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Spoelstra, Sverre

Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
Leadership

DOI:
[10.1177/1742715020937886](https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020937886)

Publication date:
2020

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Citation for published version (APA):
Spoelstra, S. (2020). The Truths and Falsehoods of Post-Truth Leaders. *Leadership*, 16(6), 757-764.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020937886>

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Download date: 22. Apr. 2025



The truths and falsehoods of post-truth leaders

Sverre Spoelstra 

School of Economics and Management, Lund University, Sweden

Leadership

2020, Vol. 16(6) 757–764

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DOI: 10.1177/1742715020937886

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Abstract

Over the last three years, the idea of a ‘post-truth society’ has become a common talking point. Politicians from around the world, from Europe to South America to the United States, have been labelled as ‘post-truth leaders’, with Donald Trump being portrayed as the standard bearer for this new kind of political discourse. This article suggests that post-truth leadership is nothing new. Ever since Max Weber developed his notion of charismatic leadership in the early 20th century, Western societies have been infatuated with the idea that leaders ought not concern themselves too much with factual reality. In a sense, leadership has been post-truth all along.

Keywords

Post-truth, leadership, facts, charisma, politics, Max Weber, Donald Trump

Introduction

In the wake of the political upheavals of Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, ‘post-truth’ was selected as the Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries (OED). Their entry for the word reads: ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. An article on the OED Web page explains that the prefix ‘post’ does not refer to a time *after* truth, but rather to ‘a time in which the specified concept [truth] has become unimportant or irrelevant’. The term ‘post-truth’ suggests that the public, or the electorate, shows little interest in ‘the truth’ (or ‘objective facts’), instead casting their votes for the candidate who manages to appeal to their emotions and beliefs. In the post-truth paradigm, the voter, thus, appears to care little about whether or not a politician’s words are grounded in the real world. The OED decision to make ‘post-truth’ their Word of the Year was based on the view that both the U.K. referendum and the U.S. presidential election were won by politicians who were good at appealing to emotions, whereas politicians who tied their messages to ‘the way things are’, that is to factual reality, lost out.

Corresponding author:

Sverre Spoelstra, Department of Business Administration, Lund University, BOX 7080, Lund 220 07, Sweden.

Email: sverre.spoelstra@fek.lu.se

The term post-truth, stemming from politics, says something about the relationship between the electorate and politicians in terms of leadership. The post-truth leader is presented as a master of managing and manipulating the emotions of their followers, a skill that comes at the cost of not speaking the truth and not speaking truthfully. Presented in this way, it may indeed appear as if we are dealing with a new kind of leadership, a 'post-truth leadership'. This would be a leadership that invites people into a parallel world that has little to do with factual reality. The editorial of a special issue on post-truth in this journal quite explicitly contrasts post-truth leaders with 'leaders whose credibility rests on telling the truth and providing accurate representations of the world' (Froughi et al., 2019: 138). But who are these leaders who, along with their commitment to faithfully representing reality, are supposed to have been pushed out by the rise of figures such as Trump?

Developments in today's political world often seem extreme in terms of the transgressions of its leaders, their disrespect for the legal order, the divisiveness they cause in society, and their lack of serious engagement with the world's most pressing problems. However, as others have also noted (e.g. Sanders (2019) and Spector (2020)), it would be a mistake to jump to the conclusion that what we are witnessing today is a new form of leadership. Discussions about post-truth leadership tend to miss the fact that the relationship between leadership and truth is, and always has been, a complex one. The distinction between truthful and mendacious leaders is not just over-simplistic but also serves to obscure a key characteristic of the modern conception of leadership that is deeply ingrained in Western culture. This is the idea that leaders *should* disregard factual reality.

In this short article, I trace the so-called post-truth leadership back to Max Weber's notion of the charismatic leader. For Weber, the charismatic leader does not need to concern himself with factual reality because he embodies a reality that is perceived to be of a higher order than that of the actual world that we live in. Of particular importance is the distinction between truths and facts: Weber's charismatic leader is not concerned with facts because he appeals to some higher truth.

In situating contemporary post-truth discourse in a longer tradition of thought on leadership, I do not suggest that there is nothing novel about what we are witnessing today, both in the political world and beyond. There *is* something new about the leadership of post-truth figures such as Trump. However, this novelty is not to be found in their disinterest in factual reality but, rather, in their public *contempt* for this reality, which is demonstrated by a constant appeal to claims about empirical reality that are demonstrably, and often obviously, false. Unlike Weber's ideal-type of the charismatic leader, who is deemed to stand above mundane facts, post-truth leaders like Trump are in a constant battle with factual reality.

