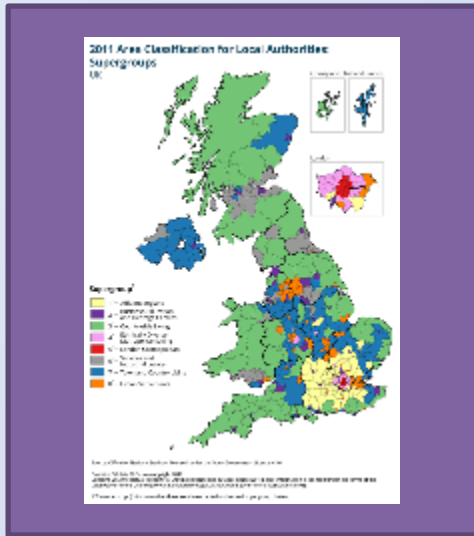


ECED7001: Political Influences in Inequality & Diversity

Theme 4: Post-Truth and Fake News: A World without Meaning?

Post-Truth and Fake News: A World without Meaning?

- We have already explored the fluid and uncertain meanings of many of the 'normative concepts' used in political discourse
- We have also discussed the way in which political ideologies such as conservatism or liberalism differ depending on time and place
- In our session on Justice we noted Derrida's postmodernist argument that there was nothing at the heart of concepts such as **justice**
- The conceptual hollowness of terms such as the **common good** has been commented on by economists such as Joseph Schumpeter
- In each of these cases we have been working in the area of epistemology - the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between **justified belief** and **opinion**.
- In this sense we talk of a justified belief in terms of one based on empirical, measurable 'facts'

What do we mean by ‘Post-Truth’

*If you have come across this phrase before,
what do you understand it to mean?*



Who said this?



*“When I use a word... it means just what I
choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”*

Humpty Dumpty – Alice Through the Looking Glass



What do we mean by 'Post-Truth'

- In sociological terms it refers to an anti-intellectual cultural and political climate in which facts and rationality are subordinated to familiar narratives that have popular resonance, substantiated only by anecdotal evidence.
- Its persuasive strategies are characterized by appeals to emotion rather than reason (argument and information) as when we looked at **populism**
- It uses **populist tropes** such as 'Plain speaking' or 'speaking one's mind'
- And plays upon popular beliefs and common anxieties (common sense) in order to win arguments rather than measurable, objective evidence

What do we mean by 'Post-Truth'

- Although the phrase itself has become popular more recently (e.g. it was the Oxford Dictionaries word of the year in 2016) it has been a concern for much longer.
- For example in 1980 the scientist and writer Isaac Asimov wrote “the strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.’” (p.19)
- We have noted that all of the concepts that are used in political discourse are **relativist** in that their meaning is determined partly by the way they are used and also by the way they are (mis)interpreted.
- Chandler & Mundy (2020) argue that post-truth ‘is a form of radical relativism indifferent to any distinction between fact and fiction—a stance ironically reminiscent of the intellectual excesses of postmodernism (though lacking its characteristic reflexivity)’
- Indeed in many ways the ‘playful’ and questioning nature of postmodernist **thought** can be seen to have legitimated post-truth **thoughtlessness**

What do we mean by 'Post-Truth'

- We have seen that the notion of a 'post-truth' world is complex, referring, as it does to the 'social, technical and political milieu that has led to what has been called the 'post-truth' era' (Pangrazio, 2018) pp.7-8).
- One of the first uses of the term was in an article published as long ago as 1992 entitled, 'A Government of Lies' (Tesich, 1992).
- In it Tesich looks at the information given to the American public regarding Vietnam, the Iran/Contra affair and the first Gulf War and argues that the public is increasingly having to choose between pride in international 'successes' and knowing the, sometimes unsavoury, detail of how these successes came about.
- As he puts it 'We are being told that we can't have both truth and self-esteem anymore. We have to choose. One excludes the other' (Tesich, 1992, p.13).

