Fake news, post-truth and media–political change

John Corner
University of Leeds, UK


Media researchers may well experience a degree of difficulty in relating to the strident arrival of ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake news’ as key markers of the current media–political situation, the focus both of countless commentaries in newspapers and magazines and a spate of new books. After all, questions about the contingency and precariousness of what is publicly circulated as the ‘truth’ have long been central to research across both the cultural studies’ and the more sociological strands of international media inquiry. Similarly, the idea of news involving a good measure of often deliberately counterfeit information, as a result of journalistic practices themselves or the strategies of deception used by sources, is very familiar too.

It is perhaps necessary to note the difference between the ‘post-truth’ label and ‘fake news’ despite the lines of interconnection. ‘Post-truth’ is a self-consciously grand term of epochal shift (trading heavily on assumptions about an ‘era of truth’ we apparently once enjoyed). As Philip Schlesinger (2017) recently pointed out in this journal, despite its limitations, its rise as an idea ‘has signalled a perception of change both in how the public domain is constituted and in the conduct of major protagonists in the media-political sphere’ (p. 603). A change does indeed seem to be occurring but the more tightly that the focus is placed on the political sphere, perhaps the less the sense of shock that should be delivered by the phrase given the long and amply documented history of strategic deception here. ‘Fake news’, however, seems a snappy identifier of a kind of a fraudulent media product (the negative judgement and the sense of intention are even stronger than...
with, say, ‘bias’ or even with Chomsky’s distorting, propagandistic ‘filters’) and it carries far less by way of philosophical baggage. Of course it, too, has various precedents as a designator. It is worth noting how, at the moment, it opens out on to two rather different sets of questions – one concerning the degree of prevalence of the ‘false’ within the news ecology and another concerning the use of the term by governments to denounce news accounts which conflict with their own publicity. The Trump phenomenon is perhaps finally more about ‘false speech’ (or tweets) than it is about ‘fake news’, thereby connecting with the history of political lying (well reviewed in Jay, 2010) but it has effectively commandeered the latter label for the purposes of an ultra-conservative defence against scrutiny and criticism.

Reading these books, no doubt soon to be joined by others, we might speculate where we would be on the issues they address were it not for the Trump campaign and the first months of his Presidency. Even for British writers, with the Brexit campaign concerning EU membership sharply in mind, it is pre-eminently the Trump campaign and the Trump mode of presidential communication which have taken matters to the level of an issue of concern about the health of public communication and democratic political culture, as Schlesinger’s remark suggests. Many examples of this mode at work are to be found in all of these books, with an unavoidable degree of duplication. Along with other instances, what they point to is a new scale and, perhaps more significantly, a new casualness in the use of blatant falsehood as a tool of public address. Three of the books examined here are written by journalist-researchers and usefully so, since journalism clearly finds itself at the centre both of what is happening and what might, for better or worse, happen next. Seeing how the problem is viewed from ‘within’ is therefore one important point of departure for any academic engagement.

**Diagnoses and remedies**

James Ball’s *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* is a thorough, well-structured commentary, offering sustained and serious argument despite the slangy assertion of its subtitle. Ball picks up on the now familiar reference points for the new phase of anxiety, including the farcical claims-making about the size of the crowd attending Trump’s inauguration, claims undercut by photographic evidence, and spokesperson Kellyanne Conway’s rather chillingly Orwellian and now classic remark to an interviewer about how discrepancies could be explained by ‘alternative facts’. While noting the new and disturbing weirdness of the Washington scene when it comes to handling realities, he places his emphasis on the rather separate matter of the fake news economy as part of a larger ‘misinformation ecosystem’ (p. 140) and therefore is able to develop what is finally an industrial perspective on what is happening here. It is, he argues, the sheer profitability of fake news which underlies its huge growth. Looking at the spaces for entrepreneurialism opened up internationally, he notes how one Macedonian town, with a population of 45,000 people, launched at least 140 different fake news websites, many dealing in pro-Trump stories and many operated by teenagers who were able to earn up to 10 times an average salary if they were successful. The operations of Facebook and Youtube get sustained attention too as a key part of the larger picture, with algorithmic targeting and strategies for ‘going viral’ closely examined alongside their importance in creating ‘news
bubbles’, homogeneous spaces within which any encounter with reports or comments differing in their principal details or their assessments is greatly reduced. The difficulty of getting a clearer framework of legal accountability in relation to the major players here, the subject of ongoing discussion, is recognised alongside the limitations of the recent initiatives for ‘monitoring and correction’ taken by the corporations themselves.

Ball is keen to emphasise how the idea of ‘fake news’ must not become established as what he calls the ‘pantomime villain’ in lazy accounts of ‘post-truth’ (p. 127) and that it should not be allowed to conceal the fact that contemporary problems with the news and the circulation of public information go much broader than ‘the fake’. Here, he quotes a comment by David Mikkelson of the fact-checking organisation Snopes ‘We have a bad news problem, not a fake news problem’ (p. 250). Although an over-correction, this is a valuable link back to the terms of earlier diagnoses and broader contexts. There is both an awful lot of news and a lot of news awfully lacking in integrity now in circulation within different national systems, working within frenetic news cycles and different kinds of often precarious and sometimes editorially compromising business models and ideological matrices. Massive over-coverage of some things plays against under-coverage or no coverage of others, as the media research agenda internationally has conclusively established. This is not a situation in which firm lines of definition or evaluation can always be drawn. The point goes back to Ball’s argument that ‘traditional media boosts and profits from fake news even as it tries to fight it’ (p. 10).

