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"The facts don't work": The EU referendum campaign and the journalistic construction of 'Post-truth politics'

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1. Introduction

The initial impetus for this paper emerged from what at the time seemed a relatively minor confluence of events in terms of political communications. In the middle of 2016 the presidential campaign of Donald Trump had generated some journalistic and political interest in the concept of 'post truth', not least due to his unexpected success in obtaining the nomination of the Republican Party to take on Hillary Clinton. The notion of post truth politics, as we shall see, had been slowly gaining some journalistic traction when it became attached to Trump's supposedly visceral, simplistic and demagogic style of campaigning. This roughly coincided with the culmination of the EU referendum campaign in the UK, the result of which led UK political commentators to suggest that post truth politics had been imported from the United States. A related term – 'fake news' – has similarly emerged to describe more prosaically the biased and distorted information that is arguably part of the post truth phenomenon. While Corner suggests fake news is a more straightforward notion without the 'philosophical baggage' of post truth (Corner, 2017: 1101), and Ball sees it as the 'pantomime villain' of the post truth debate (Ball, 2017: 127), it is clear that the term is seen as directly related to the wider debate around post truth.

It was not envisioned that, following Trump's election as president in November 2016, the topic of 'post truth' would be named as the 'word of the year' by Oxford dictionaries, become "a mainstay in political commentary" (Oxford Dictionaries | English, 2016), and generate a huge amount of political, journalistic and academic debate over its meaning and validity. This was underlined when three books written by journalists, all with titles referring to post truth, were published in the UK apparently on the same day (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017).

This paper will argue that the notion of post truth should be understood not as an explanatory term for a newly emerging socio-political (or journalistic) phenomenon but rather as a reflexive response by a journalists to a perceived loss of authority. This is illustrated by setting out some of the specific instances in which the term post truth was applied by journalists and commentators during the EU referendum campaign in the UK, and how this amounted to the journalistic construction of the term. By considering earlier approaches to news as propaganda, affective journalism, trust, and popular responses to expert rationalities in theories of risk, the paper will challenge the implication that post truth represents a new or qualitatively different kind of political (mis-) communication.

We begin with a brief history of the use of post truth as a pejorative term, before considering the alternative notion of bullshit, as set out by Harry Frankfurt in a short text published in book form in 2005. These insights are then used to consider some specific examples within the EU campaign in the UK in 2016, with a short detour into the three post truth books published in the Spring of 2017. Here I will suggest that these accounts share a particular, and constrained perspective on the novelty and threat of the post truth era. A number of alternative approaches around notions of propaganda, journalistic discourse, trust, affect, I-pistemology and risk theory are then considered, in order to argue that what concerns around post truth suggest is not a new and distinct threat to rational political discourse, but an expression of liberal journalism's own loss of faith in its own validity.

2. History of the term 'post truth'

The term 'post truth' emerged in UK newspapers over a period from 2011, but only gained any major traction in the lead up to the EU referendum. The term can largely be understood as a US import; an initial (passing) reference in 2011 was to a TED talk by Pamela Meyer on expert liars and how to spot them (see below). Jonathan Freedland in the Guardian for instance referred to Rabin-Havt's book (Rabin-Havt, 2016) and argued that the Fox News TV channel in the US was creating a 'post truth politics' which, ironically, was pushing the Republican Party into choosing presidential candidates which were polarising and unacceptable to mainstream American voters (Freedland, 2011).[1] The 2012 increase can largely be accounted for by further coverage of the US presidential election, while it was also being applied to UK politics a little more frequently. An Independent article discussed whether a claim in a Conservative Party political broadcast that the government was 'paying down

[1] While Freedland's prediction of an Obama victory in 2012 was correct, the subsequent election of Donald Trump casts a doubly ironic light on his argument.

