

Is it still possible to find out the truth?

The unexpected outcomes of the UK's Brexit referendum and the US presidential election induced a wave of moral panic in many Western newsrooms and political capitals. In 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary declared "post truth" its word of the year – defining it as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals".

Countless books and articles since have debated the emergence of this "post truth" era – ignoring the numerous earlier declarations of a "post truth" age – going back hundreds and even thousands of years.

English philosopher Francis Bacon argued in 1620 "The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion... draws all things else to support and agree with it." A slightly more elegant version of the OED definition. And similar arguments can be found from the times of the Romans and Greeks.

Yet, if it is fanciful to argue there was ever a golden age of rationalism, in which objective facts and rational debate shaped public opinion, it is certainly true that objective facts are often less influential in shaping public opinion than many would wish.

That is not, however, because of a lack of concern for the truth. As adviser to a network of more than 150 fact-checking organisations around the world, I have seen just how strong, perhaps universal, a desire people the world over share for what they consider the truth to be reflected in public debate. This is as true in Dakar or New Delhi as it is in New York or Brussels.

But two things are happening. The first is to trust. If anything, I think, we can define this not as a post-truth era, but as a post-trust age; an age in which – from London to Lagos, Bordeaux to Buenos Aires – citizens are willing to express scepticism about facts presented to them by experts. On any one topic, there may be one set of facts, but perhaps more than before, there are many understandings of them.

What does this mean for public debate? And whether it is possible to both find out, and, crucially, induce some common public agreement on what is the truth about the great matters of the day? It means, I believe, we have a challenge of presentation: we need to fundamentally change how we – in media, in politics, in civil society – present reliable information in ways that will earn the greatest trust.

The second challenge is the great struggle we see that people the world over have to overcome in order to access reliable information in the first place.

Public access to reliable information – even the most basic forms of information – is still too hard a struggle in many countries – countries where my former organisation, Africa Check works, are just one example. At the same time, the online world has enabled those who wish to do so to push out misinformation and disinformation further and faster than ever before.

So the battle to both expose misinformation, where it does harm, and to provide access to reliable information, presented in ways that establish reasons for trust, is the battle that will provide the answer to the question: whether it is possible to find, and establish, truth on key matters of debate now and in the future.