# The Art of Truth in the Social Media Age
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## Abstract

*In the age of social media, claims to truth often go viral irrespective of evidence and are streamed into universities with varying, unpredictable effects. Thinking of truth as art, a notion raised by Friedrich Nietzsche, can illuminate the paradoxical ways truth is deployed amid increased digitization. Ours is an era in which truth is destabilized and negated through the increased proliferation of masks and at the same time opened up to alternate perspectives.*

In his provocative essay "On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense," Friedrich Nietzsche (1911, 180) inquires, "What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding." For Nietzsche, an objective standard by which truth can be measured does not exist because subjectivity, language, and poetics frame truth. Today, conceivably more than ever before, such a perspective on the art—and artfulness—surrounding truth needs our attention because it can illuminate paradoxical ways truth is deployed in the social media age amid an ever-increasing presence of digital life that intercedes into institutions like the university and ruptures traditional boundaries. What does it entail, then, to call upon "truth" in relation to what Nietzsche would have us see as artifice in the first place? And what function does such a rhetorical move achieve within a social media context in which fleeting, clashing, contradictory, satiric, and even absurd truth-claiming is every day the plat du jour?

For Daniel Gordon in *What Is Academic Freedom?* (2022, 110), the social media platform, in contrast to the university, participates most plainly in the model of the capitalist marketplace: "A free market is a space in which competitors can easily enter, such as a public square in which anyone can give a speech or a social media site in which anyone can post an opinion. A university classroom is not a market because there is usually only one professor. Members of the general public cannot stream their ideas into this space." Gordon's view implies a criticism (and perhaps a renunciation) of the corporatized university, suggesting that what differentiates the university from social media is that credentialed authority figures are designed to monitor ideas within it and that students are not to act as if they were private consumers. The limitation of Gordon's

position does not lie in the criticism of corporatization but rather in the defined boundaries set up between the place of the university and the place of social media that are in practice blurred. The forces of social media, the internet, and the far-reaching digitization of society have undermined on a general, cultural level the ability of institutions like the university to maintain authority on truth.

Social media may indeed be a place in which everyone and anyone "can stream their ideas" (Gordon 2022, 110). But the fact that these platforms destabilize truth predicated on authority, expertise, evidence, and credentials is rather an interesting part of their effectiveness at reminding us of the *artfulness* of truth and truth-claims. Social media is not built around sources and credibility but around the boundless creation of largely unmonitored content. Posts that go viral spread like wildfire, mutate, and are also reinforced by metric-measuring algorithms. Free, widely accessible, and with limited content-moderation (except by those whose demanding, behind-the-scenes job it is to remove content not in line with site and legal guidelines), these platforms challenge the acceptability of who is permitted (where and in what way) to claim truth in the first place.

On a daily, if not hourly, basis, social media platforms intentionally invite the performance of truth through group pages and memes, bringing into open view truth's "mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche 1911, 180). Especially in their most artistic and literary forms, the constructed thoughts, images, and videos seen in meme culture remind one of Nietzschean aphorisms, Wildean irony, Kafkaesque mazes, and the fleetingness of living poetry. Rather than presenting a rationally organized curriculum or a lucid theory, meme culture presents a kind of counterdiscourse on truth, one that deliberately deconstructs or otherwise parodies canons of truth, especially those coming from on high.

The typically anonymous digital creations circulating online known as memes, a shorthand for imitated messages, are more than just humorous; they draw attention to the artfulness of sense and language in a way that disrupts authoritative—as well as anthropocentric—views on truth. Consider briefly a viral cat meme that appears as an example in Leigh Claire La Berge's study *Marx for Cats* (2023, 331): "'Zoom cat' [is] a cat meme produced after a Texas judge was unable to change his zoom profile picture from that of a domestic shorthair and had to announce to the colleagues with whom he was meeting, 'I am not a cat.'" In the judge's haste to assert something purportedly self-evident—"I am not a cat"—one can locate a Nietzschean dilemma: an official judicial setting in which one is called upon to 'solemnly swear to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth' depends upon an anthropocentric demand: namely, that cats, and other animals, *cannot* claim truth. Memes often deliberately poke holes into such anthropocentric fantasies through endless images of cats, who are, as La Berge (2023, 331) points out, the internet's "most cited" creature.