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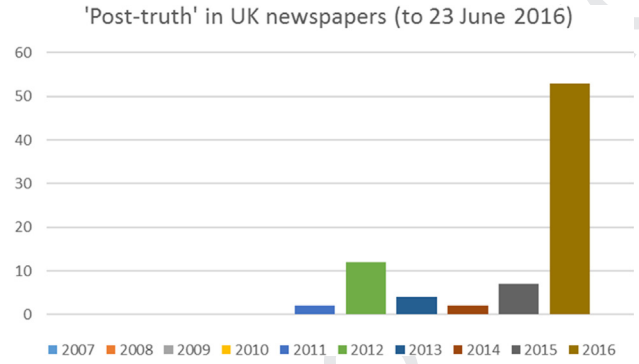
Britain's debts' could be considered a lie, and refers to a 'post truth environment' in which 'public statements are no longer fact-based but operational'; narratives are 'constructed to serve a purpose [and then] dismantled' (Whittam Smith, 2013). Following the 2015 general election, in which the Scottish National Party (SNP) made huge gains largely at the expense of the Labour party, a Scottish Labour MP was reported as explaining the result by arguing that "what truth you told it didn't really matter in a post-truth type of argument in the politics." (Jim Murphy MP, quoted in Devlin, 2015). By 2016, the term was applied both to the US election debates and the forthcoming EU referendum in the UK, where the term was predominantly used against those supporting the leave campaign. One article in the Independent argued that leave campaigners had embraced a 'post-truth and post-morality style of politics'; '[W]e've had wave after wave of protectionist rhetoric, misleading statistics, and economic fables. The Brexiteers have peddled at least six impossible things before breakfast every day during this campaign' (Chu, 2016). The link here between (post-) truth and morality raises an interesting point in suggesting that it is not just a change in political rhetoric, but an ethical shift that has occurred in the emergence of post truth. This is seen as something both new and immoral; and yet the article itself is clearly rhetorical, and full of emotive imagery ('repulsive'; 'vile'; 'pass the sick bag'). Chu does acknowledge rhetorical extremes on the remain side, referring to a speech in which then Prime Minister David Cameron implied a leave vote would destabilise the peace and stability of Europe; this was understood as a warning that Brexit could 'trigger World War Three' (Glaze and Bloom, 2016), and was considered to be an 'insult to the voters' intelligence' (Chu, 2016), but it was not labelled as post truth. More broadly, in terms of the newspaper coverage, post truth was largely found in the leave campaign rather than the opposition.

A simple count of the UK newspaper use of the phrase post truth was conducted.[2] The 2016 figure here relates only to the period ending in the referendum itself. Clearly, the fallout from the result meant that the phrase was used much more commonly after this point.



- References to 'post truth' in UK newspapers, 2007 – 23 June 2016

Away from the UK newspaper EU referendum coverage, we should firstly acknowledge that the term 'post truth' has a history prior to its emergence in 2016, which to some extent illustrates its complexity. D'Ancona finds an initial use of the term in a 1992 article blaming Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal as pushing the US public away from truth, preferring comfortable myths over reality (d'Ancona, 2017: 9).

The term has been used in a popular psychology context as a way of helping businesses and individuals protect themselves from deception and fraud. Pamela Meyer, author and 'CEO of the deception detection company Calibrate' (McCaffrey, 2017), gave a TED talk ('How to Spot a Liar') which has so far attracted over 17 million online views (Meyer, 2011a). She referred to a 'post-truth world' in her 2011 book *Liespotting* to emphasise the need, in a commercial context, to be able to recognise lies; however, the term itself is not clearly defined other than to denote an emerging 'deception epidemic' (Meyer, 2011b). An earlier book by Ralph Keyes takes a similarly broad approach to deception across society including interpersonal scenarios in which we now 'dissemble without considering ourselves dishonest' (Keyes, 2004). These books however seem to adopt the term in order to justify a particular commercial or personal 'anti-deception' strategy put forward in the respective texts; they are essentially 'self-help' books, and are not particularly interested in supporting or clarifying the notion of post truth itself.

One critique of the US PR and lobbying industries described the 'organized misinformation' brought about by corporate public relations as attempts not to rebut or challenge the arguments against them but to confuse and obfuscate. In industry sector case studies ranging from the tobacco industry, and health care to the gun lobby, Rabin-Havt argues that post truth politics emerges in the front organisations and fake grassroots campaigns that lobbyists use to provide a smoke screen that helps to delay and confound regulation and democratic change (Rabin-Havt, 2016). Indeed, from Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee onwards, the relationship between public relations and propaganda has raised critical questions (Moloney, 2006: 8); one former PR professional has acknowledged that PR is 'weak propaganda': 'The intention of the PR message producers towards their audiences is to construct messages that are manipulative and propagandistic. They are messages of 'tell' rather than 'say': constructed to get compliance from their audiences' (Moloney, 2006: 41). Moloney acknowledges that PR is not always malign in its influence, and can often be identified by its audience, and is therefore closer to 'grey' or 'white' propaganda than the 'black' version of, for instance Nazi Germany (Moloney, 2006: 44). It can therefore be seen as relatively 'weak', but is nevertheless concerned with directing its audiences ('tell') rather than engaging in consensual dialogue ('say'). This concern about PR as a form of propaganda is echoed in much of the recent concern around post truth.

