On 16 November Oxford Dictionaries named ‘post-truth’ as its word of the year. Previous winners have included more obviously geographical words like ‘carbon footprint’ in 2007, ‘credit crunch’ in 2008 and ‘squeezed middle’ in 2011. How should geographers view a post-truth world?

**Meaning**

Oxford Dictionaries defines post-truth as an adjective describing a situation in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

This tension was a theme in the Scottish referendum, the EU referendum and this year’s US presidential election. Remember the hotly debated pledge of the Leave campaign that an end to EU membership would give us £350 million a week to spend on the NHS?

**Blame the internet?**

The stratospheric rise of the internet and social media in the last 20 years has contributed to post-truth. At the simplest level there are fake news websites which publish stories with no basis in fact. These can be hard to distinguish from satirical news websites (like *The Onion*, or even the UK’s venerable *Private Eye*) which set out to make people laugh rather than to misinform (but may do both). Neither satire nor fake news is new, but their potential for rapid, widespread dissemination is.
The internet is a low-cost media platform for news and opinion and so it might be thought of as having a ‘democratising’ influence, allowing minority and marginal groups to make their views known more widely. Instead could it be that it creates a confusing tangle of views where truth and lie are impossible to distinguish? What do you think?

**The power of social media**

The day after the US presidential election a man called Eric Tucker in Austin, Texas, posted a tweet that suggested protesters against Donald Trump were being bussed into the city.

*Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in. #fakeprotests #trump2016 #austin*

In fact, the buses were for delegates attending an unrelated conference. Mr Tucker had spent very little time checking his facts. The story quickly went viral, fuelling a conspiracy theory.

You can research the full story of the Eric Tucker tweet here: [www.tinyurl.com/hw4e37e](http://www.tinyurl.com/hw4e37e)

**Affirmation vs information**

One outcome of 300 million active Twitter users and 1.7 billion monthly Facebook users is that anyone can quickly find other groups of people who share their views. This affirmation of opinions, whether or not they have any supporting evidence, is powerful. It can quickly transform something that initially seems fake into appearing quite believable. In other words, affirmation ‘trumps’ (sorry!) information. Why ‘fact-check’ when hundreds or thousands of other people believe the same thing?

Post-truth can be linked to the resurgence of populism, a political doctrine founded on the idea of a forgotten majority fighting against a minority elite. Many political figures, parties and campaigns, including Donald Trump, UKIP, ‘vote Leave’ and the French National Front can be said to tap into this ‘them against us’ narrative.

**Keep it real**

Post-truth politics has the potential to be genuinely disruptive. The UK exit from the EU might be relatively painless, but it could be destabilising for an already more fragmented EU. If Trump pulls back from NATO, global free trade, climate change agreements and America’s recent global geopolitical interventionism, then global geopolitics could undergo seismic shifts. Geographers are not just passive observers of these changes. We need to be active arbiters of facts and creators of counter-arguments. It is worth thinking critically about the sources of the information you are receiving, and analysing the judgements made by other people.

**Questions**

1. Think about the many sources of information you use. Which newspapers and news websites do you trust and why? Can you trust Geography Review?
2. To what extent do you think people who voted ‘Trump’, or voted ‘Leave’ voted against something rather than for something?
3. Should social media sites like Facebook and Twitter filter out ‘fake news’ or is it people’s right to post what they want, in other words is this freedom of speech?