

**LA CÔTE ANGLICAN CHURCH  
LENTEN SEMINARS 2021  
DISTORTING TRUTH AND MANIPULATING FEAR FOR POLITICAL POWER  
Chris Talbot  
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[SLIDE 1]

[SLIDE 2]

***What do these numbers refer to?***

30,753 – This is the number of false or misleading claims made by President Trump during his four-year term of office, as determined by fact-checkers at the *Washington Post* and the *Toronto Star*.

20.92 – Is the daily average of false or misleading claims made by President Trump during his four-year term of office.

503 – Is the highest number of false and misleading claims made by President Trump on a single day (2<sup>nd</sup> November 2020), the day before the election.

These are just the claims that President Trump made in public utterances, including via social media; who knows how much he lied behind closed doors? I find this quite staggering; yet it seems to have come quite naturally to the man. Politicians have always lied to the public, in every country, every type of polity. But in recent years, it seems that the political cost of lying and exploiting voters' fears has fallen sharply.

Tonight, we will analyse some of the forms and consequences of distortion of truth and manipulation of fear in politics, then go on to consider how we might respond, as active citizens and as Christian believers.

[SLIDE 3]

***Overview***

After setting the scene, I will lead us in an exploration of four phenomena: 'alternative facts', 'fake news', the corrosion of language and the manipulation of fear. In each case, the impacts of the Internet and social media will be considered.

I will speak for about 30 minutes. During that time, you are strongly encouraged to use the Chat function to respond, to add comments, to ask questions. Address them to 'Everyone' please. After my first presentation, Nigel Rollins will summarise some of the comments and questions and I may respond very briefly to some.

After that exchange, you will have the opportunity to speak together in randomly selected breakout groups of four persons, for 15 minutes. I will suggest a couple of topics that you may wish to explore together.

Then I will present some possible responses to those phenomena, things we can chose to do both as active citizens and as people of faith.

And during the last part of the evening, you will have the opportunity to share some of your reflections in plenary.

**[SLIDE 4]**

## **INTRODUCTION**

**[SLIDE 5]**

### ***In what sense are we discussing truth?***

Tonight, we will consider the concept of truth in a relatively narrow sense. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers 12 discrete meanings of the word 'truth'. Of those 12, these two are the most relevant for our ruminations tonight:

*Fact, facts; the matter or circumstance as it really is*

*A true statement; a report or account consistent with fact or reality*

We will only very briefly touch on absolute notions of truth, whether philosophical or religious, but mostly focus on distortion of facts and reality in political speech and representation.

**[SLIDE 6]**

### ***Why do distortion of truth and manipulation of fear matter in politics and government?***

Two of the most monstrous regimes in human history came to power in the 20th century. Both were based upon the violation and despoiling of truth, upon the knowledge that cynicism and weariness and fear can make people susceptible to the lies and false promises of leaders who are bent on power – unconditional and limitless power.

One of the clearest statements about the importance of distortion of truth and manipulation of fear was pronounced by Sally Yates, who was Acting Attorney General of the United States for the first ten days of the Trump presidency. Reflecting on politics in 2017, she said the following:

“We can debate policies and issues, and we should. But those debates must be based on common facts rather than raw appeals to emotion and fear through polarizing rhetoric and

fabrications. Not only is there such a thing as objective truth, failing to tell the truth matters. We can't control whether our public servants lie to us. But we can control whether we hold them accountable for those lies or whether, in either a state of exhaustion or to protect our own political objectives, we look the other way and normalize an indifference to truth."

If citizens allow their fears to be manipulated, their whole lives are likewise manipulated. If citizens allow the truth to die, democracy dies with it.

