

Steven Pinker Is Wrong. We Do Live in a Post-Truth Society



By Alex Berezow, PhD — October 31, 2019



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Steven Pinker is an excellent writer and thinker. Perhaps his greatest contribution to our national dialogue is his insistence, backed up by considerable research, that life keeps getting better and better. Despite the substantial problems we read about in the news on a daily basis, we live in a world that has never been richer or safer than it is now. I believe he and others like Max Roser who emphasize the same theme are absolutely correct.

However, I think that Dr. Pinker misses the mark in a recent [essay](#) [2] he wrote for *Skeptic* titled "Why We Are Not Living in a Post-Truth Era." He begins by trying to show that it is illogical to believe in a post-truth era.

"Consider the statement 'We are living in a post-truth era.' Is it true? If so, it cannot be true."

Dr. Pinker is echoing a famous dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras. The latter was in favor of relativism (i.e., what is true for you is true for you and what is true for me is true for me). Socrates indicates that this is a self-defeating argument because claiming that relativism is true is in itself a truth claim. Therefore, relativism is self-contradictory and false.

The problem with Dr. Pinker's argument is that it's a straw man. Those who claim we live in a post-truth society are *not* saying that there is no such thing as truth. What they are saying is that truth doesn't matter to most people. When presented with information they do not like, many people respond by calling it "fake news." But Dr. Pinker says this about fake news:

"Another inspiration for the post-truth cliché is the recent prominence of 'fake news.' But this, too, is not a new development. The title of the James Cortada and William Aspray's forthcoming 'Fake News Nation: The Long History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America,' is self-explanatory..."

Dr. Pinker is absolutely correct that fake news is not a recent development. Humans have been lying ever since we have been able to speak. What makes things different today, in my opinion, is that we have the internet. Nearly every human being on Earth has access to all the knowledge ever generated by mankind. Yet, instead of doing research and telling the truth, we prefer to spread lies and propaganda (and pictures of cats) at lightning speed around the globe. This takes the problem to an entirely new level. We have no excuse to be poorly informed, yet we choose to be.

Dr. Pinker goes on:

"And the belief that fake news is displacing the truth itself needs to be examined for its truth. In their analysis of fake news in the 2016 American presidential election, Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler found that it took up a minuscule proportion of the online communications (far less than 1 percent) and was mainly directed at partisans who were impervious to persuasion."

Fair enough, but I think Dr. Pinker underestimates the scope of the problem. One [study](#) [3] found that roughly half the viral stories we read on Facebook are misleading, exaggerated, or worse. Politics isn't the only arena within which we are inundated with fake news.

"But the main reason we should retire the posttruth cliché is that it's corrosive, perhaps self-fulfilling. The implication is we may as well give up on reason and truth and just fight the bad guys' lies and intimidation with lies and intimidation of our own."

Nobody is making that argument. On the contrary, there are serious efforts to understand how to reach people, which probably involves some combination of telling the truth while appealing to emotion. Dr. Pinker then makes this claim:

"When people are confronted with their own ignorance of the facts, they become more epistemically humble about their opinions."

I don't know who Dr. Pinker has been talking to, but that's certainly not my experience. In fact, quite the opposite. When people are confronted with their own ignorance, they double down and become even more insistent that they are right. As Dr. Michael Shermer [discusses](#) [4] in *Scientific American*, this is known as the backfire effect.

On this, I am in 100% agreement with Dr. Pinker:

"Rationality, to be sure, is not increasing everywhere. In some arenas it appears to be sinking fast. The most conspicuous is electoral politics, which is almost perversely designed to inhibit our capacity for rationality. Voters act on issues that don't affect them personally, and are under no pressure to inform themselves or defend their positions. Practical issues like energy and healthcare are bundled with symbolic hot buttons like euthanasia and the teaching of evolution. These bundles are then strapped to regional, ethnic, or religious coalitions, encouraging group-affirming expressive cognition. People vote as if rooting for sports teams, encouraged by the media, which treat politics as a horse race, encouraging zero-sum competition rather than clarification of character and policy."

Ultimately, where I think Dr. Pinker is wrong is in his grasp of the scope of the "post-truth" problem. His view is too optimistic. We really are [swimming in B.S.](#) [5]

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[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth#/media/File:Truth-Warner-Highsmith.jpeg>

[2] https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/steven-pinker-on-why-we-are-not-living-in-a-post-truth-era/

[3] <https://healthfeedback.org/the-most-popular-health-articles-of-2018-a-scientific-credibility-review/>

[4] <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-convince-someone-when-facts-fail/>

[5] <https://callingbullshit.org/>