Objective facts are post-truth

The first thing to observe in relation to the OED definition of post-truth is that it puts 'truth' and 'objective facts' into the same category. This conflation has become rather common in writings that warn against the rise of post-truth leaders (e.g. D'Ancona (2017)). What these authors often stress is that truth is not, itself, a difficult or questionable notion: something is true when it adequately corresponds to the world, and that is all we need to know about truth. However, this is a simplification that obscures more than it reveals, especially regarding the subject of leadership.

Even if a representation of something is true when it adequately represents that which it attempts to represent, the question remains as to what exactly constitutes 'an adequate' representation. In their book *Objectivity*, Daston and Galison (2007) draw attention to an important paradigm shift in the history of the sciences that occurred in the mid-19th century and which they present as a transition from 'truth' to 'objectivity'. In both paradigms, the scientist tries to adequately represent a phenomenon, but what is considered 'adequate' is fundamentally different in each case. The scientist

who is looking to capture the truth of a phenomenon tries to bring out its essence by highlighting, and sometimes exaggerating, its main features. Tellingly, in the then-common practice of atlas-making (broadly construed as the creation of visual overviews of any complex subject area) scientists were in need of an artist who could help to bring out the essence of the object phenomenon, for example a flower, in their drawing. A true representation, from this perspective, is a representation that not only captures one example of a phenomenon, but rather grasps the phenomenon as such, in a manner that no longer corresponds to a specific single object. This notion of truth—with its classical emphasis on underlying essences or forms—started to fade when the ideal of objective science began to make its mark. According to the ideal of objectivity, the sciences ought to capture phenomena without relying on subjective or intersubjective judgements. The advance of technology, notably photography, was important in this regard: the task of representing phenomena could now be outsourced to a device instead of having to rely on a ‘biased’ researcher. This device could register objective facts through the impersonal recording of particular states of affairs.

In the 20th-century ideal of deductive science, which has provided the dominant model for leadership studies, objectivity is pursued by means of a distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification. The context of discovery refers to the process of theory formulation, which can be based in prior experience, an individual’s worldview, or a personal judgement. The context of justification, by contrast, refers to the process of testing the hypothesized theory against the objective facts by means of impersonal scientific instruments. In leadership studies, this testing is primarily carried out by means of leadership questionnaires (or ‘measures’) such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire or the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire. The method is designed to register the facts without relying on the insights or skills of the researcher/artist (I leave aside here questions relating to the subjectivity involved in the design of measures).

In a fundamental sense, we may, therefore, conclude that the very idea of an objective fact is, as [Daston and Galison \(2007\)](#) suggest, post-truth (where ‘post’, in this case, *does* refer to a new period). In what follows, I want to retain this notion of ‘truth’, and will use it to distinguish between a ‘true statement’, as a synonym for ‘fact’, and a ‘truth’, signalling something that goes beyond the realm of the falsifiable as it assumes someone who is able to ‘see’ something that an impersonal measuring device cannot.

Leadership is about the creation of facts (not about representing them)

In popular imagination, what leaders see that ordinary people do not see is how to gain access to a future that expresses a higher truth and, in doing so, diverges from the path we are currently on. Indeed, the very idea of leadership, as [Agamben \(2019\)](#) notes, is associated in our culture with new beginnings. The leader as the one who gives ‘the order’, that is the one who creates a *new* order, creates a path for their followers that would lead to a better future. But the leader’s influence does not stop with the creation of a new path: he or she is also considered to be the one who is best suited to govern the newly created order (*ibid.*). That is, the best guide on a path is typically assumed to be the one who created the path. Leadership thus tends to be understood as an act that does something fundamental to the here and now, something that changes factual reality, and that provides some guidance for a ‘better’ future.

The problem with objectively representing reality, from the perspective of leadership, is that adequate representations do nothing *to* that reality. Descriptions describe reality but they neither interrupt nor disrupt it; they fail to create the new order that we have come to associate with ‘true’ leadership. Given the cultural dominance of the image of the leader as a kind of creator, it makes little sense to dream of a leader who is dedicated to ‘providing accurate representations of the world’ with the kind of commitment we associate with scientists.