Despite post truth being named 'word of the year', the Oxford Dictionary definition is quite vague: 'Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.' (Oxford Dictionaries | English, n.d.) This suggests that the term only has any real value if it is assumed that there are, or have been, circumstances in which objective facts are equally or more influential than emotion or belief. This in itself is quite an assumption, and carries an implicit 'golden age' argument of rational public debate and deliberation. Some versions of Habermas' public sphere thesis suggest the possibility of such an ideal 'rational-critical discourse', in which mass media facilitate the process 'by providing an arena of public debate, and by reconstituting private citizens as a public body in the form of public opinion' (Curran, 2012: 233). However, Habermas initially found only a partial and problematic manifestation of this democratic ideal in a particular historical period; in any case, the theoretical ideal itself has been challenged by critics and later revisited by Habermas himself (Calhoun, 1993). The difficulty in defining the term does not in itself negate its value; nevertheless, it may suggest that it can be enlisted to work for a range of perhaps contradictory purposes.

[2] The terms 'post-truth' and 'post truth' were selected using the NEXIS newspaper database set to report 'UK newspapers' (national and regional). This brought up a number of irrelevant items, such as a 2010 reference to the 'post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission era' in South Africa. These, along with duplicate entries, were discarded to arrive at the figures set out here.

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3. Bullshit

One key concept for a number of discussions of post truth is Harry Frankfurt's systematic analysis of bullshit, in which he argues that the essence of bullshit is that it is 'unconstrained by a concern with the truth' (Frankfurt, 2005: 38). By contrast, the liar is aware of, and speaks in knowing contradiction of the truth; the bullshitter is unconcerned whether what he says is necessarily true or false. Therefore, the bullshitter may not deceive his audience about the facts (or his belief about them); "What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to (Frankfurt, 2005: 54). While both liars and bullshitters speak in their own interests, it is impossible to lie unless you know the truth; bullshitting requires no such knowledge.

During the referendum campaign, The Sun published a front-page story headlined 'Queen backs Brexit', based on an anonymous source's account of a discussion between the Queen and pro-remain politician (and former Liberal Democrat party leader) Nick Clegg (Newton-Dunn, 2016). The article was the subject of a complaint to the industry-controlled regulatory body, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), from Buckingham Palace, and Clegg himself dismissed the story (Staff and agencies, 2016).

It could be argued that this potentially represents an example of bullshit. Let's firstly assume – and it is impossible to be certain – that the story is not completely true. It is not that the author – the Sun newspaper's political editor – could be accused of lying necessarily; he did not have direct access to the events in dispute, so cannot be sure that the story is false. His anonymous source, might of course be lying for his or her own purposes, but in terms of the journalistic process this can always be possible; it is the role of the journalist to assess the credibility of such material. It seems less likely that the journalist himself is intentional trying to deceive by inventing the story; at least, it is fair to offer him the benefit of the doubt in this regard. Instead, given the journalistic and political pressures on people in his position, the author of the article was perhaps simply unconcerned about the veracity of the story. It suited him, his editor and his publisher to write the story without any real concern for the truth. Indeed, it has been argued by many that UK tabloid newspapers are to some extent 'unconstrained by the truth', not least in pursuit of their proprietors' political and commercial interests (Curran and Seaton, 2010; McKnight, 2013).

Ultimately, the use of Frankfurt's analysis of bullshit in the discussions of post truth politics is perhaps interesting not so much for its explanatory value, but for way it is used in an attempt to clarify and fortify the vagueness and ahistoricity of post truth as a concept; we will come back to this shortly.

