CHAPTER III

EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The Concept of Post-Truth Society

The word post-truth became widely recognized after being named the Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016. At this point, the term was brought into public discussion in both academic writing and everyday conversation. According to McIntyre (2018) in his book *Post-Truth*, “Post-truth” refers to a situation in which objective facts have less influence than emotional appeals in shaping public opinion. The perception of information is influenced by personal conviction and emotional interest rather than other factors. People prefer information that just “feels” right, even if it was not explicitly stated. So in this case the truth does not go away. It simply loses some of its power. The truth is thus one version of reality among many that people may choose from based on what fits their pre-existing views.

This condition did not come about in a moment. Ralph Keyes (2004) notes in *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* that dishonorable conduct, exaggeration and manipulation have become common in public communication in modern society. People say things that are misleading, half-truths and misguided political spin. This makes it more difficult for the public to discern clearly what is true and what simply feels true. Meanwhile, there has been a continued rise in distrust of experts, journalists and institutions. This distrust creates a climate in which misinformation can more easily propagate and be accepted without much questioning.

A clear illustration of how this theoretical idea plays out in real life can be seen in the controversy surrounding the inauguration crowd size of President Donald Trump in January 2017. After Press Secretary Sean Spicer claimed that the event drew the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, despite expert estimates putting Trump's audience at around 200,000 attendees compared to Obama's 1.8 million in 2009, White House counselor Kellyanne Conway defended the statement by describing it as "alternative facts" rather than a falsehood, a phrase that immediately drew pushback from the interviewer who pointed out that most of what Spicer said simply was not true. This single exchange demonstrates exactly what McIntyre describes in theory. The photographic evidence, the transit data, and the expert crowd estimates were all available and consistent, yet the administration chose to frame the disagreement not as a factual error but as a matter of competing perspectives. Truth in this case did not disappear. It was simply repositioned as one option among several, exactly as McIntyre argues happens in a post-truth environment.

3.1.1 Post-Truth Society in Contemporary America

A post-truth society is not simply an idea. This is significant because *Don't Look Up* (2021) was made as a reaction to real-life events in American society.

One of the most significant turning points came during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. At this time a lot of false and misleading information was broadcasted on television, online news and more importantly social media. McIntyre (2018) described this election as emotional messages and political identity could be more persuasive than actual, factual politics. Many voters choose

to accept information congruent with their pre-existing beliefs, even when it was misrepresented. This pattern is supported by independent fact-checking data from that period. An analysis of 158 statements made by Donald Trump during the 2016 campaign found that 78 percent were rated Mostly False, False, or Pants on Fire by PolitiFact, yet this did not significantly reduce his support among voters who already identified with his message. This shows precisely what McIntyre means when he argues that in a post-truth climate, accuracy becomes secondary to whether a message aligns with what a listener already wants to believe. In the UK, public opinion was still influenced by misinformation during the Brexit referendum, which was similar to the one in question. As Keyes (2004) pointed out, information like this spreads not because it is true but because it is emotionally appealing and easy to accept and share.

A real-world example came during the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020. At that time, health agencies were working to communicate scientific guidance to the public. However, misinformation and disinformation are rampant on various digital platforms. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) describe this as a "information disruption" in which false information often spreads faster than its correction. The moment shows how scientific authority can be doubted or dismissed if it does not fit with what the public wants to believe. This is visible in the way unproven treatments such as hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin were promoted as near miracle cures by certain political figures and media personalities, despite the eventual findings of large-scale clinical trials. The RECOVERY Trial, one of the largest randomized clinical studies on COVID-19 treatments, concluded that

hydroxychloroquine showed no clinical benefit in hospitalized patients, and later analysis found that hydroxychloroquine was actually associated with increased mortality among COVID-19 patients rather than any protective effect. Despite this evidence, public belief in these treatments persisted for a long time among certain groups, illustrating how scientific consensus can be treated as just one competing claim rather than settled fact once it collides with political identity.

Another example of how the 'post-truth' phenomenon manifests itself in the American context is climate change denial. For years, the science on climate change has been quite solid, but the public remains divided on the issue. McIntyre (2018) explains that this division is not simply due to a lack of information. It is also related to deliberate disinformation campaigns, as well as media practices that present scientific facts as if they were only one side of the debate.

3.1.2 The Erosion of Truth Through Media and Spectacle

To understand the sustainability of a post-truth society, it is necessary to reflect on the function of media and visual culture. Guy Debord (1994) in *The Society of the Spectacle* noted the shift in modern society from direct reality to image and performance. More than just direct experience, people relate to the world through what they see in the media. This is not just about technology, but also how images have been used by society to shape its reality.

