

Introduction: Politics in a post-truth era

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‘It’s blue, it’s blue, the sea is so blue’ the little boy shouted. ‘It can’t be, what is the sea made of’ his grandfather asked. “Water of course”, “what colour is water”, “clear of course” the boy responded. “So the sea cannot be blue” his grandfather told him emphatically. “But it is, look, it’s blue”

In 2016, the Oxford dictionary named the term “post-truth” as word of the year, it explained a cultural phenomenon where people increasingly believed their eyes, their opinions, their gut feelings to a much greater extent than cogent argumentation backed with data. In the context of politics in particular, objective factual arguments are shown to be less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. The phenomenon explains how media reportage, popular culture and interpersonal communication can build up perceptions of reality which become more ‘real’ than reality itself. Here we can suggest that perceptions of truth, factivity and trust are the determinants for accepting an argument as opposed to interrogation of a case to detect whether it is true, based upon real facts and not fakery masquerading as fact, and that the source is really trustworthy or just appears so. The post-truth phenomenon is argued to be the latest and potentially most damaging crisis in public communication (Blumler, 2018)

Decision making, at election times in particular, is argued to be driven by phenomena related to the post-truth environment. Hyper-communication, involving the ultra-constant sharing of content, creates a hyper-reality. All communication is questionable yet believable. The organisations that seek to persuade exploit the hyper-communication environment in order to build and reinforce strongly held beliefs, encouraging the disavowal of contrasting facts, in order to undermine support for the arguments of opponents. While a feature of many political contests, post-truth has become most associated with populist campaigns, in particular the UK’s campaigns for each side of the EU membership referendum and Donald Trump’s successful bid for the US presidency (Baron, 2018). Populist campaigns deliberately give voice to privately held beliefs, they often give voice for beliefs which are suppressed by politically correct norms of societies (Waisbord, 2018). They reinforce pejorative stereotypes based on religious and racial differences, the gendering of roles and discuss myths of an ‘us’ (as a nation and people) and them, the others whose differences mark them as not us. Hence there are far-reaching implications of such practices for democratic societies.

The rhetorical style of populism is nothing new however. Writing in the 4th century BC Plato distinguished between *pistis* (mere belief) and *episteme* (true knowledge), railing against the rhetoric of the Sophists who offered relative truths as opposed to absolute truths. While relativism was not a term familiar to Plato, he would have recognised the inherent problem with the doctrine that knowledge and truth exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context. Plato believed there was such a thing as an absolute truth. A truth relative to one community or society is merely a belief. His argument that the Sophists, or the rhetoric of sophistry, simply led to actions being based on beliefs is relevant for much political

communication (Nehamas, 1990). Such practices are also by no means new. In 1782 Benjamin Franklin created the *Boston Independent Chronicle* to carry propaganda and fake stories designed to solidify an anti-British mood among settlers in the United States and create the conditions for them to take up arms against their mother country (Knudson, 1974). The revelations of UK government discussions about making a stronger case for invading Iraq in 2003 highlight further how in modern democracies sophistry and relative truths are common currency in persuasion. In fact such arguments are created on a daily basis as statistics are interpreted and counter-interpreted to reinforce the arguments of differing sides in parliaments across the world. Given that relative truths are as old as politics itself, how then has post-truth only been coined as a phrase and a phenomenon in 2016?

Post truth elides with concerns that have been raised about the state of public communication for some time (see for example Keyes, 2004). Stephen Colbert used the term 'truthiness' in 2005 to describe "truth that comes from the gut, not books" (Meyer, 2006). Lisbet van Zoonen coined the term I-pistemology, a play on epistemology, the science of knowledge. She defined this phenomenon as "a contemporary cultural process in which people from all walks of life have come to suspect the knowledge coming from official institutions and experts and have replaced it with the truth coming from their own individual experience and opinions" (van Zoonen, 2012: 57). But it was the Trump and Brexit campaigns which turned post-truth as a term and as a phenomenon as a buzzword (Farkas & Schou, 2018). The nature of the post-truth environment has been explored previously in recent months. Stephen Coleman's (2018) special edition of *European Journal of Communication* set out to "understand the changing character of public communication and the new challenges facing individuals and societies that are committed to democratic norms and practices". Baron (2018), meanwhile, argues post-truth to be a symptom of the failure of politics and sets out a manifesto for redressing the deficiencies of democracy. Hence the symptoms of post-truth are well known, as are their potential impacts for the cohesiveness of democratic societies.