4. The EU referendum campaign and post truth politics

The EU referendum was promised as part of the Conservative party manifesto in the 2015 general election, and was set for 23 June 2016; by the spring of that year official campaign organisations had been accredited and the campaign began to develop. The campaign was cross party in nature; both Leave and Remain sides included politicians from both main parties. However, the official position of most of the main UK political parties was to remain, with only the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland formally committed to leave. The Conservative Party was officially neutral, reflecting the clear split within the party. In the sense of political institutions at least then, there was a clear mainstream, formal majority in favour of remaining within the EU. During the campaign (and also of course following the result) a number of episodes were identified in journalistic discourse as typifying the post truth nature of the debate. The following sections highlight three of these.

5. Case study 1: £350M for the NHS

The 'claim that came to define the Brexit campaign' (Ball, 2017: 48) was one that was plastered across the side of a bus, as well as featuring in numerous press conferences: 'We send the EU £350 million a week – let's fund our NHS instead'. The National Health Service is generally regarded as one of the most well-regarded institutions in the UK, and the suggestion that it might receive more funding following a leave vote was a potentially crucial argument. Critics of the claim argued that the figure was misleading, given that the UK had negotiated a 'rebate' in 1985 meaning that the figure is probably much smaller. Ball (Ball, 2017: 50) and the Full Fact website suggest then that the actual 'fee' is closer to £13 billion per year, or £250M per week (Full Fact, n.d.). But this also ignores the payments made by the EU to the UK's farmers and regions, which if taken into account would further reduce the figure to around £136 million. However, the debate then depends on whether the EU payments – which are not controlled by the UK government – should fairly be included.

The issue here then is arguably complex, and while at one level this is a technical debate about the facticity of a statistic, it is also about the rhetorical construction of the claim. At best, this was not a policy promise but a general statement of intent, implying a boost for the NHS whilst not directly committing to it.

The debate around this particular campaign claim arguably also suggests a misunderstanding of the referendum process. Given the cross-party nature of the campaign, and the uncertainties surrounding what kind of government would be in place following any leave result, the campaign was unlike anything UK journalists had covered for many years. Notwithstanding the Scottish independence referendum (which in any case had much clearer dividing lines and one governing party – the Scottish National Party (SNP) ready to implement a new constitutional arrangement), journalists were used to reporting elections in a first-past-the-post system which (in theory at least) produced clear majorities. Even in the case of a hung parliament, it would be expected that the winning party or parties would attempt to implement the main policies set out in their manifestos. Thus there was perhaps an implicit assumption by journalists that any policy suggestions made by each side would then to some extent be implemented by the winning side. This clearly was never likely, as the official campaigns would effectively dissolve at the end of the campaign – there was no institution committed to providing '£350 M for the NHS' the minute the polls closed. With 'no politician or party strictly accountable for it', Ball considers this 'the ultimate bullshit political claim' (Ball, 2017: 52); given the uncertainty around the true figures involved and the responsibility for implementing it, those that promoted it could be argued to have no real interest in the veracity of the claim.

6. Case study 2: Turkish immigration

A second key topic was raised in a TV interview on 22 May 2016 by Armed forces Minister and Leave campaigner Penny Mordaunt when she argued that Turkey may soon become an EU member. A poster from the official campaign had merely stated that 'TURKEY (population 76 million) IS JOINING THE EU', and in the sense that they were being considered formally for membership, this was entirely correct (Ball, 2017: 53), but there were two further implications. Firstly, it was argued, the suggestion that Turkey

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would be joining the EU in the near future was extremely unlikely given the various accession criteria that Turkey was far from being able to satisfy. More straightforwardly, Mordaunt had stated quite clearly that the UK within the EU would be unable to prevent Turkey's entry to the EU, and that this would leave the country open to large scale immigration from the EU's new Turkish citizens. The Minister was challenged on this by interviewer Andrew Marr:

> MARR: Except the British government does have a veto on Turkey joining so we don't have to let them join.
> MORDAUNT: No, it doesn't. We are not going to be able to have a say...
>
> [BBC News, 2016]

The Minister was accused of lying by remain campaigners and others, who asserted that the European Council would need to 'act unanimously' in accepting new members, giving the UK a clear veto (Withnall, 2016). More broadly this was criticised as a xenophobic, even racist position, engendering a fear of foreigners. Such an approach was taken up by tabloid newspapers and amplified to suggest, via anonymous 'Leave campaigners', that 'Britain will be at the mercy of murderers and terrorists from countries like Turkey if it remains controlled by Brussels' (Hall, 2016).

