

Post-truth and fake news

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Fake news is big news. Until recently 'fake news' referred to political satire shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. It now appears that satire has been killed stone dead. Political reality is perpetuating so many outrageous spectacles, self-righteous tantrums, opinionated absurdities and outright lies that political satire simply struggles to compete with reality. Facts have become a stake in adversarial political contests rather than a generally agreed aspect of a shared reality. During the Brexit referendum, the Leave campaign falsely claimed that the UK exchequer would save £350 million pounds every week outside of the EU. In Scotland, Project Fear, as the No campaign was self-styled, engaged in fantastical exaggerations of catastrophe in the event of a Yes vote in the 2014 Independence referendum.

This seems like small beer compared to the scale of lies and petulance of US media politics. This reached fever pitch during and after the 2016 US elections when a reality TV celebrity won the Presidency against a seasoned political operator long versed in the dark arts of spin. One estimate claimed that 78 percent of Donald Trump's factual statements fell into the category of untruth (Pomerantsev, 2016). Lies, falsehoods, and untruths are no barrier to political popularity. They have been a feature of politics since universal suffrage. Nevertheless, something more fundamental appears to be at stake in the multiple crises of political representation today.

Trump and his White House staff have committed so many blunders and inaccuracies that to some it seems that this may be a deliberate policy to misdirect the US media and undermine the credibility of journalists (Shreckinger and Gold, 2017). For instance, White House staff wrongly claimed that two Iraqi refugees committed a 'massacre' in Bowling Green, Kentucky, as part of a bungled effort to

bolster Trump's travel ban on citizens of (predominately Muslim) 'countries of concern'. Most notoriously, White House press secretary Sean Spicer claimed that the use of chemical weapons of civilians by the Assad regime in Syria was so uniquely evil that "someone as despicable as Hitler didn't even sink to using chemical weapons", forgetting, of course, the use of chemicals in the systematic mass murder in Nazi concentration camps. Spicer also told experienced reporter April Ryan at a briefing on White House connections to Russia to "Stop shaking your head . . . At some point, report the facts". He wrongly accused Iran of attacking an American warship and repeatedly claimed that a terrorist attack took place in Atlanta, Georgia (he may have meant Orlando). Yet Trump point-blank refused to fire Spicer on market share grounds: "That guy gets great ratings. Everyone tunes in".

Rather than a conspiracy of misinformation orchestrated by the White House some see the chaotic media relationship as a transparent expression of Trump's intuitive passive-aggressive personality (Gaber, 2017). Some in the US press corps are more generous in their understanding of the pressure and scrutiny that the relatively inexperienced Trump team are coming under. As one journalist put it: "Mostly they're just reactive and incompetent. They don't have time, man. Their ass is on fire all day, every day. These are not evil geniuses. It's not some sort of wonderful, malevolent plot to destroy the media. These people are in a 24-7 state of panic" (Shreckinger and Gold, 2017).

For their part, under pressure journalists are also prone to mistakes, as when a *Time* journalist erroneously claimed that on taking office Trump had replaced a bust of Martin Luther King with one of Winston Churchill, circulated widely online. This allowed Trump to return to his campaign

rhetoric about the 'fake news' agenda of the liberal media establishment. At a Black History month gathering Trump argued: "You read all about Dr. Martin Luther King a week ago, when somebody said I took the statue out of my office and it turned out that that was fake news. Fake news". Trump also publicly refused to take questions from a CNN reporter on the grounds of the network "peddling fake news".

By amplifying the incompatibility of competing versions of reality an atmosphere might be created that reliable factual veracity is simply impossible to achieve. This follows a well know PR strategy to incinerate unwanted scientific evidence by creating a firestorm of contention. Trump constantly complains about the biases of "lamestream" media. Yet, as one study shows, people who vent their suspicions of the 'mainstream media' tend to be more liable to uncritically consume misinformation (Pomerantsev, 2016). There is emotional comfort to be had in selective ignorance.

It is, of course, not only the US and the UK where fake news circulates. After the failed coup attempt in 2016, Turkey's leading newspaper *Sozcu* published gruesome images purportedly showing anti-coup protesters cutting the throat of a captured soldier (Genc, 2017). The report carried no credits for the pictures and did not carry any quotes from eye-witnesses. It was later revealed that the image could not be verified nor could a beheaded soldier be found in the Istanbul morgue. In this case both progressive and conservative media used the false image to advance their political causes.

Experts, facts and algorithms

Are citizens becoming immune to fact-based reasoning? Traditional media struggles to staunch or counter the online circulation of misinformation; indeed, it often reproduces it under editorial



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pressures. Peer to peer online transmission of misinformation undercuts professional journalism. Sources recommended by a friend are less likely to be challenged or ignored than journalistic sources. Instead they are rapidly re-tweeted or ‘liked’. Pseudo-democratic intimacy is supplanting hierarchies of impersonal expertise. During the Brexit campaign Conservative politician Michael Gove claimed that British people “had had enough of experts”.