This collection explores the meaning of post-truth as a cultural phenomenon. The essays will explore the underlying themes, relating to media and culture, but drawing on cultural theory, to explore the implications of the post-truth phenomenon for public engagement, trust and the principles underpinning democracy. Reflecting on landmark events in politics we cumulatively enquire what post-truth tells us about the current and future state of the relationship between citizens and politics and, importantly, what role media plays in contemporary democratic life.

The collection of essays begins with Scullion and Armon who situate the notion of post-truth within a contemporary notion of democracy which positions the individual, a self-empowered but atomised agent, as having legitimate social agency. Drawing on a range of social theories, the authors posit that the contemporary self which is characterised as having narcissistic tendencies desensitises our sociality and thus thresholds of embarrassment and shame rise. Consequently democratic rights are privileged over responsibilities and democratic engagement is pursued to assert and validate personal beliefs and identities; in other words for selfish rather than communitarian motives. Identifying how populist political discourses speak directly to selfish individuality using the language of disinhibition, vulgarity and

personal truths, this opening paper explores this cultural turn situating narcissistic individualism at the heart of the post-truth phenomenon.

Anastasia Deligiaouri picks up similar themes in the second article which draws on the work of Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe to explain how social reality is dependent on discourses. She argues that the struggle between discourses central to the notion of a post-truth era represents attempts to construct and signify reality. What she refers to as “regimes of truth” she describes as context dependent to a specific society and so constitute dominant discourses that manage to produce “claims of truth” and consequently affect the function of societies. In examining how truth claims link to beliefs prevalent within communities, Deligiaouri highlights the importance of examining the discursive construction of truth and the ‘rules’ and procedures that are followed. Hence this paper provides a theoretical and philosophical investigation of the discursive construction of truth to highlight the impact of post truth politics on the contemporary political scene.

These themes are further explored by Susan Salgado who examines the role of online media drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Foucault, again, as well as Lyotard, and Rorty. Truth, Salgado argues, is a property of our representations of the world, something that can be interpreted in multiple ways and not something we can find in the world. This concept of post-factual relativism fits very well with most political campaigns and with many politically and emotionally biased party discourses that make claims to fact and define reality. Highlighting examples from recent contests and debates, Salgado argues the problem has become more pronounced with the development of information and communication technology. Technologies provide environments within which the distinction between facts and fiction can become increasingly blurred due to hybrid platform genres which completely obscure the already blurred lines between objective news source and opinionated commentary. Frequent users of such environments can be exposed to alternative versions of facts and reality, fake news stories and arguments which claim facts to be mere opinions. Salgado thus highlights that the epistemic status of information seems to be, therefore, challenged by a growing relativism that has found expression online.

The fourth and fifth articles focus on situating post-truth in practices as opposed to theoretical narratives. In an analysis of UK government communications 1997-2014, Ruth Garland argues that post-truth is simply the updated terminology for understanding the practices and social impact of an older phenomenon: political spin. Spin is a biased and self-advantaging form of public communication practised by media and political actors, one thought to have developed alongside 24/7 media during the 1990s. Much research focuses on the electoral campaigning process as conducted through political parties, while the much larger government-funded communications service is relatively under-explored empirically. Garland argues that changes in UK government public communication, and especially its approach to news management, reached a tipping point immediately after 1997, challenging traditional notions of truth and objectivity. Far from being a phenomenon unique to New Labour, these changes are now embedded within the governing executive, and continue to evolve, despite resistance from both civil servants and parliament, as well as public and media disquiet. Using data from interviews with former UK government communicators,

special advisers and policy journalists, and the analysis of key documents, this paper shows how, in the age of the permanent campaign, party political communication becomes government communication; officials reconcile the ethical norms of impartiality and due process with politicians' drive to 'manage' media scrutiny; and hence create the conditions by which citizens can witness a day to day struggle being played out over the meaning of truth?