The expectation in the modern world that a leader should deal with visions is a good illustration of the fact that leaders can hardly be labelled as ‘true to reality’. A vision is, by definition, a deviation from reality because it paints a picture of a future that is different, attractive, and inspirational. A factual statement, in contrast, refers to the actual, to the things that are in the past or the present. But the image of the visionary leader is of someone who thinks and speaks in grand terms about what *can* come to be. Such future-oriented speech cannot be fact-checked because it belongs to the domain of the potential, the as-yet-unrealized world of what might be. Martin Luther King’s dream, for instance conveys a vision that has come to be seen as a great truth, but is not, itself, a true or false statement. More contentious visionary claims, such as Trump’s promise to ‘make America great again’, are similarly immune to falsification. ‘The grass is yellow’ is merely descriptive (and perhaps a little depressing), and thus has little potential as a leadership slogan. But ‘Grass can be green again!’ looks to the future and, with its call for faith in a better tomorrow, has the potential to inspire and provide a rallying cry for those looking for something more than what they presently have.

An effective vision is not merely a mundane statement of the future that could, arguably, be unmasked as dishonest (e.g. ‘Trade talks will be complete in less than a month’, knowing or believing that they will take another year). Not just any statement about the future will do: visions are most effective when they are larger than life, which makes them incommensurable with the present facts of life. Indeed, this incommensurability is the main source of the success that leaders have in binding people together. Of course, like all people, leaders do also say things that are tied to empirical reality (‘I had a coffee with the minister this morning’, ‘I signed the treaty yesterday’, etc.), but these utterances are not seen as constitutive of real leadership in the popular imagination: the language of ‘true’ leadership is a language that operates at a safe distance from falsification.

If the language of leaders is immune to falsification, this does not mean that leadership is beyond questions of lying and deception. Quite the contrary, it is a common but serious mistake to understand lies as being opposed to facts, as in: ‘The lie has a clear relationship to the facts, in that it is wholly opposed to them’ (Davies, 2017: 5). The relation between lies and facts is, ‘in fact’, not clear at all. It is perfectly possible to lie by stating some facts while leaving others unsaid (e.g. saying ‘I wasn’t at the crime scene...’, while thinking ‘...the day before the crime happened’), or to ‘double bluff’ by taking advantage of the distrust of a listener and making a factual statement in the anticipation that they will refuse to believe it. What makes a lie a lie is not its opposition to the facts, but, rather, its intention to deceive (Bok, 1999).

To the extent that lies are successful at deceiving someone, they cause an event in the factual world. Lies thus have the capacity to change objective reality. It is the lie’s performative character (Derrida, 2002) that, in sharp contrast to factual representation, aligns it with leadership; the lie implies a certain creativity, just as leadership as such is culturally associated with acts of creation. As Arendt has noted:

the deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected: they owe their existence to the same source: imagination (Arendt, 1969: 5).

When it comes to leadership, however, it is never a straightforward matter to decide if a leader’s vision is based on a lie. Whether a vision is deceptive or not cannot be settled objectively without controversy. A vision may be seen as a ‘higher truth’ by the leader’s supporters or, alternatively, as a ‘great lie’ by their opponents (Spoelstra, 2018). This is, of course, a direct consequence of leadership speech being far removed from factual reality: if leadership is about truth, rather than facts, epistemological controversy is to be expected.

Weber's anti-economic leader

It has become popular to think of post-truth leadership as a recent phenomenon. Some have even tried to link the rise of post-truth leaders to a blurring of fact and fiction associated with the rise of postmodernism and post-structuralism in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. D'Ancona (2017) and Kakutani (2018)). According to this narrative, the intellectual left is at least partly to blame for the rise of figures such as Trump because they have undermined understandings of truth and objectivity that were previously widely, and commonly, held. This argument does not strike me as carrying much weight. To begin with, it seems implausible that the voters of middle America, for instance, have taken their lead from literary theory and French philosophy. Moreover, those who *have* immersed themselves in such theoretical approaches tend to be acutely aware of the ways in which stories can be constructed to serve political ends, and have learnt to be suspicious of those who exploit the power of such stories. What is of particular interest in the present context, however, is that this narrative misses the most characteristic feature of our enduring cultural understanding of leadership, namely that true leaders ought not to engage themselves (too much) with facts: all facts are trivial in comparison to the truth of the leader's vision.

The idea that leaders do not reside in the factual world is much older than postmodernism and post-structuralism, going back at least as far as the Carlylean Great Man fantasies of the 19th century (Spector, 2016; Spoelstra, 2018). The most profound sociological account of leadership as something that is necessarily cut off from the factual world can be found in Max Weber's ideal-type of charismatic authority, which he developed in the early 20th century and especially during the First World War (Weber, 1968). According to Weber, charismatic authority derives from the attribution of extraordinary qualities to an individual by his followers, qualities that, in a quite literal sense, do not belong to the normal order. This distinguishes charisma from the authority of law and the authority of tradition, which are ordinary forms of domination that do not rest on an exceptional human individual.

The religious origins of the notion of charisma (meaning 'gift of grace') are not coincidental: Weber elevates the charismatic leader to a sphere that is uncontaminated by the constraints of ordinary life. Weber's charismatic leader is essentially transgressive, one who oversteps the bounds of the present order and whose supporters take these transgressions as proof of their leader's extraordinary character. Indeed, Weber even goes so far as to describe the charismatic leader as 'anti-economic', in the sense that charisma must be understood as 'the very force that disregards economy' (Weber, 1968: 21). This phrase is telling: the true leader, in Weber's view, is not concerned with everyday wins and losses; his mind is elsewhere, pursuing higher truths rather than engaging with facts.

The extraordinary nature of the charismatic leader rests on the faith of his supporters. As soon as followers stop seeing their leader as an extraordinary person, his charisma disappears. This is a constant danger, as the leader's authority is tied to the person, rather than being rooted in a stable ideology (Sanders, 2019). Being a charismatic leader, therefore, implies a need to endlessly demonstrate that one does not belong to the reality of ordinary people.

Such expectations of otherworldliness can be difficult for leaders to live up to. Prior to his election, U.S. President George Bush senior had been criticized for a lack of 'vision'. Rather than embracing the idea of becoming a charismatic leader, Bush responded with open contempt for 'the vision thing'. A *Newsweek* reporter who overheard Bush's comments later spun them into a famous cover story that framed him in terms of his fight against the 'wimp factor'. This image of a weak leader lacking in vision was to haunt Bush throughout the single term of his presidency. To avoid

negative publicity of this kind, leaders may create a deliberately false image of themselves, misrepresenting reality to hide their ordinary character.

A bit of historical background on Weber's notion of leadership is illuminating when considering how we think about leadership today: Weber was alarmed by the diminishing importance of personal values in public life caused by the rationalization (or bureaucratization) of society that he saw happening during his lifetime. Charismatic leadership was to provide the counterweight to this phenomenon. Weber deliberately crafted the ideal type of the charismatic leader in contrast to the value-neutral scientist and the bureaucrat: Science and bureaucracy are matters of impersonal reason, whereas leadership is tied to the irrationality of the single person. The scientist rigorously follows methodological rules and the bureaucrat obediently follows rules from above, but the leader is led by his personal views and convictions alone.

Despite Weber's insistence that charismatic leadership is to be understood as a value-neutral ideal type which was meant to help sociologists in their analysis of societal developments, some of his political writings betray an infatuation with charismatic leadership as a redeeming force (Mommensen, 1974). Even though Weber was very much aware that charismatic leadership could result in sect-like organizations, this concern was not his main priority. He saw the greater danger in Germany of his time as being posed by the rise of a bureaucratic society in which there would be no space for originality, creativity, and free individual expression. Charismatic leadership was to provide the much-needed antidote to the constraints of bureaucracy, breathing new life into political and industrial systems that would lead to extremes of dehumanization if left unchecked.

Weber's positive evaluation of leadership as the extraordinary force that relieves us from the burden of administered life has become paradigmatic for our thinking about leadership today (Spoelstra, 2018, 2019). In business discourse, Weber's distinction between bureaucracy and charisma takes the form of a distinction, popular since the late 1970s, between management and leadership: management is seen today as the business version of bureaucratic control, whereas leadership is understood as a creative and original force that lifts organizations up to higher ground. In politics, Weber's portrayal of the charismatic politician as a skilled demagogue who brings a new dynamism to stale party politics seems more acute than ever.

Given this notion of leadership, we should expect that politicians who want to be perceived as 'real' or 'great' leaders will, to the extent possible, avoid statements that can be fact-checked as they focus instead on captivating their audiences with visions of the world to come. By avoiding the realm of the factual, leaders can demonstrate that their minds are not shaped by the past or the present. Rather, they already, in a sense, inhabit the future and show the rest of us how we can join them.

Against this background, it should be less surprising that Trump, as the *New York Times* wryly observed, is 'trying to create an atmosphere in which reality is irrelevant' (Leonhardt and Thompson, 2017). For Weber, this is part and parcel of the nature of charismatic leadership: by demonstrating a lack of interest in the past and the present, or by pretending to be someone who is unaffected by ordinary concerns, charismatic leaders create the image that they belong to a higher sphere in order to bring about change in the here and now.