Mordaunt later argued that she was making a subjective assessment that the UK would find it politically difficult to stop Turkey's accession; nevertheless, it could be argued that rather than an explicit lie, the comment was made from a position of indifference to the truth. In other words, this could be a further example of bullshit, in Frankfurt's terms; in order to press home a politically advantageous point stoking fears of immigration, Mordaunt cared little about the factual nature of her claim. It was simply expedient, in propagandistic terms, to assert it whether or not it was true.

7. Case study 3: Gove vs the 'experts'

Another high profile Conservative politician provided a further challenge to the liberal model of rational fact-based political debate when Michael Gove was interviewed on 3 June 2016. Gove was then Justice Secretary, and was interviewed as prominent Leave campaigner. When challenged on the range of economic and political organisations supporting the remain campaign he called the EU 'distant elitist and unaccountable' and suggested that 'the people of this country have had enough of experts...from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong' (rpmackey, 2016). Gove was criticised as 'importing Trump-style post truth politics' (Tapsfield, 2016), but seemed to return to the point later when he argued that German scientists in the 1930s might be considered experts, but were paid by their government to denounce Einstein and his theories (Rawlinson and Humphries, 2016). From the perspective of the remain side and many within the media, Gove's point seemed an outrageous rejection of science, fact and expertise; as a previous Education Secretary, Gove should surely be defending those who had studied the facts to become experts in their respective fields, not rejecting their earned authority.

Ball argues one reason for the success of the leave campaign was the clarity of its message ('take back control') which will always win against complexity (e.g. the probable negative economic effects of disinvestment and trade tariffs over time) (RoyalStatSoc, 2017). Certainly the force of the NHS claim, vague as it was, and the simple emotional calls to reject foreigners and experts, suggest a campaign based on feelings rather than facts. Indeed, Arron Banks, the entrepreneur and largest donor to the Brexit campaign for the UK to leave the EU, acknowledged in a newspaper interview that the successful campaign was predicated on an American style media strategy, generating an emotional response because 'facts don't work' (Booth et al., 2016).

8. Ball, D'Ancona, Davis

The currency of the notion was underlined on 11 May 2017 when three books were published with post truth featuring in their titles. This section discusses how these journalistic texts construct the concept. One way in which post truth is reified is simply through assertion. d'Ancona begins his book by initially qualifying his position: 'If indeed we live in a Post-Truth era...'(p2); but the capitalisation seems to assume some importance. He then hedges: 'what we call Post-Truth...'; by page five however, an Orwell essay on the Spanish civil war is a 'premonition of the Post-Truth era' – so the concept becomes reified within four pages, and there is from then on little question about whether this really is a new phenomenon. He finds an early use of the term in a 1992 article about Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal, but names 2016 as the year that 'definitively launched the era of Post-Truth' (d'Ancona, 2017: 7).

The two key issues for d'Ancona around which post truth emerge, are the election of Donald Trump in the US and the EU referendum in the UK. Similarly, the first two chapters of Ball's book discuss Trump and Brexit respectively (Ball, 2017), and Davis likewise finds these two issues as paradigmatic cases. It is clearly these specific *electoral* events that have exercised much of the discussion of post truth; their inexplicability – from the perspective of liberal anglophone journalism – have perhaps led to a search for some kind of explanation, and post truth has helped to provide this.

A review in The Times of d'Ancona's book suggests that he sees post truth as evidence of "emotion – which had historically been subordinate to reason – regaining the ascendancy."(C. Davis, 2017). This is both a very particular view of history and one which ignores the continuous importance of affect in everyday life as well as in the way organisations and institutions communicate with public. The notion of a golden age of rationality can be challenged from a number of perspectives (e.g. Latour, 1993).

Poole's review similarly takes issue with d'Ancona's blaming of 'postmodernists' for laying the foundations for post truth. Where d'Ancona sees the work of Lyotard, Baudrillard and others as dismantling any possibility of truth, Poole suggests that it has always been the case that evidence and expertise needs to be gathered and constructed by those with the demonstrable expertise to do so; this doesn't mean that there is a "chaotic free-for-all"; it just means that truth is a more complex and debateable concept than some commentators like to suggest. He quotes Alasdair MacIntyre: "Facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were a 17th-century invention." (Poole, 2017).