Oscar Wilde (1905, 263), who famously parodied the narrow confines of truth in law at his own historic trial and whose sardonic and humorous aphorisms are ripe for meme content

creation, also speaks directly to our own moment when he writes, "The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks." And as he puts it elsewhere, "Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure" (Wilde 1905, 246). The porosity and performativity of truth where masks lead to other masks becomes particularly visible when the online world is recognized as fundamental to twenty-first century experience. Postmodern critics, who "questioned objective truth" (McCaughey 2023), have been key here with respect to breaking truth down in general. Terry Eagleton (1989, 125) further reminds us that "somewhere behind modern literary theory, lurks the gigantic shadow of Friedrich Nietzsche." On social media, the never-ending streams—or, in more ominous terms, feeds—do not flow in a way that makes rational sense or that promotes consensus-building but rather seem to promulgate disorder and masking, at times for their own sake.

Prominent anti-capitalist cultural critic Naomi Klein, in *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (2023, 29), highlights the way social media creates, intermingles, and masks personas amid a haze of fragmentary posts, endless scrolling, and finicky algorithms when she details her own personal experience of others repeatedly "getting [her] confused with Naomi Wolf," who has in recent years become known for her conservative conspiracy theories. Moreover, that what are called "scam artists" proliferate in every online sphere imaginable also points to our Nietzschean dilemma: persuading someone to believe that something is true that might hypothetically be untrue depends on art (as defined, for example, by rhetoric, or the art of speech), artistry, and the way truth and illusion are closely related. In our age, however, scam artists with ready access to deepfake technology and other AI software can go so far as to orchestrate entire live video meetings where faces and speech-content have been convincingly swapped or interchanged, as seen in the recent story of a finance firm employee who, fully believing he had been on a video conference call with fellow staff, ended up actually transferring millions of dollars to a scam artist (Chen and Magramo 2024).

One would be remiss here not to mention that social media is playing a significant role in the formation of young adults—some of whom are, or soon will be, embarking upon university life for the first time. Their views on truth are increasingly shaped by a life streamed on various platforms and lived in an online world proliferated with deepfakes and other AI-generated content, even more so after the increased digitization spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. US surgeon general Vivek Murthy, clearly troubled by this trend, recently "demanded Congress to put a label on the [social media] apps as it does with cigarettes and alcohol" in order to protect children and their mental health (Goldman 2024). While our social media age amplifies and plays with dilemmas surrounding truth and lies, it does not create them. Murthy's view speaks more to the far older fear of what a collapsed world without authority would look like, one that is recalled in the oft-quoted lines from W. B. Yeats's (2005, 1196) poem:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

While Nietzsche's proposition on truth could arguably endorse the disorder seen magnified on social media today, it shows us at the same time the importance of unlocking truth-claims from "fixed, canonic and binding" truth (Nietzsche 1911, 180) and of opening truth-claims to those who have been excluded from canons held under the grip of historically hierarchical and patriarchal institutions. Indeed, in virtually all social media spaces imaginable, one can find the expression of alternate, affective, satirical, marginal, and deeply personal truths emanating from diverse individuals and social groups. Greta Thunberg, who calls herself an "autistic climate justice activist" on her Instagram page of 14.5 million followers, has received from the start and continues to this day to receive much of her attention and support because of social media users (@gretathunberg, February 5, 2024). Meanwhile, the TikTok handle "Ellie's Voice Safe Sleep" seeks to educate visitors about sleeping baby syndrome not necessarily through facts and reason but rather primarily through the divulgence of the personal trauma of Ellie's mother (@elliesvoice_safesleep, February 5, 2024). The social media platform enables her to use emotional stories to persuade others of the relevance of her truth, just as the platform provides the partners of incarcerated people a way to divulge their marginalized truths outside the borders of a judicial institution.