What do we mean by 'Post-Truth'

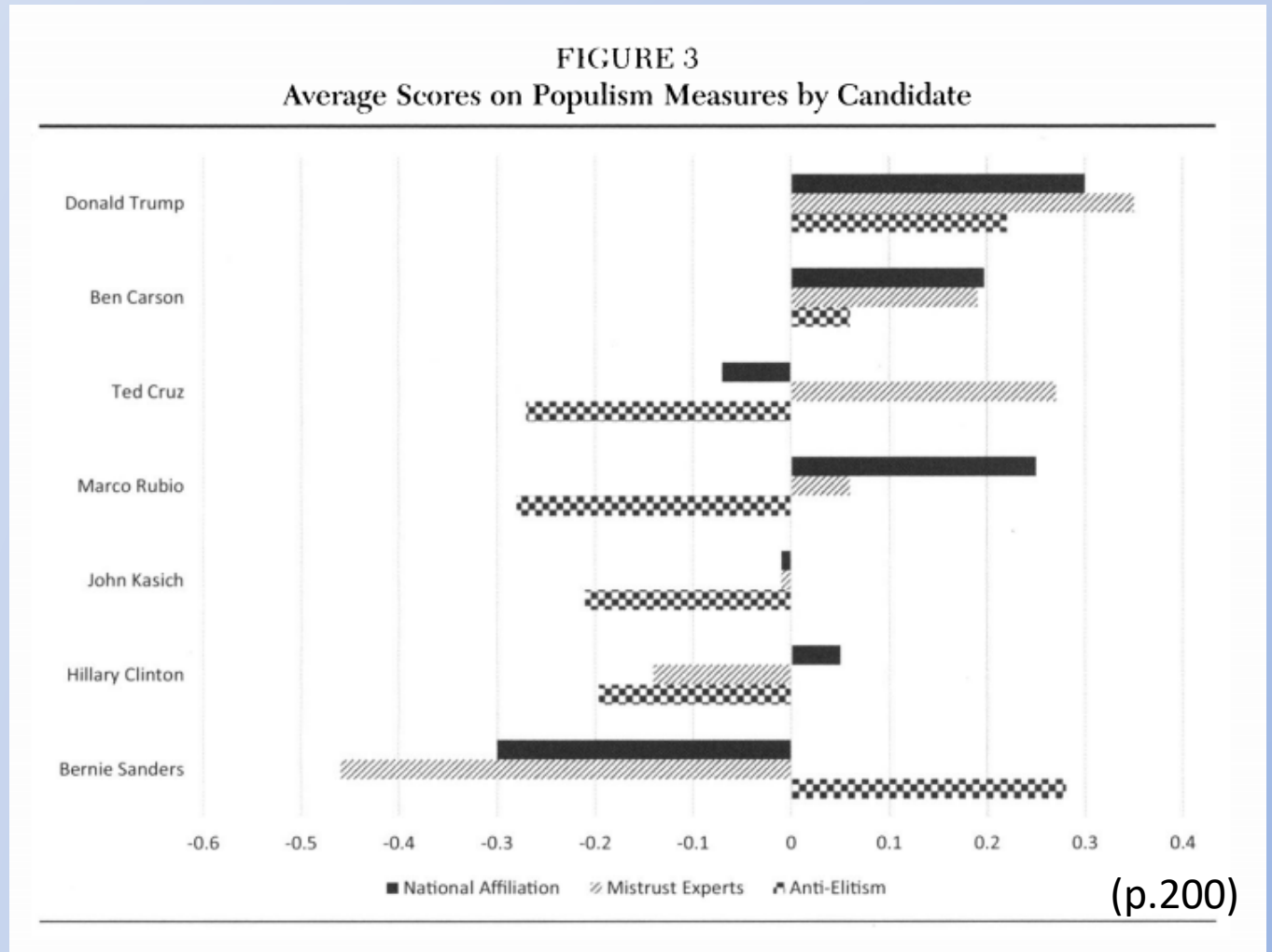
- If one accepts Tesich's contention then it can be seen that the public play an active, although not always conscious, role in deciding what they choose to believe in order to maintain what has been called their 'socially based identities' (Crawford & Novak, 2018, p.238).
- Crawford and Novak (2018, p.238) go on to argue that there is 'ample evidence from within psychological social psychology that people seek confirmation for their beliefs about themselves'.
- This choice between a difficult or uncomfortable truth and a positive sense of social identity has also been explored by Barthes, who talks of 'the "ordinary" consumers of popular culture, the non- or anti-elite classes invoked by populism' (Barthes, cited in DeKoven. 1998, p.82).
- We will return to these concepts when discussing the impact of fake-news in terms of discourse analysis.