Of the three post truth books published on 11 May 2017, d'Ancona's says nothing about bullshit directly, whereas the other two make it a key organising concept, with subtitles underlining this emphasis ('How Bullshit Conquered the World'; 'Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It'). Davis begins by explaining that his book is broadly about 'mendacity and nonsense' in public discourse, and when discussing the lies of a murderer in court, expands the field of interest even further (Davis, 2017: 1). Ball's book similarly uses the term as an organising principle, with each section considering different aspects of bullshit. In part, this perhaps suggests the power and clarity that Frankfurt's discussion provides; however, it could also be interpreted as reflecting the difficulty in defining and using post truth as a term of analysis – it is as we have previously suggested, simply too vague. It is also worth noting the political perspectives of these journalists. In conventional terms, d'Ancona writes from a centre-right political position (previously editor of the right-wing Specta-

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tor magazine and deputy editor of the Sunday Telegraph), while Davis' career is largely within the BBC. Ball worked for the liberal-left Guardian before moving to the online Buzzfeed news website. They all however effectively work within a mainstream liberal journalistic milieu in which enlightenment values of rationality, dialogue and debate are assumed. Thus, they all make clear in different ways that they wish to explain the 'irrational appeal of bullshit' which is a 'mystery' (E. Davis, 2017), while attempting to 'turn back the tide' (Ball, 2017: 13).

9. Propaganda, lying and bullshit – pre- post truth

If post truth as an analytical term is vague and imprecise, it is also less novel than the current interest in it implies; the suggestion that political debate has recently been degraded by lies and misinformation is clearly problematic. Plato's authoritarian Republic suggests that while the people must never lie to their rulers, society's philosopher-king guardians might lie to the people for the public good – to maintain order and avoid questioning of their role. Useful fictions[3] – myths – are necessary to maintain the state. In identifying pathos as one of three modes of persuasion alongside ethos and logos, Aristotle emphasises the importance of emotion in rhetorical argument (Book I – Chapter 2: Aristotle's Rhetoric, n.d.). Kriss lists political theorists and philosophers from different historical periods who 'lament that questions of government are no longer ruled by transcendent, objective fact', from Mill and de Tocqueville to Kant and Burke (Kriss, 2016), underlining the longstanding concerns of those who would rule about the susceptibility to illogic and irrationality of the lower classes. It is also of course the case that governments have employed misinformation, lies and deceptions – often framed as propaganda – in their dealings with their publics. Hannah Arendt's discussion of the pentagon papers scandal and its impact on trust in politicians identified a point at which the boundary between truth and lies breaks down, and 'truth that can be relied on disappears entirely from public life' (Arendt, 1972: 7). Arendt also notes that those promulgating the lies exposed in the Pentagon Papers considered politics to be 'a variety of public relations', and they were engaged in 'image-making as global policy' (Arendt, 1972: 11, 18). This suggests a link both with the supposedly recent post truth era and more specifically something close to Frankfurt's bullshit.

Jowett and O'Donnell's definition of propaganda provides a counterpoint for the discussion of post truth: 'Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the interests of the propagandist.' (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006: 7). While post truth bullshit is not necessarily always systematic – in the sense that it can switch between contradictory positions for tactical purposes – it nevertheless seems to fit well into the definition above. It certainly is assumed by those who use the term to be intentional, and working in the interests of those who propagate it. The three examples discussed above may differ in the extent to which the proponents could be considered liars rather than bullshitters, they all work in the political interests of the leave campaign.

Wartime propaganda has often been used to rouse the publics into action (i.e. 'agitative propaganda') (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006: 16). The notorious 'corpse factory' story from the First World War – in which British officials circulated a story about German installations melting down the bodies of dead soldiers for their glycerine – shows how at least in wartime contexts, liberal democratic governments will mobilise emotional responses for their own purposes (Carruthers, 2000: 34). Similarly, more recent examples have been analysed in detail, from the Vietnam War (Hallin, 1989) to the Gulf War of 1991 (Taylor, 1998) and the Iraq War of 2003 (O'Shaughnessy, 2004).