Within expert cultures truth is restricted to the performance by insiders of cognitive competence to discriminate between knowledge claims. But beyond expert cultures, grounds other than cognitive competence are necessary, for instance that the claims of physics are accepted more or less universally by a public culture of non-physicists (Turner, 2001). Hence there is a vast difference between generalised public validating audiences and specialised validation audiences. Since knowledge claims are validated by different audiences, conflicts between democratic opinion and expert opinion are unavoidable. The issue is how competing positions are mediated.

The legitimisation and diffusion of expert knowledge takes the form of a communicative process. For a democracy expert communication cannot take the form of a rubber stamp that fixes cognitive authority for all time. Expertise necessarily takes the form of a messy political process, not an absolute guarantee. Lacking public validation, the authority of experts will enter into conflict with democratic processes. This is the source of the endless culture war, confusion and ignorance that post-truth seeks to galvanise.

‘Facts’ are required to confirm shared worldviews. With reduced exposure to inconvenient facts and counter arguments,

political literacy is narrowing. People choose to hear what they want to hear. In one sense, the postmodernist ideology that captivated Western intellectuals a number of decades ago has come home to roost (Van Zoonen, 2012). Crudely stated, postmodernism posited that all truths are merely narrative claims with no foundational basis for veracity and therefore no truth claim could be definitively superior to any other truth claim. Claims for truth fell under the suspicion that they were simply a disguised ruse to grab power and assert privilege.

The current crisis of facts is part of a much longer process of communication shift from facts to data (Davies, 2016). A concern for factual information beyond subjective interpretation emerged with modern accountancy practices, followed by developed statistical methods in science, administration and economics. Market research surveys and opinion polls began to be deployed around a century ago to manipulate political outcomes. All this provided government policies with an air of objectivity beyond the reach of ideological dispute. At the same time the emergence of modern communications systems, from newspapers, railways, radio to television, surmounted the physical and emotional distance between politicians and citizens.

Sound and vision made the political leader familiar to mass audiences as a charismatic personality. With the arrival of the picture press in the 1890s, modern popular journalism shifted the public domain away from the practice of democratic politics to the personalised bonds of a privatised media. An impartial but partisan truth was established by the use of pictures, captions, headlines and stories (Hartley, 1992). Facts are what can be seen. A tension is inscribed into news journalism between the ‘truth’

found in the coherence of visualised order and the ‘fake’ exposed by random disorder.

Universal status was claimed for both an adversarial truth and an adversarial ‘we’ community of national readers against the imputed falsehoods of ‘them’ the outsider group – political opponents, terrorists, youth, minority ethnicities or religions, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

William Davies (2016) argues that fears of a post-truth society express the anxieties produced by a large-scale transition from ‘a society of facts’ to ‘a society of data’. Thanks to what is called the ‘internet of things’ – smartphones, smartcards, social media, e-commerce and sensory devices in public spaces – vast quantities of data, ‘big data’, are being generated by the banal routines of daily life. The algorithms of social media are designed to anticipate and confirm existing preferences, biases and prejudices, what is known as ‘bio-psycho-social profiling’. While facts can be viewed as a more or less stable reality that politicians might argue about, big data, by contrast, measures ‘sentiment analysis’. Bio-psycho-social profiling monitors the fluctuating, momentary responses, the emotive ‘public sentiments’ of users and audiences. Impersonal facts are losing out to sentimental data. For Davies, as big data proliferate, as measures of temporary feelings and attitudes and agreed facts are squeezed out, it will become increasingly difficult to establish a broad public consensus to identify and address fundamental social, economic and environmental problems.

However, a different kind of post-truth consensus is being constructed by the corporate, governmental and ideological manipulation of big data, algorithms and bio-psycho-social profiling. As Andy Wigmore, Leave.EU’s communications director, told *Observer* journalist *Carole Cadwalladr* (2017):

“... using artificial intelligence, as we did, tells you all sorts of things about that individual and how to convince them with what sort of advert. And you knew there would also be other people in their network who liked what they liked, so you could spread. And then you follow them. The computer never stops learning and it never stops monitoring”.

Politicians are beginning to come to terms with big data techniques for manipulating behavioural change. Until recently they had approached attitudinal

change 'in such crass ways' according to Nigel Oakes, founder of strategic communications firm SCL (Briant, 2015: 64). Trump's single biggest election donor was billionaire Robert Mercer, joint CEO of Renaissance Technologies, a hedge fund that uses algorithms to model and trade on financial markets (*Cadwalladr*, 2017). Trump's campaign manager and now chief strategist is Steve Bannon, close associate of Mercer. Mercer funded the Media Research Center to correct 'liberal bias' in the media and donated \$10m for Bannon to found Breitbart – an extreme right-wing libertarian news site that propagates antisemitic and Islamophobic sentiment. With 2 billion page views a year Breitbart is the biggest political site on Facebook and Twitter.