What do we mean by 'Post-Truth'

- Chandler & Mundy (2020) go on to point out that 'The post-truth politics that followed the financial crisis of 2008 is closely associated with a distrust of 'experts', science, political elites, and the mainstream media'.
- The rise of post-truth as a popular discourse can also be seen to have been influenced by the rise of **global informational capitalism** that we discussed in Theme 2.
- For example Jason Hannan (2018) writes, in *Trolling ourselves to death? Social media and post-truth politics* that the 'logic of public discourse has been restructured in the light of social media'
- It can be seen to have done so in two, seemingly contradictory ways;
- Firstly, in creating a group of people who believe everything they read in their self-selecting and subjective Twitter feed etc.
- Secondly, in creating a group who dis-believe everything they read as being the product of a self-serving elite
- It is not without irony that we tell students not to use Wikipedia as a source because it doesn't pass the [CRAAP test](#)!

What do we mean by 'Post-Truth'

- In their article 'Rise of the Trumpenvolk' Oliver & Rahn (2016) argue that Trump successfully utilised three post-truth themes in his campaign; **nationalism**, a mistrust of experts and anti-elitism



Fake News

- There can be little doubt that ‘fake news’ forms part of the zeitgeist.
- For example, Mooney (2018 p.1) asserts that ‘ “fake news” was rampant in the 2016 U.S. election season and continues to stay in the headlines in one form or another’.
- Indeed, a search of UK and Irish news sources in Newsbank shows that the phrase was used in 137 sources in one day: 1 magazine, 88 newspapers, 24 newswire reports and 24 online sources ([Newsbank](#), No Date).
- However, the very ubiquity of the phrase is problematic in itself and in order to fully understand it we need to explore the nature of the concept of ‘fake news’ as well as its historical context.

Fake News

- We also need to explore the concept of 'truth' against which to judge the 'fakeness' of 'fake news'
- Given the focus of this Module we should also explore how the concepts of vulnerability and inequality as well as the political and public discourse have been affected by this growing, postmodern phenomenon.
- One key issue for the social scientist in this area is defining exactly what is meant by the term 'fake news'. The complexity of the 'fake news' agenda is highlighted by Mooney (2018, p.1) when she states that the phenomenon includes;

'news and opinion articles about corporate technology monopolies, the negative impacts of social media and too much screen time, the viral spread of conspiracy theories, Russian propaganda, and online privacy'.

Fake News

- However, for the purposes of this Theme ‘fake news’ is taken to mean ‘massive digital misinformation’ that is ‘becoming pervasive in online social media to the extent that it has been listed by the [World Economic Forum](#) (WEF) as one of the main threats to our society’ (Burkhardt, 2018 p.5).
- Although not labelled ‘fake news’, examples of **propaganda** and **bias in reporting** are certainly not new as is stated by many, including Burkhardt (2017) and Pangrazio (2018).
- For example, Duprez Jr. (2011 p.56) points out that accounts of the First Crusade (1095-1099), by a Christian and a Muslim respectively, are ‘sensationalized, more interested in promoting, and recording for later historians a glorious representation of their leaders’.
- He goes on to argue that ‘Historians must cross reference their sources in order to come to the most likely conclusions, and not muddled opinions on what may have occurred in the past’ (Duprez, 2001, p.56).

Fake News

- It is the contention of this Theme that the same is true for social scientists as they seek to navigate the ‘muddled opinions’ of a ‘post-truth’ world.
- It can be argued, that in a post-modern world, truth is a concept layered with complexity. Indeed, in both lexical and philosophical terms of reference, ‘truth’ is problematical.
- This is because, as Bordonaba Plou (2016, p. 115) states, ‘truth can perform different semantic and pragmatic tasks: there are fact-stating uses, disquotational uses, prosentence-forming uses or truth ascribing uses’.
- For the purposes of this discussion it is the ‘prosentence-forming’ or prosentential aspect of truth that is most useful.

But what does that mean?

Fake News

- Beebe (No Date) states that when the term truth is used prosententially, it is 'To assert that a sentence is true is simply to assert or reassert that sentence; it is not to ascribe the property of truth to that sentence'.
- That is to say "it is true because I say it is true" (see Humpty Dumpty)
- Therefore, if it is the case that asserting that something is true does not necessarily prove that it is true then this logic can also be applied to the concept of 'fake news'.
- That is to say that, in order for something to be perceived as 'fake news' it merely needs to be labelled as such.
- This conflict between the assertion of truth and the ascribing of the property of truth is what Bordonaba Plou (2016, p.125) calls the 'dialectical connections' between the assertion that something is true or false and the 'disagreement with earlier assertions'.