### ***Truth dies in four modes***

Victor Klemperer, a German scholar of language, kept a meticulous diary of ways in which the Nazi party twisted the German language for its propaganda purposes, between 1933 and 1945. Based on his diary, Klemperer wrote a book entitled *The Language of the Third Reich*, after the war. Now, I am not equating contemporary politicians with Nazis. That would be misleading and reductionist. Nevertheless, there are deep lessons that can be learned from the history of the 1920s and 30s, which resonate today, because many contemporary politicians use methods and techniques strikingly similar to those used by Fascist and Communist regimes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sped up and magnified by modern technology and media. Victor Klemperer analysed four modes by which truth died under the Nazi regime. **[SLIDE 7]** Listen for echoes in today's world.

First mode: Open hostility to verifiable reality – presenting inventions and lies as if they were facts

Second mode: Shamanistic incantation – endless repetition of the same lies – designed to make the fictional plausible and the criminal desirable – never a moment of calm testimony. There is an equivalent contemporary technique, originally developed in Russia but copied elsewhere, which is referred to as the 'firehose of falsehood': rapid, relentless, bogus information, designed to confuse, exhaust, numb and render voters passive.

Third mode: Magical thinking – open embrace of contradiction – blatant abandonment of reason. We see this manifested in conspiracy theories, absurd, yet widely followed.

Fourth mode: Misplaced faith – "I am your voice" – Once truth becomes oracular rather than factual, evidence, experience and individual discernment become irrelevant.

**[SLIDE 8]**

### ***Hannah Arendt on the relationship between truth and totalitarianism***

In 1951, reflecting on the terrible tyrannies of her time, the political theorist Hannah Arendt described the relationship between truth and totalitarianism: "The ideal subject of totalitarianism is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist."

Populism, nationalism, tribalism, dislocation, fears of rapid social change, resentment of downward economic mobility and the hatred of outsiders are on the rise again as people, locked in partisan silos and filter bubbles, are losing a sense of shared reality and the ability to communicate across social and sectarian lines.

The real danger of what we are examining tonight is that populist demagogues, would-be autocrats, deliberately distort truth ... facts ... and play on people's fears, prejudices and ignorance, to delegitimize not only their political opponents but the very institutions of democratic government. The destruction of democratic institutions is underway today in Hungary, Poland, Belarus, Turkey, Russia, India, the Philippines, Brazil and many other countries.

**[SLIDE 9]**

### **'ALTERNATIVE FACTS'**

On 20 January 2017, at President Donald Trump's inauguration ceremony, the crowd in attendance was evidently smaller than at previous presidential inaugurations. Nevertheless, President Trump and Sean Spicer, his Press Secretary, claimed that it was bigger than all previous inauguration crowds. Aerial photographic evidence belied that silly assertion. Nevertheless, Kellyanne Conway, a Counsellor to President Trump, explained that the Administration's claim was based on **[SLIDE 10]** 'alternative' facts.

The late US Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed, "Everyone is free to choose his own opinion, but not to choose his own facts." Yet that is precisely what is happening more and more in political discourse.

Barack Obama reflected in 2018 that: "One of the biggest challenges ... to our democracy is the degree to which we do not share a common baseline of facts." [People today] "are operating in completely different information universes."

Most people aged 50 or less have grown up in an intellectual environment characterized by the extreme relativism of post-modernism, **[SLIDE 11]** the philosophical approach to truth developed in the 1960s and 70s mainly by French thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Lacan. The heart of post-modernist relativism is the rejection of all metanarratives – of all attempts at unified, complete, universal, and certain stories about everything that is. Postmodernists generally argue that truth is always contingent on historical and social context rather than being absolute and universal and that truth is always partial, under construction and "at issue", contested, rather than being complete and certain.

This is the intellectual air that we breathe in western societies today. Now, relativism has been very beneficial in bringing to the foreground the voices of people who were systematically ignored, marginalized or neglected in the past, including the voices of most women, LGBTQI persons, poor people, national, racial, ethnic and religious minority groups, as well as the voices of people living with disability. However, political operatives of the far

left and far right exploit that understanding of truth as partial and contested to justify all manner of violence against the truth and against other people.

