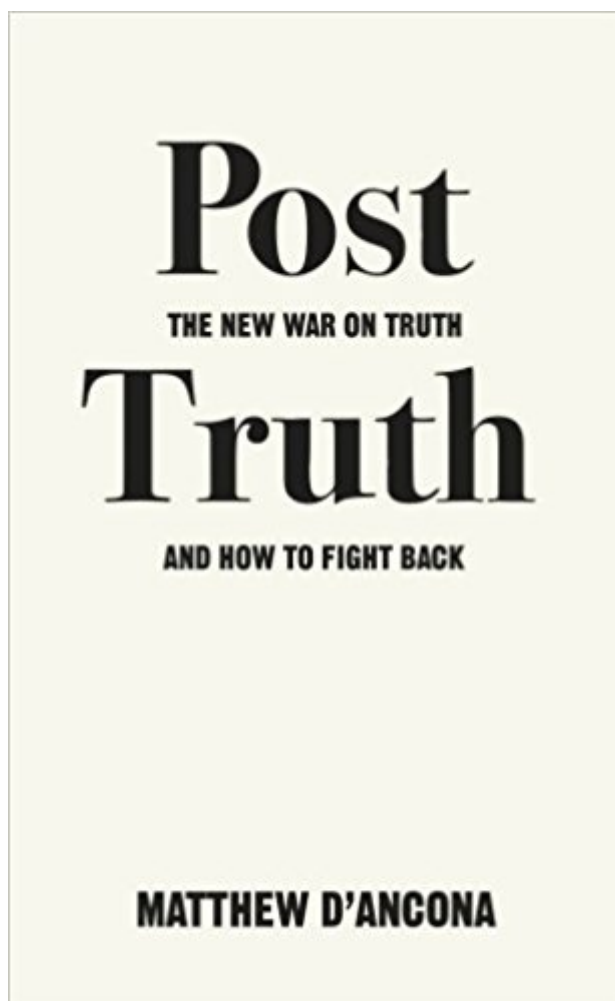


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Post-Truth: The New War On Truth And How To Fight Back



Synopsis

Welcome to the Post Truth era? a time in which the art of the lie is shaking the very foundations of democracy and the world as we know it. The Brexit vote; Donald Trump's victory; the rejection of climate change science; the vilification of immigrants; all have been based on the power to evoke feelings and not facts. So what does it all mean and how can we champion truth in a time of lies and "alternative facts?" In this eye-opening and timely book, Post Truth is distinguished from a long tradition of political lies, exaggeration and spin. What is new is not the mendacity of politicians but the public's response to it and the ability of new technologies and social media to manipulate, polarise and entrench opinion. Where trust has evaporated, conspiracy theories thrive, the authority of the media wilt and emotions matter more than facts. Now, one of the UK's most respected political journalists, Matthew d'Ancona investigates how we got here, why quiet resignation is not an option and how we can and must fight back.

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Customer Reviews

"D'Ancona's punchy polemic asks questions that are urgently topical and undeniably important." *Guardian* "To anyone who is invigorated by urgent writing, Matthew d'Ancona's work is as startling as a cold shower." *Observer*

Matthew d'Ancona is a British journalist and broadcaster. He writes a weekly column for the

Guardian and was previously editor of the Spectator. He also contributes regularly to the BBC's Today program. Matthew was the Sunday Telegraph's political columnist for 19 years. He also writes for the Evening Standard, the New York Times and GQ. Matthew is a visiting research fellow at Queen Mary University of London and author of several books including *In It Together: The Inside Story of the Coalition*. He is a Trustee of the Science Museum Group, chair of the think-tank Bright Blue and was elected a Prize Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, in 1989.