Fake News

- In this way the assertion that something is ‘fake news’ can create a situation whereby all previous content on the same subject is also retrospectively perceived as fake by association.
- Therefore, if some-one with enough influence on public opinion, for example ‘Donald Trump, the media, Congress’ (Mooney, 2018 p.3) labels facts as ‘fake news’ then, it could be argued, it becomes ‘fake-news’ merely by the application of the label.
- This is because, as Becker argues, people will defer to those perceived to be in the ‘highest group’ who are seen to be ‘best placed to define “the way things really are” due to their “knowledge of truth”’ (Becker cited in Allan, 2004, p.63).
- This can be seen to link with the idea of ‘speaking **truth** unto power’ which is a common trope



Fake News

- Whilst bias, propaganda and 'fake news' are not new phenomena, there can be little doubt that the rise of social media and related forms of communication has increased the problem of 'fake news' as a post-modern phenomenon.
- For example, Pangrazio argues that, whilst news has been 'democratised' by the plethora of digital media platforms, society also needs to address the issue of 'what news is, how it gets made, shared and read online' (Pangrazio, 2018, p. 8).
- The sheer number of 'news' sources has led to what has been called by Mills et al (2019, p. 4) 'the explosion of fake news' and they, like Pangrazio they are concerned about both the 'generation' and 'diffusion' of such news.

Fake News

- Both of these commentators are concerned with the way in which it is now both easier to create fake news due to the sheer number of available platforms (generation) and the ease with which such content can be picked up by others (diffusion) for example by Retweeting
- This situation is confirmed by Silverman (cited in Pangrazio, 2018 p.8) who states that in the final three months of the 2016 Presidential election in the U.S. ‘the most widely circulated stories [...] came from false websites and hyperpartizan blogs’.

Hyperpartizan?

Fake News

- In terms of the generation of fake news, Mills et al identify three main reasons for what they call the 'creation of disinformation' (Mills et al. 2019, p.4).
- Firstly, they identify what they term 'inadvertent disinformation' caused by the fact that anyone with access to the internet can now publish 'news-like content that is accidentally false or misleading because of a lack of rigor in reporting' (Mills et al. 2019, p.4).
- They then identify 'ideological disinformation' which is more akin to the propaganda mentioned previously and which Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) claim is designed to 'advance certain agendas, stoke conspiracy, or discredit others'.
- Finally, they move on to look at what they term 'exploitative disinformation' which they argue is designed to produce a commercial or financial advantage from the dissemination of false or misleading information (Mills et al. 2019, p.4).

Fake News

- Before moving on to briefly look at how the ‘fake news’ phenomenon is changing the concept of vulnerability to exploitation / inequality and the effect it is having on public discourse it is also worth exploring one final aspect of the issue that makes it a postmodern phenomenon and that is the way in which ‘fake news’ is spread.
- As we have seen, commentators are troubled by the way in which ‘fake news’ is spread and have explored how this differs from the past.
- For example, Burkhardt (2017, pp. 10-11) outlines the process by which news (both ‘true’ and ‘fake’) has been disseminated throughout history;
- beginning with the spoken word and ‘word of mouth’, moving on through the written word to the printed word and then through visual and auditory media (radio, film TV) to the internet.

Fake News

- Burkhardt argues that the internet and particularly social media has exacerbated the problems of bias and false news because 'On social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, information is often personal' (Burkhardt. 2017 p.12).
- There are two aspects to this personalisation which could be termed the personalisation of dissemination and the personalised targeting of information.
- The former term can be used to relate to the way in which a user of Facebook or Twitter are able to share information that they receive.
- For example, Burkhardt (2017, p. 12) states that if a person wishes 'to share the information with friends and followers, a single click can accomplish this task'.
- Not only does this 'single click' make it much easier to disseminate information to a number of people quickly but it also in some way validates the information because of the personal connection between the sender and the receiver.

Fake News

- These connections can be of two types which Crawford and Novak (2018, pp.395-6) label 'core ties' and 'significant ties'.
- The difference between these two types of relationship relies on the depth of connection with 'core ties' being those with very close family and friends and 'significant ties' being with members of groups (e.g. ex-school friends, members of a society or club) who are not considered 'good friends' (Crawford and Novak 2018, pp.395-6).
- Whilst the authors note that there is still much research to be done in this area they do acknowledge that people using such methods of communication 'report that doing so has helped them make major decisions' (Crawford and Novak 2018, pp.395).
- It can be argued that this indicates that information disseminated from someone with whom a person has 'core ties' is more likely to provide validation for that information, making it more likely to be believed. This is also supported by research carried out by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 230).

