

The Problematic of Communication as “Truth-Telling” in the Twenty-First Century?¹

Chaiwat Satha-Anand²

Introduction

At the time of this writing, *New York Times* ran an article on Donald Trump Jr.'s email affirming the Russian government's support for the Trump campaign with damaging information on Hilary Clinton, calling it: “Not Right Now: the Art of not Talking About Trump” (Flegenheimer and Huetteman, 2017). When asked about this issue, Republican senators, Toomey of Pennsylvania, Corker of Tennessee, and Hatch of Utah replied: “Not right now”; “Talk to others about politics”; and “He (Donald Trump Jr.) is a very nice young man, very dedicated to his father...(Though) he divorced their mothers...(And that the controversy) “could be way overblown”, respectively.

Perhaps such reality, among others, is one of the reasons why in 2016, *Oxford Dictionaries* has declared the word “post-truth” to be its “international word of the year”. As a matter of fact, the use of the term had increased 2,000% in 2016 compared to 2015, influenced by the era of Donald Trump and Brexit, among other things. Oxford's “international word of the year” is a way by which the passing year was reflected in language. The word “post-truth” is defined as an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in

¹ This article is adapted from the keynote speech presented in the Communication and Changing Society International Conference in corporation with the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Thammasat University and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya. The Conference was held at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand on 21 July 2017.

² Professor in the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University.

which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Casper Grathwohl, Oxford Dictionaries President, predicted that he wouldn't be surprised "if post-truth becomes one of the defining words of our time". He explained that Oxford's choice "reflects a year dominated by highly charged political and social discourse. Fueled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, post-truth as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time" (*The Guardian*, 15 November 2016).

It goes without saying that the word "post-truth" is not unproblematic. If one adopts Oxford's definition of "post-truth" as the time when "objective facts" is less influential than human emotions and personal belief, and accepts that the era of post-truth, drawn from Latin- post means "after" or "behind", then there are at least two problems with this definition. First, it equates "truth" with "objective facts" assuming also the existence of "objectivity" cherished by conventional epistemology. Second, it seems to suggest that human emotion or personal belief has nothing to do with "truth", defined as "objective facts" or otherwise.

If both points are called into question, then it would mean that the present era is not "post-truth" since "truth" still functions in some ways, inherent in human emotions and beliefs among other things, in different spheres especially in the realm of communication. If twenty-first century communication is marked with advanced technology that enables human communication to be possible with unprecedented speed, then I would argue that there is a need to raise the question: what does speed do to communication as truth-telling project in the twenty-first century? This paper begins with a brief discussion of the notions of communication as "truth-telling" and "truth". Then the problem of speed that characterized communication technology/reality in the twenty-first century will be explored. The paper ends with a critical appraisal of how such speed will render communication project as truth-telling increasingly problematic.