The inauguration crowd controversy discussed earlier also illustrates this idea well. Side by side aerial photographs comparing Obama's 2009 inauguration and Trump's 2017 inauguration, along with mass transit ridership and television ratings data, all pointed in the same direction, yet the dispute was ultimately fought

not over the images themselves but over which narrative would be allowed to define what the images meant. This is precisely the condition Debord describes, where the contest for public belief is no longer about what actually happened but about which spectacle is permitted to stand as the official version of events.

In such an environment, messages that play on emotional and visual aspects will be more popular than logical and detailed explanations. The spread of misinformation becomes easier in cases where information can be conveyed through stories, images, and drama. Note that in science, information always requires patience and logic. When the goal of your media environment is entertainment, sensationalism will prevail.

The theories put forward by McIntyre, Keyes, Wardle, Derakhshan, and Debord lead to the conclusion that the emergence of a post-truth society cannot be explained by individual behavior alone. This phenomenon is a result of media structures, political motivations, and established cultural traditions.

3.2 Media Sensationalism

Media sensationalism occurs when media organizations enthusiastically embrace news and report it in an exaggerated, dramatized manner to make it seem interesting or attract readers' attention. Modern media systems, such as McQuail's *Mass Communication Theory* (2010), emphasize entertainment rather than facts. News stories are not always designed to convey the truth and provide balanced statements, but rather to spice things up, use hyperbole, and make them more digestible while moving at a fast pace.

The complexity of a story is often transformed into a compelling narrative in sensational reporting. Zhou, Grabe & Barnett (2001) have identified several hallmarks of this reporting style, including emotionally charged language, dramatic visuals and plot twists, and an emphasis on personal conflict over broader explanations. These techniques are effective in capturing people's attention, but they also influence how audiences process the data. People remember the experiences of the story, not the key details.

This pattern is visible in how news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic often shifted between downplaying and overstating the threat depending on which framing produced more public attention. Some treatments such as convalescent plasma were heavily covered in their early promising stages, while the negative results from larger and more rigorous trials received far less media attention once they were published. This reflects exactly what Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett describe, since a hopeful and dramatic story about a miracle cure naturally draws far more engagement than a cautious follow-up report explaining that the treatment did not work as expected.

However, the above trend has been slowly changing the function of media. Unlike its role in providing the public with needed information, the media today has become more entertainment-based. People love to see in the news something that is exciting or even shocking. It takes much thinking to write an intelligent article.

This tendency is not simply a product of deplorable journalistic practices, as McQuail (2010) explains. It relates to the capitalist architecture of our modern

media landscape. Media organizations rely heavily on audience attention in no small part because without it, they simply cannot survive; media organizations convert that audience attention into advertising revenue. The more views, clicks and shares a story receives, the more money is paid. This creates a powerful structural incentive to cover news not as objective analysis, but as a form of entertainment with emotional appeal and arousal.

Fact-based reporting and science-focused media or information are at a disadvantage in this environment. Both typically require context, explanation, and patience from readers. However, news fueled by fear, anger, or celebrity fame spreads more quickly and easily. This commercial logic does not make sensationalism an exception, but rather a common practice in media production. This dynamic has helped create a “post-truth” culture where emotion consistently trumps information over time.

3.3 Disinformation

Disinformation is defined as false or misleading information created and disseminated with the intent to deceive. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), in their book *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking*, provide a useful framework for understanding this issue by distinguishing three interrelated concepts: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

False information is called misinformation. It's like spreading false information without the intention to mislead, but it ends up misleading the public. Disinformation is false information intentionally produced and disseminated with

the aim of deceiving the public. Conversely, malinformation is factual information disseminated in a way that causes harm, often by failing to provide context, strategically timing its distribution, or presenting it in a misleading way. This distinction demonstrates that false information is not always the result of misunderstanding. It's often part of a deliberate policy. Disinformation is often produced to sway public opinion, create confusion, erode trust in institutions, or protect particular political and economic interests.

A clear case of deliberate disinformation can be seen again in the framing of the 2017 inauguration crowd size. The claim that the event drew the largest audience in history was not an innocent miscalculation, since the contradicting visual and statistical evidence was immediately available to anyone making the statement. When Kellyanne Conway later described this as “alternative facts,” the phrase quickly became emblematic of debates over truth and misinformation in politics, with critics arguing it undermined the credibility of the administration while supporters viewed it as fair pushback against unfair media coverage. This illustrates exactly the structural function of disinformation that Wardle and Derakhshan describe, since the goal was never to provide an accurate count but to protect the political image of the administration on its very first weekend in office.

In the digital age we live today, data is instantly accessible through simple interaction with technology. Yet this convenience further facilitates the dissemination of disinformation over digital platforms. This is referred to by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) as “information disorder”, an ecosystem in which misinformation spreads more rapidly and widely through social networks,

preempting better factual information that corrects or clarifies false claims. Disinformation is deliberately created to arouse emotions and reinforce existing public beliefs and sentiments.