In today's 'post-truth' world, we observe a burgeoning range of techniques used to construct so-called 'alternative facts': **[SLIDE 12]**

- Fake science based on false equivalence of volume and quality of evidence – asserted by climate change deniers, anti-vaxxers and creationists
- Fake history also based on false equivalence of volume and quality of evidence – promoted by populist nationalists, white supremacists and Holocaust deniers
- Fake people on social media – created by 'trolls' and troll farms
- Fake followers and 'likes' on social media – generated by bots

These techniques have been used by political operatives who deliberately blur lines between fact and opinion, and who substitute blustering speculation and assertion for informed argument. Lobbyists and political operatives hire people, known as trolls, to build up fully-fledged conspiracy theories, such as those of QAnon, which claims that President Trump was waging a secret war against the 'deep state' and elite, Satan-worshipping cannibals and paedophiles in government, business and the media. Other absurd and malicious conspiracies have included the 'Great Replacement', 'birtherism' and 'stolen elections.' Such conspiracy theories are not limited to the United States but are spreading and morphing into other countries and languages.

Just one example of fake history: Spokespeople from the Indian right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (the BJP) have been campaigning for the government to change the name and identity of the Taj Mahal, claiming that a Hindu ruler built it as a temple for the god Shiva. The full weight of documentary, archaeological, architectural and artistic evidence shows that the Taj Mahal was built by the Muslim Mughal ruler Shah Jahan in memory of his queen, Mumtaz Mahal. These statements about the Taj Mahal are part of the long-term BJP government campaign for 'restoration of Hindu pride', targeted at people who believe in Hindu nationalism, that India should be a nation for Hindu people only. Such statements stir up hatred of 'the Other' and also help politicians to deflect people's attention from substantive issues like job creation and the health of the economy.

**[SLIDE 22]**

### **'FAKE NEWS'**

Harvard University researcher Claire Wardle has distinguished seven types of fake news, with increasingly malicious intent. **[SLIDE 14]**

1. **Satire or parody** (no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool)
2. **False connection** (headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content)
3. **Misleading content** (misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual)
4. **False context** (genuine content is shared with false contextual information)
5. **Impostor content** (genuine sources are impersonated)

6. **Manipulated content** (genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive, as with a "doctored" photo)
7. **Fabricated content** (new content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm)

This is how fake news works.

An outstanding documentary film was made about Bellingcat, a collective of online, open-source, investigative journalists, which graphically demonstrates how governments and politicians go about creating and disseminating fake news. See the reference in the list at the end of the paper.

Social media algorithms are designed to profile users, feed them content, customized news feeds and advertisements that reinforce their preconceptions, allowing them to live in ever narrower, windowless silos. They connect users in groups with like-minded members.

**[SLIDE 15]**

### ***The will to fake***

“Real or fake, we can make any message go viral,” BJP President Amit Shah claimed in September 2018 while addressing social media volunteers in Kota, Rajasthan. “It is through social media that we have to form governments at the state and national levels. Keep making messages go viral. We have already made a WhatsApp group with 32 lakh [3.2 million] people in Uttar Pradesh; every morning they are sent a message at 8 a.m.,” Shah was quoted by the *Dainik Bhaskar*, a Hindi newspaper. This is just one example of the relentless bombardment of increasingly like-minded people with information and news, real or fake.

Some governments have tried to regulate or circumscribe fake news. A prominent example is Singapore’s Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, which came into effect in 2019. However, the temptation to use such laws to repress legitimate criticism and protest is strong. **[SLIDE 16]** The NGO Human Rights Watch has found evidence of abuse of the law to silence critics. A Human Rights Watch staff member stated, “The Singapore government’s knee-jerk reaction is to harass or prosecute anyone for expressing disagreeable opinions rather than engaging with its critics. Behind Singapore’s gleaming façade of modernity is a government wholly intolerant of peaceful protest.”