Fake News

- The second phrase used previously (personalised targeting of information) relates to the ability of political, commercial and news organisations, among others, to create websites, stories and links that are aimed specifically at individual users based on their internet profile.
- This is done by the use of what Mills et al (2019) call 'programmatic algorithms'. This technical process has been summarised by Burkhardt as algorithms which;

'..can be programmed to search for information on the internet that is similar to what a social media user has already clicked on, liked or shared. They can then inject that new information into what the user sees'.

(Burkhardt, 2017, p.12)

Fake News

- In both of the cases above, it can be seen that consumers of news are in danger of passively receiving news and opinion rather than being an 'active audience' as discussed by Burton (2005, pp.88-91).
- They are more likely to be passive either because they trust the source as one of their group of 'core ties' or because the information has been chosen by algorithms to fit their preconceptions.
- This familiarity can lead to the uncritical consumption of news, or, as Pangrazio (2018, p. 14) puts it 'user input on platforms results in an increase in value of the information to the user'.
- In this way the agent of mediation is no longer the editor or journalist but the (potentially biased) social connection or algorithm.

Fake News

- It is for this reason that this Theme seeks to argue that **all** users of social media and other forms of internet information are now vulnerable because they are more likely to accept such information uncritically.
- This argument is made by Burton (2005, p.59) who discusses what he calls 'ideological realism' or the fact that things can be perceived to be true because they are expressed in ways which correlate to other things that the consumer perceives to be 'true'.
- Indeed, this relationship between the perception of what is true in relation to what we already know is borne out in work carried out by Pennycook *et al* in the Journal of Experimental Psychology.
- Their hypothesis was based on the 'long tradition of work in cognitive science demonstrating that prior exposure to a statement [...] increases the likelihood that participants will judge it to be accurate' (Pennycook *et al*, 2018, p.1866).

Fake News

- They undertook a number of studies with, among others, supporters of Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton to explore this hypothesis, often using statements that were clearly untrue.
- As part of the study, participants were exposed to several instances of the same information and as a result of their studies the researchers found that in regards of people's perception of fake news, 'repetition increased accuracy even for items that the participants were not consciously aware of having been exposed to' (Pennycook et al, 2018, p.1875).
- However, it is not just the case that the more frequently people are exposed, even unknowingly, to false stories the more likely they are to believe them.
- In the study of politically opposed consumers of news (i.e. Trump and Clinton supporters), the researchers found that ' 'fake-news' headlines were positively affected by repetition even when there is a strong political motivation to reject them' (Pennycook et al, 2018, p.1875).

Fake News

- Thus it can be seen that we are perhaps all vulnerable to the influence of fake news, whether it is 'inadvertent', 'ideological' or 'exploitative' in nature simply because of our exposure to it.
- One example of this exposure is seen if one undertakes a discourse analysis of the way in which discussion regarding experts is now carried out in what Barthes has called 'public philosophy' (Barthes, 1972, p. 152).
- In 'Mythologies' Barthes set out what he saw as the conflict between 'high' culture, which included theorists and experimental writers, and the 'mass' culture of the petit-bourgeoise and proletariat (Barthes, 1972).
- DeKoven, has gone on to argue that Barthes' concept of mass culture was a modernist construct which has now been replaced by post-modern popular and **populist** culture (DeKoven, 1998) and it is in this popular culture that the role of experts has been denigrated by populist rhetoric.

Fake News

- One example of this will have to suffice, that of Michael Gove.
- In a Brexit debate in 2016, the then Justice Secretary was reported as stating that “people in this country have had enough of experts” (Mance, 2016).
- Although this statement was made as a defence of Gove not being able to name an economist who supported Brexit it is this populist line that has influenced the public debate rather than the lack of expert endorsement.
- This can be seen as an example of what Sorenson has called a ‘form of inoculation’ (cited in Devereux, 2014 pp.199-200) in that the public is ‘inoculated’ from the lack of expert support by the argument that we have had too much interference from experts in the past

Fake News

- This trend has also been recognised by Panrazio (2018, p8) who talks of ‘an increasing distrust of public institutions and news media’.
- It is this increasing distrust of ‘high culture’ as embodied by academics, experts, public bodies and traditional journalism that is fed by the ‘explosion of fake news’ (Mills et al, ibid) that concerns those seeking to answer what Allcott & Gentzkow (2017, p.233) describe as the ‘important questions about who becomes the arbiter of truth’.
- Thus the public, political discourse regarding inequality and diversity is increasingly based on personal opinion rather than empirical evidence
- This danger was identified in the 1970’s by Michel Foucault when he wrote the ‘discourse’ is ‘perspectival’ i.e. that truth is in the eye of beholder

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