This same dynamic appeared during the early promotion of ivermectin as a treatment for COVID-19. Despite the World Health Organization recommending against the routine use of ivermectin in COVID-19 patients after multiple randomized studies failed to show meaningful clinical benefit, adherence to these recommendations was hindered by the rapid spread of incorrect information across social media. The persistence of these claims even after they were contradicted by rigorous clinical evidence shows how disinformation, once it becomes tied to a person's political or social identity, becomes resistant to correction regardless of how much new evidence accumulates.

Disinformation does not have to be more accurate than actual evidence in a post-truth society (McIntyre, 2018). It just needs to be significantly more compelling, closer to the audience's perspective, and with data that extends beyond the horizon. According to him, people tend not to question information they feel echoes their identity and emotions, despite a lack of evidence.

In other words, it can be said that disinformation is not only a communications challenge but a structural challenge as well. Disinformation is typically associated with politics, business, and campaign-driven attempts to influence opinion. In this way, disinformation is an inevitable consequence of media and political systems that value loyalty, emotion and engagement over truth and accuracy.

3.4 Public Ignorance

Public ignorance is when people are unaware of, indifferent to, or not encouraged to reflect critically on important social, political, or scientific issues. In today's society, limited access to information does not automatically imply ignorance. According to Michael Schudson (2008), author of *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, in fact, people are exposed to an enormous amount of information every day through television, social media, news websites, and digital devices.

The result is that most people feel overwhelmed rather than educated by all this information. If you're inundated with too much content at once, you might stop paying attention to what you're reading or watching. They do not analyze the information. They simply absorb it quickly and move on to something else. As a result, people can become overwhelmed with information and still lack a deep understanding of the important things.

This condition was visible throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in how official health messaging shifted over time. Early guidance from health authorities suggested that masks were unnecessary for the general public, while later guidance reversed this position once new evidence about asymptomatic transmission emerged. Even though this change reflected the normal evolution of scientific understanding, the inconsistency was enough to make a large portion of the public stop trusting official sources altogether, leading many to instead choose information that simply confirmed what they already wanted to believe. This shows how public ignorance is rarely about a complete absence of information. It is more

often about an inability or unwillingness to update one's understanding as new and more reliable evidence becomes available.

The state of overwhelm leads to a change in cognitive behavior which is colloquially called “brain rot” in modern digital culture. While this phenomenon started as internet slang, it mirrors what Nicholas Carr (2010) describes in *The Shallows* as the speedy flow of digital information slowly re-wiring the circuits in the human brain to adapt to instant and superficial thinking. This “brain rot” is a crisis of decreasing attention spans. As shown in recent studies, the computer scientist Gloria Mark (2023) proved that due to the frequent contact with digital information, people's ability to pay attention and focus on screen watching has dropped to just 47 seconds. Due to this loss in concentration, the brain becomes a “cognitive miser” and begins to save energy by refusing complicated stories and focuses on entertainment instead. The effect of this is that people become indifferent on a functional level as they are absorbed in media but cannot think about societal problems deeply anymore.

This cognitive miser then enable what Cass Sunstein (2001) in *Republic.com* calls “selective exposure.” In a state of mental fatigue, people avoid to think deep as they are being overthinking or overloaded. People will gravitate towards information that supports their prior ideas. They avoid information that contradicts their worldview because it is uncomfortable and takes more mental effort. This selective behavior was visible during both the 2016 election and the pandemic, where individuals who supported a particular candidate or political position tended to consume news sources that reinforced their existing views while

dismissing fact-checking efforts from sources outside their preferred media ecosystem. On top of that are digital algorithms that boost content users are more likely to thumbs up, respond to and share. What this means is different people are consuming completely separate streams of information. They do live in separate information universes, what James Carville called an "echo chamber" where the same ideas are recited and rarely disputed. Within this echo chamber, the reasoning people use to defend their beliefs often relies less on evidence and more on flawed patterns of argument. A claim is frequently treated as credible simply because many people within the same group already accept it, a pattern of reasoning known as the argumentum ad populum fallacy, or it is dismissed not on the basis of its content but because of who is making it, a pattern closer to the ad hominem fallacy. Both patterns allow a group to keep rejecting outside evidence without ever having to engage with it directly. This makes it more and more difficult to find common ground on the facts among members of a society.

Schudson (2008) combined with the phenomenon of "brain rot," and along with Sunstein (2001), propose that public ignorance is not simply a personal flaw. It is largely related to the interaction between media systems, digital platforms, and human cognitive practices. Now that people do not want to know, instead they do not know the truth. They are in a setting that rewards known information more than challenging, troubling concepts that require work and assessment.