This example reveals another meaning of “fake news”. In the mouth of a would-be autocrat or authoritarian government, ‘fake news’ becomes a means for discrediting any reporting or opinion critical of that person or government. It is often applied to mainstream media, such as newspapers of record and news networks. Donald Trump routinely described the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and CNN, among many others, as promoters of ‘fake news’. One example among thousands: In 2017, an official of Myanmar’s Ministry of State Security said, “There is no such thing as Rohingya. It is fake news.” So, we have fake news that is really fake, and fake news employed as a label to discredit opponents and undermine faith in democratic institutions.

The Internet, the creation of social media networks since 2004, and the availability of smart phones since 2007, have revolutionised politics and news gathering and dissemination. The power of gatekeepers in older print and broadcast media, who felt bound by professional ethics and election rules, has been greatly weakened, opening space to fraudsters and cranks, whose postings are not subject to verification, as are the writings of professional journalists. High quality investigative journalism is very time-consuming, thus very expensive. Under pressure of declining advertising revenue and business consolidation, print and broadcast media outlets worldwide are shutting down their independent investigative journalism units, relying on increasingly narrow channels of news feeds. That is why transparent, open-source, online citizen investigative journalism is so vital. Trained volunteers make time for rigorous, transparent research, that networks can no longer afford.

Authoritarian political movements are exploiting other global, systemic political and social changes: **[SLIDE 17]**

- Resentment caused by increasing inequalities of income and wealth
- The personal is political – breakdown of separation of public from private spheres of life. Privacy is constrained in an online world where every click of a mouse, every keystroke, is analysed by people we do not know.
- Infotainment: Merging of news and politics with entertainment
- Toxic polarization in politics
- Populist contempt for expertise (experts are viewed as members of opposing tribes)
- The addictive nature of the Internet and social media

**[SLIDE 18]**

### **THE CORROSION OF LANGUAGE**

A major technique used to distort facts is to deform the meaning of words. Again, the lessons of history provide warnings.

Victor Klemperer noted several linguistic techniques, which the Nazis repeated over and over to shape people's thinking.

#### **[SLIDE 19] *Recurrent words and expressions***

The war "imposed" on a peace-loving Führer  
Jews as "alien to the species"  
The "incommensurable hatred" of the Jews

#### **[SLIDE 20] *Euphemisms***

"evacuation" = deportation  
"intensified interrogation" = torture  
"concentration camp" = extermination camp  
"special treatment" = murder

**[SLIDE 21] Neologisms**

*arisieren* – to “aryanise”  
*aufnorden* – to “nordicise”  
*entjuden* – to “de-Jew”

**[SLIDE 22] Deformation of meaning**

“the People” = some people, not others  
“struggles” = encounters  
“defamation” = any attempt to understand the world in a way different from the Party’s

This corrosion of language is intensified in today’s social media, in which trolls can deliberately overwhelm reasonable discourse with divisive and hate-inducing language.

**[SLIDE 23] Recent examples of the corrosion of language in politics**

Viktor Orbán was prime minister of Hungary between 1998 and 2002. After losing the 2002 election, Orbán declared that “**the homeland** cannot be in the opposition.” By “the homeland” he meant himself, envisioning himself as the only true representative of Hungary; if he wasn’t in the government, then the government was illegitimate.

Last week, preparing for this seminar, I interviewed an Indian human rights activist, who is also a scientific researcher and a civil servant. She described harassment online and at work because of her public stand for non-discrimination on the basis of religion in Indian life. She recounted to me to many examples of civil servants and students intimidated by online attacks, which has led to the discouragement of critical thinking in universities and restrictions on academic freedom. She stated that people who disagree with Government of India policy are routinely referred to as ‘**anti-national**’ and ‘**seeditious**’. Public statements by government ministers confirm that impression. An Indian government minister sated early in March, “Those who don’t agree with [the Government of India’s actions on COVID-19] are to be tracked, not to be engaged in dialogue, but to be ... ‘**neutralised**’.”

