approach, as information silos will indeed still channel many partisans away from legitimate news sources. McIntyre supports efforts to bolster Americans' critical thinking skills and notes how many educational institutions are attempting to tackle this task. He encourages all Americans to stand up to lies wherever they find them in their everyday lives, saying, "One must always fight back against lies. We should never assume that any claim is 'too outrageous to believed.' A lie is told because the person telling it thinks there is a chance that someone will believe it. . . The point of challenging a lie is not to convince the liar, who is likely too far gone. . . But because every lie has an audience, there may still be time to do some good for others. . . In an era of post-truth, we must challenge each and every attempt to obfuscate a factual matter and challenge

falsehoods before they are allowed to fester." He notes that research suggests that even partisans can change their minds if faced with the evidence repeatedly, as long as we do so in a non-threatening manner.

If there is a weakness in *Post-Truth*, it is in its prescriptions for addressing our current mess. It is difficult to imagine how we will get ourselves out of this present moment if we do not address partisan media outlets' massive influence and social media's corrosive impact. However, it is hard to lay this at McIntyre's feet as he readily admits that the big fixes—such as transforming how partisan news outlets and social media platforms operate—are likely to face far too much backlash to be sustainable.

McIntyre may not have a magic wand that can fix our country immediately, but this is, of course, not a reasonable expectation. What he has given us is an excellent analysis of the post-truth trends corroding our society. *Post-Truth* is indeed an excellent book. It is indispensable in providing readers with the tools necessary to understand our current moment and make several suggestions for how we might get started towards digging ourselves out of the morass. This call-to-arms is a much-needed, well-written, well-argued, and highly-accessible book for those citizens who despair over the current course their country is taking yet have not given up on righting the ship.