When considered in differing local or national contexts of cultural repression or censorship related to truth-telling, social media can also have the effect of unlocking truth. Sasha Seregina, for example, relied on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites to launch groups and pages dedicated to organizing antiwar events and spreading awareness in Serbia of the Russia-Ukraine war (Martino 2023). As Seregina reminds us, "Our online activities meant a lot to [some Serbians] as a space of freedom" (quoted in Martino 2023). These online activities, to be sure, can be streamed into universities as well, carrying a range of consequences from transformative to chilling. The posts documenting the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 as well as subsequent Black Lives Matter protests widely disseminated on social media platforms must be counted as among the crucial catalysts for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives undertaken by universities, K–12 schools, and funding centers across the country post–George Floyd.

In contrast, social media posts have also led to mobbing and reactionism, as seen in the national story of the ousting of Harvard University president Claudine Gay as well as in the regional story of Hafiza Khalique, a New York University undergraduate student who was doxed on social media and disciplined by university administrators after a video of her tearing down posters at the start of the Israel-Palestine war went viral (Spirlet 2023). As Dilys Schoorman and Rosanna Gatens (2023, 4) remind us, "Then, like today, Black Americans and members of the LGBTQ+ community (and topics relevant to them) were particularly singled out for villainizing and victimizing." This singling out is often performed on social media, as seen in the accusations of plagiarism against Gay disseminated by Christopher Rufo on X (formerly known as Twitter), where his posts "drove more than 100 million impressions" to be picked up later by various media

outlets across the political spectrum (Ward 2024). Rufo's motivating target, like those in his camp more broadly, might be summed up as a battle against the end of truth: "My primary objective is to eliminate the DEI bureaucracy in every institution in America and to restore truth rather than racialist ideology as the guiding principle of America" (Ward 2024).

Such recent events, among others, have brought into focus the powerful role that social media now plays on universities and the search for truth. For Gay (2024), "Universities must remain independent venues where courage and reason unite to advance truth, no matter what forces set against them." But if humans use subjective, poetic metaphors of truth that over time become ossified as "truth," then it cannot suffice to equate social media with lies and universities with truth. In Nietzsche's (2016) view, the heavy promotion of education in modernity primarily furthers the interest of the state. In his series of five dialogues in *Anti-education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, begun by recounting a conversation he overheard as a young student at a university in Bonn, Germany, Nietzsche (2016) suggests that the imposition of the state's practical interests in mass education ultimately can drive out those who are not invested in the truths of the present moment. Klein (2023, 54–55) further raises the contemporary issue of the corporatized university, noting how students experience the college admissions process as already blurring authentic truth-telling with their perception of what is marketable, a process that will continue throughout their university years. From early on, that is to say, students may perceive that they are a kind of consumer, that universities signify a brand, and that degrees are positioned "as the requisite first step to any lucrative career" (Klein 2023, 54–55).

For John Henry Newman (1905, 456), the older truth of religion and the newer truth of science ushered in during the Enlightenment Era were not incompatible but were meant to be liberally examined at the university under "the whole circle of truth." But this circle would be incomplete without reflection on the difficulties in which the notion of truth is itself implicated. We are turned back to the dilemma posed by Nietzsche: What is truth anyway? If one accepts that "truths are illusions of which one has forgotten" (Nietzsche 1911, 180), then each examination of truth functions not as a launching pad to advance to the bottom of a deep well but rather as an enigmatic journey composed of poetic metaphors reliant at bottom on language and artifice. In the social media age, the borderless ambiguities of truth beckon one to surrender the myth of the whole truth for the exposed myths of art.

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