While it might be assumed that journalism in wartime is a distinctly different scenario compared with peacetime reporting, Carruthers has suggested that this is a false dichotomy and that the distinctions between truth and falsity and between war and peace are both difficult to determine; the slide from the 'total war' of WWI to 'limited war', the 'troubles' of Northern Ireland and the war against terror suggest that there is no clear dividing line (Carruthers, 2000: 23).

10. News: a culture of lying

One critique of news media from the 1990s discussed the ways in which 'journalists and officials fabricate an alternative reality that is covered in the media, reacted to by the public and dealt with by the government as if it were the same reality we experience in everyday life…' (Weaver, 1998: 1). This seems to me to be a close approximation of the post truth argument today; d'Ancona similarly emphasises the role of the public response to post truth who react with collusion or indifference (d'Ancona, 2017: 26). In Weaver's discussion (originally published in the early 1990s) however, the source of the problem can be found not in the social media of cyberspace but in the newsrooms of US newspapers and TV stations. Weaver traces this back to Joseph Pulitzer's founding of modern journalism in the late 19th century, whereby news would ignore context and attempt to 'engage the values and the feelings of the people among whom Pulitzer was seeking his audience' (Weaver, 1998: 35). Pulitzer's style of news 'stressed the emotional and the immediate rather than the rational and the considered' (Weaver, 1998: 41). In 2007 Bakir and Barlow identified the field of 'trust studies' emerging in social science towards the end of the 20th century. This was linked to the identification of 'modern times' as an 'age of suspicion' (Bakir and Barlow, 2007: 3) in which the trust in social and political institutions, and in media particularly, has declined to levels which the authors consider socially problematic. In this context, notions of post truth are manifestations of a much broader rejection of authority in which journalistic processes are one of the key problems.

11. Truth claims and the 'affective turn'

These longer term concerns around trust and truth in political culture have more recently been addressed from a number of other perspectives. Wahl-Jorgensen has suggested the need for research to address a 'blind spot' around emotion in political communications. It is clear that this not a new phenomenon; she notes how historical accounts have sought to re-establish the importance of emotion in Western cultures that have tended to valorise the rational and dispassionate in political engagement (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014: 3). The historical downgrading of emotional engagement in the public sphere can be traced to the emergence of liberal democracy and its challenge to the 'irrational' power of monarchs and the church. Wahl-Jorgensen highlights not only the long-standing position of emotion in political communications, but also sets out it's potentially positive role in nurturing public empathy (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014: 25). Papacharissi focuses on online news streams, but similarly sees subjective, affect-oriented news as a potentially progressive force in providing an outlet for statements of dissent (Papacharissi, 2015: 34).

Van Zoonen has argued that a sceptical distrust in expertise and official explanations of the world, previously reserved to sections of feminist and critical theory, is now widespread in public discourse; she has coined the term I-pistemology to connect this to

[3] 'needful falsehoods' (The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato, n.d).

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'the emergence of the self as the source and arbiter of all truth' (van Zoonen, 2012: 56–7). She points out that these developments are not new – Lasch for instance identified a self-centred culture in the US in his 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch, 1991) – while emphasising the role of the internet as a 'multiplier' platform.

These perspectives both respond to, and are part of, what has been described as an 'affective turn' in the humanities (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014: 3), which continues to address the role of affect in cultural life in general and political communications in particular.

12. Risk and the lay-expert divide

A further related area of study is that of risk. If risk is 'to do with uncertainties: possibilities, chances, or likelihoods of events, often as consequences of some activity or policy' (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006: 1), then current political uncertainties mean that we can consider risk analysis and management as a legitimate perspective. Early risk research tended to assume the superiority of scientific or expert knowledge, and differences between this and the views of the public were understood as reflecting a deficit in lay knowledge and understanding. More recent critiques of this view argued that it served only to disguise social power as authority, and promoted a conception of risk as being usefully informed by lay perspectives which often challenged and improved on official or institutional perspectives (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006: 35). In this view public understandings are not necessarily irrational, but 'pursue a specific form of knowledge and experience based on value systems which are culturally different from rather than inferior to those of experts' (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006: 35–6). One study examined cumbrian sheep farmers' responses to official UK pronouncements on the (supposedly low levels of) radioactive contamination of land due to fallout from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident. Wynne found that while expert projections made unrealistic assumptions about farm processes and sheep behaviour, and overlooked uncertainties and variations in data gathering, farmer's specialist and localised knowledges were ignored or dismissed (Wynne, 1996: 66). From this perspective, Michael Gove's dismissal of 'experts' takes on a more nuanced meaning. While Gove may well have made his comment simply as a dismissive attempt to deflect criticism of his position, the broader point – that official and expert perspectives are not value free, and they can and should be challenged – is nevertheless valid.