**[SLIDE 24]**

**THE MANIPULATION OF FEAR**

Political operatives are willing to play on perceived fears of electorates in order to gain or hold onto power.

I will examine two types of manipulation of fear, as illustrations of a pervasive global phenomenon.

**[SLIDE 25]**

One very common technique to manipulate fear can be described as **terror management**. When a terrorist attack strikes, whether real or invented, authoritarians use it as an excuse to seize or consolidate power.

Contemporary authoritarian politicians are terror managers. The present regime in Russia consolidated its power as a result of a combination of real, staged or questionable terrorist acts – bombings in Russian cities in 1999, ostensibly by Chechen terrorists; a real terrorist attack in a Moscow theatre in 2002; and the siege of a school in Beslan in 2004. Each event was used to justify the elimination of potential rivals to the regime of Vladimir Putin, such as private television stations and elected regional governorships, thus consolidating Putin's power. ***Terror is managed.***

On 8 April 2015, Russian hackers known as APT 28 took over the transmission of the French television station TV5MONDE, pretended to be ISIS, impersonated a 'Cybercaliphate', and then broadcast material designed to terrorise, seeking to make French people fear terrorists even more than they already did. This took place less than three months after the Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris. The goal of the Russian hackers seems to have been to drive voters towards the far-right Front National, today known as the Rassemblement National, a party that is financially supported in part by loans from Russian banks, and companies with links to the Government of Russia. ***Terror is managed.***

#### [SLIDE 26]

Authoritarian politicians and political movements all over the world are **manipulators of people's prejudices and fears of 'the Other'**: foreigners, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, people of other faiths.

Just two examples:

A poster for the Brexit LEAVE campaign used a photo taken on the border between Croatia and Slovenia in 2015 to give the impression that Britain was somehow being invaded by non-Anglo-Saxon, mainly Muslim asylum seekers. Politicians who demonise migrants play on the ignorance, prejudice and fear of downwardly mobile people, who are manipulated into blaming outsiders for structural problems within their societies. Those problems are not solved with simplistic, inflammatory slogans.

For the past decade, tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India have been stoked by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, whose political operatives assert that Indian national identity is exclusively Hindu. Relentless propaganda campaigns continue to be directed against Muslims, manipulating the fears and prejudices of millions of Hindu voters. Right-wing group protesting against Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, living in India, urge "Rohingya Muslims [to] go to Islamic countries." Notice the terminology "Islamic countries" – nationality and citizenship are defined by religious affiliation in this conception.

#### [SLIDE 27]

### **BREAKOUT GROUPS**

## **[SLIDE 28] Discussion**

You will now be placed into randomly allocated breakout groups of four to discuss these issues.

You may choose to discuss alternative facts, fake news, the corrosion of language or the manipulation of fear, and then go on to identify ways in which we might respond to these challenges as active citizens.

## **[SLIDE 29]**

### **RESPONSES AS ACTIVE CITIZENS**

*How can we respond to these challenges to truth and manipulation of fear?*

*How can we choose to act in ways that are life-giving and that provide hope to others?*

## **[SLIDE 30] Concerning news and information, we can choose to...**

- Learn how to identify fake news

## **[SLIDE 31]**

Here is a useful infographic with suggestions for identifying fake news, disseminated freely by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.

## **[SLIDE 32]**

We can also choose to...

