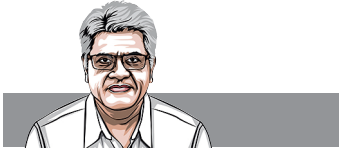# The global epidemic of alternative truths

Untroubled by factuality and diversity, privilege and power are fashioning public opinion in troubled democracies

SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

Truth is often regarded as a metaphysical construct, though it has a more pragmatic dimension as a process of accurately recording perceptions, and ensuring they become part of an agreed social record. The latter understanding is serviceable in a practical sense, but opens the door to a certain troubling relativism. Perceptions are moulded by culture, and observation statements are conditioned by language. Is truth then culturally determined?

The U.S. and social fractures
In the United States, a defeated President sulks in his lair insisting that he really won. Defeat brings sorrow and remorse in its wake, but this election has revealed an anxiety to wallow in untruth. Earlier in the year, as the novel coronavirus pandemic began its lethal spread across the United States, the political leadership sought salvation in denial and then in division. By a calculus of costs and benefits, that may have been smart. The worst hit, at least in the early phase of the pandemic, were people of the minorities and lower income groups, unable by their very identity to impose a serious punishment on political delinquency.

Fractures of race and class in the U.S. are now overlaid with profound differences in culture. At just the time the death toll in America crossed a grim milestone, the journalist, T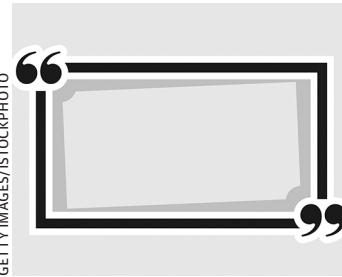alia Lavin, observed that the "culture wars" had reached a stage at which 100,000 dead was "a matter of political opinion". It was, she bemoaned, a telling symptom that the U.S. was "an utter failure of a country", a lament that brought to mind Hannah Arendt's classic 1967 essay , titled "Truth and Politics".

Truth and politics
Arendt was drawn to the theme by the response to her landmark 1963 book on the trial in Jerusalem of the Nazi killer, Adolf Eichmann. That book, written from eyewitness observation, spoke what she thought were undisputable truths. But the response ranged from puzzlement at her motivations, to outright mendacity in discrediting the facts she relied on. Thinking back, Arendt made what seemed a vital distinction. "Factual truths" for her, bore reference to observations by living subjects of constantly changing reality. "Formal truths" on the contrary, were part of the received wisdom. Few could question the latter, such as the proposition that two and two made four. But factual truth was always prone to challenge as being no more than opinion.

Truth and politics, Arendt conceded, had always been "on rather bad terms with each other" and "truthfulness" was never counted "among the political virtues". This was a reality with a profound bearing on the practice of politics, since "facts and events", the outcome of the collective life of humanity, were the "very texture of the political realm".

James Madison, one among seven "founding fathers" of the U.S. Constitution, said about governments, that finally, they all "rest on opinion". Yet, an individual's opinion tended to be "timid and cautious" in its expression, and only acquired "firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated". Numbers could be a guarantee of strength, though not of authenticity. Indeed, the whole procedure for Arendt seemed thoroughly unsatisfactory, since there was nothing that prevented a majority "from being false witnesses". Rather, "the feeling of belonging to a majority may even encourage false testimony". There is no wisdom in crowds – like all forms of power, majoritarianism could threaten the truth.

War and deception
In 1971, soon after the Pentagon Papers (officially called the Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force) were published in *The New York Times*, exposing a long trail of official deception on the U.S. war in Vietnam, Arendt wrote about how the lie in normal circumstances, is "defeated by reality". However large the tissue of falsehood, even when spun with the help of computers, it would be inadequate to "cover the immensity of factuality". A fact could be removed from the world if a sufficient number of people "believe in its non-existence". But this would require a process of "radical destruction", an experiment that totalitarian regimes had undertaken with frightening consequences, though without the intended result of "lasting deception". The lessons from the Pentagon Papers, and the "extraordinarily strong" opposition that had emerged to the U.S. war in Vietnam, was that a government intent on intimidation to secure its ends, was unlikely to succeed.

The role of social media
A readily identifiable aspect in which things have changed since, is the sheer ubiquity of the computer, which Arendt believed, even with all its prowess, could not quite conceal factuality. Earlier modes of harvesting attention and securing assent for a particular perception of reality, have been transformed in this intensely networked milieu. And since the events of 2016 – notably the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election as the U.S. President – social media has come in for intense scrutiny for its ability to create bubbles of political misinformation.

It is difficult though, to imagine social media as an autonomous force that works to similar effect irrespective of the soil it falls upon. The U.S. in this regard, is fertile soil, segregated by class and credentials into ghettos of privilege and deprivation by four decades of neoliberal economics. The economist, Raghuram Rajan, and the philosopher, Michael Sandel, have in recent times pointed out how daily lives in the U.S. today are increasingly about sameness, less about exposure to diversities of culture and social perception. It is a context that enables particular population cohorts to pretend that other worlds do not exist, that their perceptions, fortified in regular "check ins" with social media, are all that matter.

India, a social milieu with its own modes of sorting by class, caste and community, affords new means of campaigning and exercising political power through connectivity. Customary deliberative processes have been dispensed with: Parliament sessions conclude without the Question Hour and consultative meetings across party lines over significant legislative initiatives have been scrapped. Political leaders, beginning with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speak from high pedestals but rarely put themselves under scrutiny in media conferences or interviews.

Still to be neutralised
In his first address to party representatives after securing a decisive win in the general election last year, Mr. Modi issued several explicit warnings about the media. Print media and TV may seem a good way to project ideas onto the public stage, he said, but there is a risk of falling victim to their "magnetic power". These remarks were in spirit congruent with his instructions in 2014. Soon after taking office then, Mr. Modi signalled his enthusiasm for social media at a meeting with Facebook's Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg. Immediately afterwards, he instructed colleagues in the party and government, to use social media to get the word out, but to stay clear of direct interactions with traditional news media.

Public opinion in democracies is now fashioned within cocoons of privilege and power, untroubled by factuality or diversities in perception. If the U.S. seems, at least for now, to have tapped the sources of countervailing power to neutralise this drift towards a world of alternative truths, the challenge remains unmet in India.

Sukumar Muralidharan teaches at the school of journalism, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat