Chapter 3
Anti-Vaccination in the Post-Truth Era:
Who Will We Trust?

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ABSTRACT

Science denialism, or the decline/loss of trust in scientific knowledge, is related to losing the value of truth as a phenomenon, the post-truth era is a period in which truth is devalued and fluid. This study reveals the relationship between this concept, which permeates a wide range of areas from political discourses to daily life practices, and the pandemic, which is a global crisis. It also seeks to reveal how the pandemic reproduces hegemonic relations. This study addresses the relationship between the post-truth era and anti-vaccination and aims to understand how anti-vaccine individuals view COVID-19 vaccines. The study included in-depth interviews with five vaccine opponents. There were found to be recurring themes in the interview data. One of the core ideas of post-truth, science denialism, was used to investigate these issues. The hierarchy between classes, the prominent theme in the data collected from the opponents of vaccination, was analyzed with a critical perspective.

"Reality" is what we take to be true.
Gary Zukav

INTRODUCTION

In the post-truth era, lying is not a concept that is applied from time to time but can be understood as the main feature of the age in which it is lived. In this age, power structures bend the truth to protect their privileged position. This assumption is certainly not new and valid in almost every period. However, with the post-truth, the problematization of this situation has changed. Today, the truth presented by power structures and the perception of truth by people living in this age is fluid. On the other hand, this understanding spreads to daily life activities in a not-long process.

The post-truth era does not describe the temporal process after the truth but the emptying of it by giving it a subjective meaning and reflecting the untruth as accurate. In this context, scientific knowledge, seen as truth by proving its objectivity with modernity, has lost its reality in the post-truth era. The circulation of misinformation has increased with the loss of information accuracy and the digitization of the media.

COVID-19, which we encounter in the post-truth era, shows us that we need to rethink the concept of post-truth and its possibilities and risks. The importance of reaching the correct information has been seen with the coronavirus pandemic. Individuals do not unconditionally trust and question the information shared by their ruler structures. This situation has also manifested itself in issues such as anti-vaccination. Because COVID-19, which has become a political discourse over time, has become a tool through which power structures reproduce themselves. Although the pandemic has brought the credibility of power structures into question for a relatively more expansive audience, this position has also enabled the power structure to revise how it legitimizes itself.

The anti-vaccination movement is not limited to the COVID-19 vaccine. "Opposition to vaccines goes as far back as the 18th century" (Hussain et al., 2018). Anti-vaxxer groups have consistently opposed vaccines for different reasons. Early anti-vaccination movements were often motivated by religious restrictions and taboos. Later, various reasons, such as conspiracy theories, the adoption of "scientific" information spread by word of mouth and unproven by individuals, fear, abstaining, and the domination of the body by power structures took their place in the anti-vaccination stance. As with previous anti-vaccine movements, those against the COVID-19 vaccine have different arguments.

One of the claims in this study is that the reason for insecurity and different information circulation in individuals is that knowledge has become an empty signifier in the post-truth era. The verifiability of information has become almost impossible today. Although verification platforms search for the accuracy of information, they cannot keep up with the circulation rate of information pollution. In addition, individuals' distrust of power structures also affects their understanding of information.

"Post-truth was foreshadowed by what has happened to science over the last several decades" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 17). Also, science loses its importance because it is still not seen as objective enough, even in a global problem. Today, scientific knowledge has been turned into political discourse. In other words, scientific knowledge has become an empty signifier. The empty signifier is "a signifier without a signified" (Laclau, 2005, p. 105). In other words, the different meanings attributed to the signifier emptied the signifier itself. This situation has triggered individuals' distrust of scientific expertise in countries that have become implicitly totalitarian due to central forces in different areas such as social, cultural, economic, political, and others.

When the concept of post-truth is considered from a sociopolitical perspective, it is necessary to examine public security and related factors. It is associated with the spread of misinformation, the consequent undermining of public safety, and the fact that post-truth information, while increasing in quantity, is of questionable veracity. The undermining of public security may cause the public to become anxious and fearful. This case can make manipulating the masses easier for the power structure. The concept that enters daily life enables the production, flow, and reproduction of knowledge for the benefit of the ruling class and strengthens its power. At this point, technological developments affect daily life as a result. According to Enes Aluç and others, who explain the concept of post-truth as the substitution of fake information and images for reality, "In a period when technical possibilities and fakes are perceived as so real, the level of media literacy of people is of great importance and constitutes a separate subject of discussion" (Aluç et al., 2022, p. 4).

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