What's new about post-truth leadership?

While leadership has been a post-truth, or rather post-*fact*, pursuit for a long time, there *is* something new about contemporary post-truth leaders like Trump. In contrast to Weber's charismatic leader, who does not concern himself with the factual, Trump *does* speak, very frequently, in the language of facts, something that has fuelled the rise of fact-checking media.

Uncovering the falsehoods of a leader like Trump is unquestionably a vital task for the preservation of a healthy democracy. But it is equally important to ask what it is he achieves by saying things that are demonstrably false. The reason why few commentators have asked this question may be because the answer seems to be too obvious to warrant much consideration: by lying about the facts, Trump and other post-truth leaders aim to deceive people into thinking more highly of them and their policies than they deserve. There is, no doubt, some truth to this, but it seems to me that this is not the full story.

Hannah Arendt once wrote that ‘the assertion that the Moscow subway is the only one in the world is a lie only so long as the Bolsheviks have not the power to destroy all the others’ (1968: 350). Arendt gives an example of a statement that seems to be ‘factual’, in the sense that it can be fact-checked (and is obviously false), but that does not directly communicate a fact. Rather, this deliberately false assertion is a demonstration of power, in this case, the power to commit an act of great violence.

We might say something similar about many of Trump’s ‘lies’ as well: they too are as much a demonstration of power as they are statements that intend to deceive. Trump’s infamous campaign promise to send Hillary Clinton to jail if elected was hardly meant to be believed; it was primarily an attempt to create an image of himself as someone whose power stands above the legal order. Even the lies that do aim to deceive their audiences, perhaps most famously Trump’s demonstrably false claim that his inauguration attracted a larger audience than that of his predecessor Barack Obama, also serve other purposes. Most importantly, he shows to his constituency that he has no need to conform to the norms according to which ordinary people must abide. In this sense, he is still a characteristic example of the transgressive Weberian leader.

In a recent article, [Spector \(2020\)](#) shows how the denial of obvious facts by post-truth leaders like Trump is connected to a notion of truth. He gives the example of Trump retweeting a video entitled ‘Muslim migrant beats up Dutch boy on crutches!’; a real video, but with a false title as the perpetrator was neither a Muslim nor a migrant. For Trump supporters, however, this *fact* is unimportant, as the title, in their view, articulates the *truth* that Muslim migrants are a threat to national security ([Spector, 2020: 10](#)). This example shows how a (false) factual statement is mobilized to serve a higher truth in the eyes of followers (or a big lie, in the eyes of their adversaries).

What is new in post-truth leadership is not its disinterest in reality, but the way in which it demonstrates its otherworldliness: by showing contempt for the importance of factual statements, rather than by avoiding them. This combative approach to facts may be new, but its effect is very much in line with traditional charismatic leadership. For, in demonstrating his otherworldliness, a figure like Trump also creates a faith-based world in which he can define what is true.

Conclusion

In this short article, I have argued that the so-called post-truth leadership is not as new as some contemporary debate tends to suggest. The disinterest of leaders in factual reality, as seen in the stances taken by contemporary political figures such as Donald Trump, can be understood as part of a long tradition of leadership thought that positions the leader above mundane life. This gives the leader a pseudo-religious aura which, according to Weber, must be maintained by producing secular miracles, that is by creating events that seem to go against the facts as we know them.

For leadership scholars, the pressing task is not merely to understand and criticize the leadership of post-truth leaders such as Trump. The more fundamental task is to think and rethink the Weberian notion of leadership as such, and particularly the gulf it has created between ordinary people (who are bound to traditional norms and the legal order) and extraordinary people (who are expected to transgress these norms). The management/leadership distinction itself is part of the ‘leadership problem’ that we face today.

Acknowledgements

This article draws on a short piece published in *The Conversation*: S Spoelstra, ‘Donald Trump’s war on facts is the latest play in a long-established tradition to create a post-truth reality’, 24 October 2019.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council (2015-01100) and Jan Wallander and Tom Hedelius Research Foundation (P2015-0106:1).

ORCID iD

Sverre Spoelstra  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2965-1937>

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Author biography

Sverre Spoelstra is an associate professor at Lund University School of Economics and Management. Apart from leadership, his research interests include organizational philosophy, management knowledge production, and gamification.