In November 2012, Mark Thompson, the former Director General of the BBC, delivered, as part of his Humanitas Visiting Professorship in Rhetoric and the Art of Public Persuasion at Oxford University, a series of three lectures there entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The theme of Thompson's lectures was the degeneration of public discourse and particularly of political language in contemporary democratic politics, with the latter becoming more effective as an instrument of political persuasion but less effective as a medium of explanation and deliberation. To illustrate the way in which public language is increasingly prone to exaggeration and paranoia, Thompson examined in some detail Sarah Palin's reference to Obamacare's alleged death panels (which Ancona also references). Thompson's insights (later worked up into his 2016 book *Enough Said. What's Gone Wrong with the Language of Politics*) were extremely prescient. Since 2012, the phenomenon of post-truth expression, and particularly Fake News, has become a mainstream concern given the misrepresentations of the EU referendum campaign and, above all, the election of Trump as 45th President of the United States. There has accordingly been a flurry of books on the subject. Matthew Ancona's *Post-Truth* is part of that trend but he, like Thompson, views the perversion of public discourse in its fullest context considering, like Thompson in his original lectures, topics such as the disavowal of climate change science, and he is also, like Thompson, not content merely to analyze what has happened but goes on to suggest ways in which the situation might be retrieved, Ancona's book being subtitled *The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*. Incidentally, whilst Ancona's fairly brief book is amply footnoted it does not contain a bibliography, and there is no reference anywhere in the text to Mark Thompson's pioneering work. Ancona's mission is threefold: to expose the

roots of our Post-Truth era; to diagnose its symptoms; and to offer a cure. When tracing the origins of the Post-Truth era d'Ávila ranges broadly, examining the post-modernists' corrosion of the notion of objective reality, the role of the internet and the erosion of trust in a variety of institutions as a result of events including the 2008 banking crisis, the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal, the revelations regarding Jimmy Savile, and the hacking controversy. A more comprehensive account could also have included references to the findings of the Saville, Chilcot and Hillsborough inquiries, or at least to the doubts which were ultimately vindicated by their reports. These are not d'Ávila's only omissions. The EU referendum and Trump's election but not Corbyn's election as Labour leader are presented as marking "an uprising against the established order and a demand for ill-defined change" which "overturned the blithe predictions of pundits, pollsters and bookies", and we're told that the Leave campaign "triumphed with slogans that were demonstrably untrue or misleading" whilst no mention is made of George Osborne's "punishment Budget" or "DIY recession". In addition, if d'Ávila wanted to trace popular disenchantment with the predictive power of experts he should have mentioned their dire but unfulfilled prognostications regarding the Y2K or Millennium bug. d'Ávila realizes that Trump is a symptom rather the cause of Post-Truth but still manages to skewer his serial mendacity with all the delight of a lepidopterist pinning some particularly prized possession. Thus Trump is "a soiled Gatsby" with a talent for emotional narrative, who is essentially an entertainer, who has successfully "recast the presidency as the most desirable role in show business." Rather than making Donald Trump or Alexander Dugin or Nigel Farage his chief villain, d'Ávila somewhat surprisingly casts Sigmund Freud in that role, on the grounds that the paradigm of therapy, which prizes emotional sincerity above forensically established objective fact, "has spread far beyond its original clinical setting, to assume a dominant role in contemporary culture and mores." I seriously doubt whether Freudianism has percolated through society as fully as d'Ávila imagines. I would suggest, for example, that however much many of those who supported Brexit or voted for Trump may be willing to blame immigrants for society's ills they will always hold an individual to blame if faced with a choice between doing that or blaming that individual's parents or society at large. d'Ávila's suggestions for defending respect for the truth against

the “plutocratic, political and algorithmic firepower” of the Post-Truth stakeholders are varied and plausible and his call to the barricades genuinely rousing, although his faith in satirists to “act as picadors in the fight against Post-Truth” is almost certainly over optimistic. As Peter Cook was fond of pointing out, Weimar Berlin had the world’s most sophisticated political cabaret but that did nothing to stem the rising tide of fascism. In the final analysis, setting aside all the shortcomings outlined above, this is a well-written, wide-ranging, informative and thought-provoking book which will be very appealing to those who share its author’s wish “to defend Enlightenment values.” I just wonder if, considering the persistence of religious values, the advent of ersatz religions such as Marxism and fascism and of pseudo-sciences like Freudianism, or even the enormous popularity of activities like gambling, rationalism has ever been quite as firmly entrenched as he assumes.

Short and to the point! Very Insightful!

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