The examples discussed in this section are intended to illustrate that concerns around persuasive communications and rhetoric, the susceptibility of populations to emotional appeals, and their lack of engagement with rational 'fact-based' debate are nothing new. Furthermore, risk theorists' notions of 'situated rationalities' (Lupton and Tulloch, 2003: 9) and lay knowledges suggest that these concerns can be challenged.

13. Conclusion

Helen Margetts has made the point that while in the past 'fake news' and propaganda were largely the domain of large mass media organisations or state controlled institutions, social media has "democratized making money out of fake news" in the post truth era (RoyalStatSoc, 2017) (5:10). This opens up an interesting avenue of discussion in that it suggests that the concerns that journalists have around post truth are an expression of a turf war over the control of ideas. The problem, perhaps not fully articulated, is that the monopoly on reality construction has been broken, and governments and media organisations have yet to find a convincing response.

In light of the perspectives set out above, the case study examples presented here should perhaps be understood not so much as evidence of a newly emergent post truth era of political and media bullshit, but rather as representing a kind of propaganda which can be traced back decades if not centuries. The appeal to affect, and the lack of concern for the narrowly rational are not novel phenomena, but can instead be found both in political rhetoric and public responses; in Aristotle and Arendt, Pulitzer's yellow journalism, lay rationalities of risk, and van Zoonen's concerns around I-pistemology and the self as a source of truth.

The journalistic debate around post truth can therefore be seen as a form of boundary work, constructing what (for liberal anglophone journalism) is and is not acceptable in public debate.

Certainly we should refrain from finding the blame for this in the novelty of social media. While there may be some evidence that Facebook, Twitter and others provide efficient channels for fake news (Ball, 2017), the emphasis on these platforms ignores both the history of disinformation, propaganda and bullshit, and the wider social contexts in which these kinds of post truth are in any case disseminated.

The cyber-utopianism of some commentators envisaged a 'liberal dream' of a globalised, international public sphere, critical and well-informed (Curran and Witschge, 2009); the development of the notion of post truth perhaps can best be understood as an equally exaggerated and ahistorical response to the reality – a 'liberal moral panic'[4] (Beckett, 2017) around the kinds of irrational, affective, populist news and information found in current media channels. We might pursue this notion further by considering how this particular moral panic represents the social construction of deviance (Critcher et al., 2013) in the sense that a disempowered out-group – those audiences apparently receptive to misleading, populist politics – are defined by moral entrepreneurs and experts, leading to an elite consensus around the threat to society, and the need to take some kind of regulatory action. While the details of such an analysis are for a further study, this offers an interesting and potentially enlightening approach to post truth as a discursive construct.

A broad commitment to education might also be seen as part of the solution to the problem of post truth; some have suggested that the compulsory teaching of philosophy (Poole, 2017) or for children to have their 'critical faculties trained' in 'how to select and discriminate from the digital torrent' (d'Ancona, 2017: 114-5). One conservative commentator for *the Times* has called for children to be taught "how to understand and interpret things that are seen on the internet, how to assess evidence and how to spot techniques used to fabricate it."[5] (Finkelstein, 2017). Nevertheless, these 'solutions' might be seen as one of the later elements in an ongoing moral panic around post truth, a term which can be seen as 'an expression of frustration and anguish from a liberal class discombobulated by the political disruptions of 2016' (E. Davis, 2017: 2). While Davis goes on to assert 'genuine changes' in the style of public discourse, he perhaps inadvertently identifies the crucial point – that the 'liberal terror' concerning political changes in 2016 is the key reason that post truth has emerged as both an explanatory term and an intense focus of debate in journalistic discourse.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.04.009.

[4] It should be noted that the term 'moral panic' has itself been the subject of some debate over its value and validity (Critcher, 2003; Hier, 2011).

[5] One twitter user noted that this sounded like media studies – something of which Finklestein's employer, Rupert Murdoch, is presumed to be not particularly supportive (Horton, 2017).

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