Mercer is also reported to have a \$10m stake in Cambridge Analytica, a small data analytics company that specialises in 'messaging and information operation' developed for 'psyops', information operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as mass propaganda attempts to manipulate emotions and change behaviour (*Cadwalladr*, 2017). Cambridge Analytica also worked for both the Trump and the Leave campaigns and claims that it has psychological profiles of 220 million American citizens, almost the entire US electorate.

Collective memory and post-truth

History shapes how we think about the future and collective memory shapes how we think about history. Collective memory in its turn is shaped by patterns of communication. Unreliable communication repeated over time will produce false or distorted collective memories. Whatever gets repeated gets remembered. Concerns have been raised that Twitter in particular is reducing the contemporary media ecology to the trite, the simplistic, the impulsive, and the uncivil. Some consider that the 'age of Twitter' could have been invented as the ideal medium for Trump's personality and style of politics (Ott, 2017). Trump's twitter account has around 13 million followers, although the majority of these may be fake or inactive (Ott, 2017: 64). Twitter's character limitations demand brevity and simplicity. As a mobile technology it can be used almost anywhere without restraint and so encourage impetuous tweets. Its very informality and impersonality encourages traits of aggressive self-promotion and narcissism.

Collective memory, of course, has always been fallible. However, with the self-reinforcing mechanisms of social media



Danny Lawson - PA Images / Getty Images

Top: An angry reaction by a voter to Jeremy Corbyn's appearance on her doorstep?

But has it been 'photoshopped'? Below is a very similar image, credited to a PA photographer. The fist she makes could well signify support/solidarity for Corbyn.

How do we know if either is 'fake'? Especially when the comparison appeared in a clickbait spread hosted by BuzzFeed.com

sites like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, the reliability of collective memory is becoming more vulnerable to distortion and misrepresentation (Spinney, 2017). Social media functions as an echo chamber that reproduces the predispositions of group ideology. When a network settles on an agreed account, collective memory

becomes relatively impervious to alternative accounts, even if more factually accurate. Yet while collective memory shores up the group identity of insiders and insulates them from the perspectives of outsiders, it can also become more expansive and inclusive if collective fears, threats and tensions are reduced sufficiently.

Where's the due diligence on renewables?

The madness of climate change ideology is crippling Australia

James Delingpole



James Delingpole continues attacks on “climate change ideology” in *The Spectator*.

Young people in particular are thought to be susceptible to self-confirming networks. They engage far less with traditional news consumption and are easily bored by political reporting. Social media reinforces a culture of distraction among young people instantly feeding on depthless fragments of information. But it is also possible that, contrary to received wisdom, young people may be exposed to a wider range of viewpoints online and dialogically undertake critical fact-checking outside of the paternal care of (declining) journalistic authority. Such heightened political literacy was evident in the online and offline grassroots movement during the 2014 referendum in Scotland (Law, 2014–15).

Science, communication and post-truth

Post-truth partisanship depends on circuits of self-propagation. The sociology of science has for a long time called into question the principle of absolute truth as an independent entity on the basis that other scientific networks, infrastructures and validation structures could well produce other forms of verifiable knowledge. Historians of science have found that attempts to dispel myths by expert knowledge may only have the contrary effect of increasing the emotional commitment to an unshakable and unfalsifiable core belief. It is not only a credulous public that takes emotional satisfaction in myths. Consider the absence

of credible evidence for the widely accepted idea within educational research that learning is done most effectively when it is tailored to the supposedly unique ‘learning styles’ of individual students.

Scientific evidence is denigrated and traduced as merely another type of opinion. The Trump administration refuses to accept scientific evidence of climate change based on experiments, field observations and theory. When *The Spectator* magazine carried an article by James Delingpole, editor of the Alt-right Breitbart London website, challenging scientific findings on ocean acidification as an invention of ‘climate alarmists’, the scientific coordinator of the UK research programme on ocean acidification, Phil Williamson (2016), complained to the magazine without reply and referred his complaint to the Independent Press Standards Organisation. While Williamson acknowledges that there are scientific uncertainties, research has been accumulated by around one hundred scientist and 250 peer-reviewed papers. Delingpole ignored these and claimed that ‘man-made global warming theory is a busted flush’ and ocean acidification is a ‘trivial’ ‘scaremongering theory’ about which nothing new can be learned that could not be uncovered by ‘a few hours’ basic research [sic].

IPSO's code of practice states: ‘The Press, while free to editorialise and campaign,

must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact’. Yet IPSO ruled against Williamson's complaint and his appeal about *The Spectator* article, which it judged had not breached the code of practice on the basis that it was purely a ‘comment piece’ challenging the scientific consensus. Against ill-informed, ideologically-driven opinion, scientists, Williamson claims, are faced with Brandolini's law (also known as the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle): the amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it. Media literacy on its own is insufficient to counter the anti-democratic manipulation of the public by post-truth and fake news.

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