- Seek information and news from a wide range of sources, including some we don't agree with
- Investigate – listen intently and attentively; spend time reading longer, analytical articles, comparing sources
- Avoid dependence on Internet and television for news – because both are designed to be addictive in ways that print media are not, and because television is a very passive medium, requiring less intellectual and imaginative effort than radio and print media.
- Subscribe to print media, thus supporting investigative journalism
- Support independent, open-source, transparent investigative journalism

- Become aware of some of the lessons of history – The historian Timothy Snyder writes, “History allows us to see patterns and make judgements. It sketches for us the structures within which we can seek freedom. It reveals moments, each one of them different, none entirely unique. To see one moment is to see the possibility of being the cocreator of another.” (Snyder, *On Tyranny*, p. 125)

**[SLIDE 33]**

**To resist authoritarian populists, we can choose to...**

- Vote – every time – The right to choose those who govern us is one for which millions have fought and died over centuries, and for which people continue to fight and die; we can choose to exercise that right to help preserve and nourish freedom
- Defend democratic institutions – parliaments, laws, courts, universities, trade unions, public services and civil servants
- Speak up – we can write to our elected representatives, we can write to editors of newspapers and magazines; we can demonstrate peacefully, non-violently, in public
- Support 2-3 great causes – concerning the environment, women’s rights, minority rights, asylum seekers and refugees. There are so many. Learn all about them; fund and encourage civil society organisations that advance those causes locally and globally

**[SLIDE 34]**

**To overcome fear, we can choose to...**

- Maintain a private life – By not sharing too much and too personal information via the Internet, including social media and email. All over the world, people have accepted as normal the violation of electronic privacy, which actual and would-be tyrants exploit ruthlessly. For Hannah Arendt, a major feature of totalitarianism was the erasure of the difference between private and public life.
- Be patriots not nationalists – Patriots love their country and work for its good. Nationalists vaunt the superiority of their nation over others and stoke resentment about other nations’ achievements.
- Be loyal to humanity not to a particular tribe.

**[SLIDE 35]**

**RESPONSES ROOTED IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**

**[SLIDE 36]**

As Christian believers, we can choose to...

- Take comfort and inspiration from our Saviour

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8: 32)

- Pray – individually and in community – for the state of our world. I have been rediscovering recently how much God loves us to pray. Prayer allows us to enter into partnership with Him, to accomplish His desires on earth.

The next three points apply equally to all people as to Christians; but Christians can choose to practise them too.

- Listen intently and attentively
- Take action for justice – individually and in community
- Love others sincerely and actively

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4: 18)

The opposite of fear is not only courage, though that is certainly true. The opposite of fear is love. Our love is not perfect, but learning to love others, people different from ourselves, drives out fear.

“... speaking [+ cherishing, maintaining, doing, living] the truth in love ...” (Eph. 4: 15)

The Greek word used by Paul is literally “truthing” in love. So, we can choose to speak the truth; cherish to truth; maintain the truth; do the truth; live the truth. That’s how to defend the truth and drive out fear.

**[SLIDE 37]**

#### **FURTHER READING AND VIEWING**

I drew inspiration for this piece from a range of books, articles, films and podcasts, which I can heartily recommend.

**[SLIDE 38]**

Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017.

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books, 1951.

Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*. New York and London: Continuum, 2006 [first published 1947].

Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Luke Mogelson, "The Storm" / "Among the Insurrectionists", *The New Yorker*, 25 January 2021, pp. 32-53. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/01/25/among-the-insurrectionists>.

*Bellingcat: Truth in a Post-Truth World* (film), 2018. <https://www.arte.tv/de/videos/098117-000-A/bellingcat-truth-in-a-post-truth-world/>.

Eliot Higgins, *Finding Truth in a Post-Truth World* (video recording) TED<sup>x</sup> Amsterdam, 18 November 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mozxTk3Brqw>.

Massimo Maoret, *The Social Construction of Facts: Surviving a Post-Truth World* (video recording) TED<sup>x</sup> IESE Barcelona, 10 May 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tHbSasnvo&t=4s>.

"Is Facebook a Danger to Democracy?" (podcast), *Inside Geneva*, Swiss Info, 9 March 2021. [https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/podcast\\_inside-geneva/45674148](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/podcast_inside-geneva/45674148)

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, *How to Spot Fake News* (poster), 21 February 2021. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174>.

**[SLIDE 39]**

THANK YOU!