Lilleker and Liefbroer pick up on this theme but focusing on the more charged environments of elections and referenda when most truths are ones that can be contested. During these battles for the hearts and minds of citizens, each party and side vies to produce the most believable narrative in order to win the most votes. Drawing on data from interviews and focus groups conducted in 2016 and 2017 the article explores what beliefs existed and how these demonstrate the power of post-truth for determining election outcomes. The authors find voters searching for an argument or a person that they can believe, and believe in, attempting to disentangle the various contested perspectives but without recourse to intensive research. Using the elaboration likelihood model as a framework and drawing on cognitive psychology, the authors demonstrate how political communication is interpreted in the process of voter decision making and, in doing so, explains how citizens are implicitly at the heart of the post-truth environment. While campaigns may exaggerate, obfuscate and deceive, Lilleker and Liefbroer find that it is the citizen who decides which text or image has most resonance, which truth is the most compelling, and which side the most believable.

The more empirical papers focus on the UK context but largely the conclusions they draw might relate to many political systems and contexts where facts are contested and citizens must decide unaided who or what to believe. Fake news is an additional problem within such contexts, and the final article by Poulakidakos, Veneti and Frangonikolopoulos highlight this related phenomenon using the lens of propaganda theory. They argue that a key feature of the contemporary online interactive communication environment and, in most cases, the interwoven phenomena of post-truth and fake news serve specific financial or ideological interests in the dissemination of public information. The discussion of post-truth and fake news may be one that has emerged over a recent and short period, but both describe conditions already understood as propaganda. Although propaganda, when first described, was an endemic characteristic of the traditional one-way mass media (Press, cinema, radio, television), it remains a central feature of the many to many communication facilitated by latest technological developments. The quantitative democratization of communication, i.e. the ability of everyone having access to the internet to express her/his own opinion, mainly taking place in web 2.0 environments, has not yet been matched by an equal qualitative improvement, as far as the development of rational dialogue on issues of public interest is concerned. The authors juxtaposes post-truth and fake news prevalent in the post-modern and post-industrial communication environment with the modernist notion of propaganda in order to identify similarities and differences in terms of their causes, characteristics and possible effects. Poulakidakos et al thus provide a theoretical framework for understanding whether we are dealing with a new phenomenon (post-truth), a "new" version of an "old" phenomenon (post-propaganda) or of a re-invention of modernist propaganda.

The final three essays add a further dimension to the discussion. Bendall discusses how information is weaponised and in particular how disinformation can be understood as a real threat to democracy. However his think piece offers a positive note, arguing that there remain mechanisms for scrutinising public communication and so at this stage a democratic crisis can be averted. Klinkner however adds a caveat to Bendall's argument. Drawing on Arendt's work she poses questions about whether it is possible to disentangle truth from well-constructed arguments. Although finishing on an optimistic note, her hope that human reason can prevail places enormous dependency on the capacity of citizens to educate themselves to navigate the information environment. Richards' final essay juxtaposes human psychological needs and emotional drivers with the notion of human reason. Exploring the rhetorical power of Trump he suggests the need to understand the role of emotion in society, to abandon the privileging of rationality and to address debates with a greater level of emotional intelligence. While concluding on a critique of Trump, his critique has broader relevance as a critique of modern society; one which seeks hope and take solace in those forces which give voice to their fears. In this way Richards highlights the conundrum at the heart of post-truth, the need to have something to believe in.

Cumulatively therefore this collection of articles situates post-truth as a cultural problem, one that can be explained with reference to theorised perspectives on the shift from modernity to post-modernity. The cultural practices that have emerged among public communicators and citizens, together with the developments and usages of innovations in communication technology, provide an environment where reality is a construction. We argue this is not purely a phenomenon constructed by the political or media elites who seek to direct public opinion. But rather the post-truth phenomenon is a social problem. Religious, tribal, racial, ideological and national metanarratives lose their purchase, yet fail to be replaced by meaningful alternatives in a world where the individual is instructed to express herself by satisfying her consumerist desires. The lack of security of belonging, or sharing an identity and a truth with a community, however relative that truth, leads to a search for something in which to invest hope and trust (Miztal, 2013). When all narratives are contested, when every communicator seeks to manipulate citizens' emotions, and when every argument as a feel of truthiness about it, how does one know what to believe. It is this challenge, one that lies at the heart of the post-modern era, and of many societies, which shapes the relationship between citizens and politics that we highlight as the progenitor of the post-truth problem.

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