MEDICINE AND THE MEDIA

A brief history of post-truth in medicine

From antivaccine conspiracy theories to climate change denial to obfuscation of the truth about the harms of smoking, post-truth is nothing new, finds Nigel Hawkes

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This is the age of lies, as truth is trampled and falsity flourishes, its reach grotesquely amplified by social media and the internet. Or so believe many commentators dismayed by Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, climate change deniers, antivaccine campaigners, and the power of Hollywood stars whose unlikely nostrums on diet and health are taken seriously by millions.

Three such pundits, all authors of books on the phenomenon with strikingly similar titles, met for a debate at London’s Science Museum last week chaired by Fiona Fox, the chief executive of the media relations organisation the Science Media Centre.

Evan Davis of the BBC has written Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit; the political writer Matthew D’Ancona Post-Truth: The New War On Truth And How To Fight Back; and Buzzfeed’s special correspondent James Ball Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered The World.

D’Ancona traced the deliberate creation of untruth back to the 1950s and the efforts by the tobacco industry to discredit research on the health effects of smoking.

“Post-truth” might describe a culture in which debate appeals to emotion rather than practicality, with repeated assertions to which factual rebuttals are ignored. But was it really a new phenomenon, Fox asked, or just a new name for an old thing? The row over the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine cited in the books was, after all, pretty familiar.

Tobacco industry

D’Ancona blamed a general decline in faith in institutions as well as the “rocket booster” force of technology for the immediate ills. But he traced the deliberate creation of untruth back to the 1950s and the efforts by the tobacco industry to discredit research on the health effects of smoking. “The game was not to win the argument,” he argued, “But to upset the notion of scientific consensus—not victory but public confusion—and enough doubt to prevent tough action against smoking.”

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The same techniques were being used by climate change deniers, and by the opponents of Obamacare who claimed that the NHS employed “death panels” to determine who should be treated and who not. He saw a need for charismatic leadership by scientists to turn the tide. “Truth always requires an emotional delivery system,” he said.

Davis took a contrary view, calling for scientists to be more modest in their claims rather than more strident. “My advice to scientists is not to argue more strongly but to apply psychology and be more modest in their claims,” he said. “Shouting is not the way to do it. They should be more open minded and respectful.”

Ball was probably more realistic than either, when he said that researchers were more likely simply to keep their heads down. And those brave enough to peep above the parapet always sought to win the argument on their own terms, while what they should be doing—he said—was to win old fights in new ways. “Let’s face it, the opposition aren’t going to say ‘Yes, you’ve been right all along, you’re terribly clever,’” he said. “We’ve already messed up on climate change and millions will die. We need a new approach.”
Thin science

The risk, acknowledged Davis, was of falling for a “thin model” in which science is stripped of the very qualities, such as complexity, rigour, and thoroughness, that make it work. “We don’t need to ‘thin’ science. It’s about communication, talking to people where they are, at lower volume to reduce tribalism,” he insisted.

“Shout too loud and you entrench people’s arguments.” You won’t convince a follower of homoeopathy that he’s mistaken by calling him a dimwit, he said by way of example. Discussing the power of placebos might be a better starting point.

The suggestion that the Brexit vote and the election of Trump were prime cases of post-truth politics angered one audience member, who said that the panellists were liberals who had been in the minority on both arguments, had lost, and were now claiming the wins were the result of public ignorance fed by untruth. This was nothing more than virtue signalling, he said. It was a point that deserved a better response than it got (which was none). Tribalism and unrealistic promises may have underpinned Trump’s victory, but were they absent from Jeremy Corbyn’s surprise good showing at the general election? The Labour leader didn’t get a mention in the debate, proof maybe of Davis’ claim that truth, post-truth, and bullshit are all a function of the tribe you belong to.