How might effective resistance, a ‘fight-back’, proceed? This is a question which nearly all writers on the topic are forced to address with varying degrees of confidence. Ball gives it serious attention but his recommendations involve politicians, journalists and the public in way which finally has the effect of dispersing any strong sense of a way forward. For instance, advocating greater efforts towards ‘media literacy’ in schools and colleges may be laudable but the scale of the challenges identified make this seem (perhaps unfairly) rather gestural. Commendably, though, he is sufficient of a realist to recognise that the economic conditions in which ‘post-truth’ activities have thrived, interconnecting across both mainstream and social media flows, are not going to disappear quickly.

Paul Levinson’s short book Fake News in Real Context (essentially a pamphlet essay) inevitably works on a much smaller canvas but manages to get across some useful points of argument. He starts with statistics that might, themselves, need checking as to methodology of collection but which certainly establish strong grounds for worry. For instance, he cites a study (p. 15) noting that on Facebook between February and November, 2016 fake news items received 8.7 million ‘engagements’ of one kind or another while ‘real news’ received 7.3 million. He poses the question of just how far people believe ‘fake news’ and draws evidence for different assessments, arguing that since Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by around 3 million, putting strong emphasis on this factor, especially given the other, essentially non-fake if nevertheless skewed communications in play in the campaign (including Director of FBI Comey’s announcements about the Clinton emails) might be going too far. However, he notes how fake news goes beyond what he calls the ‘appeal-to-authority’ of much propaganda and does so by ‘making recipients feel they are now authorities on the subject, by virtue of the false news that they have received about it’ (p. 10). Clearly, only detailed research on
audiences and users will be able even to start clarifying this question of the forms of cognitive and affective engagement and their consequences. However, some of the available information about the number of American citizens who, for example, continue to believe the ‘birther’ accounts that Obama was not by nationality a legitimate candidate for the Presidency, certainly give cause for concern.

Levinson looks at the rapid ramping up of Trump’s accusations regarding the mainstream media as a ‘fake news’ source when he was President-elect, moving from dismissal of specific items through to the much more general (‘you’re fake news’ to CNN reporters, my italics) and on to freestyle condemnation in response to polls showing his loss of popularity once President (‘any negative polls are fake news, just like CNN, ABC, NBC polls during the election’).

He takes heart from indications that there is a rise in engagement with serious journalism as a result of the uncertainty surrounding many ‘stories’, but it would clearly be wrong to invest too much in this. The reach and appeal of the ‘misinformation ecosystem’ goes well beyond the readerships and audiences of extended serious reporting. He points to the risks of some counter-moves too, like the decision in May 2017 of CNN, ABC, CBS and NBC not to carry an ad by Trump loyalists criticising the networks of purveying fake news. This (quite understandable) decision brought the accusation, selective with its facts, that the mainstream media were quite capable of limiting freedom of speech in breach of the spirit of First Amendment when it conflicted with their own interests. The incident also shows how an increasingly blurred relationship between editorial and advertising material in many outlets can complicate general perceptions of what the news is as an informational product and the standards by which it should be judged.

Matthew D’Ancona’s Post Truth is offered as a succinct summary of key issues but its intellectual reach is a broad one. In his introductory pages, D’Ancona connects back to a 1992 article by Steve Tisich which, considering the effect of recent US scandals, including Iran-Contra, noted that ‘we have, as a free people, freely decided we want to live in some post-truth world’ (p. 9). The ironic ‘voluntarism’ at work here notwithstanding, the link back to earlier usage and earlier perceptions of a critical shift is useful. Taking some of his early examples from the UK Brexit debate before moving on to the current US situation, D’Ancona raises some sharp analytic questions about belief and falsehood and about the increased importance of emotionally appealing story-telling in contemporary political communication. Like Ball, he places emphasis on narrative form as being as significant as informational units (facts or falsehoods) when it comes to strength of appeal and breadth of circulation. Along with the delivery of affective satisfactions, this is one strand of the link with the attractions of conspiracy theory that is clearly at work in some fake news accounts. Also like Ball, and other writers on the theme, he is drawn to move away at points from an immediate concern with communicative practices and political structures to consider the psychosocial, indeed neurological, factors at work in the construction of contemporary subjectivity and the ‘civic self’. Again, speculation on this, although fascinating, finally becomes rather empty until more research evidence about attitudes to news and changing habits of political attitude-formation is forthcoming.

There is a danger, one which he just about avoids, in connecting too directly the UK’s Brexit referendum with the Trump campaign and its aftermath, even if finally they can
be seen as parts of a broader phenomenon. The Brexit vote, on both sides of the issue, was essentially a battle of political propaganda with its precedents in electoral campaigning. What distinguished it was the sheer degree of strategic falsehood employed in the service of persuasion and (certainly with a connection to Trump here) the often intemperate populist rhetoric of change wedded to a nationalist political imaginary steeped in nostalgia. This was pithily codified in the ‘Leave’ slogan ‘Take Back Control’. What it clearly didn’t have was that sense of ‘individual outsider takes on corrupt establishment’ which so sharply characterised the narrative generated by Trump.

D’Ancona, as noted, tracks back to earlier signs of a problem in different spheres: the financial crisis of 2008 he regards as a key moment in the reduction of trust in official public accounts (although he could have said a lot more here about the impact of the propaganda surrounding the invasion of Iraq). He examines how the changing trust profile of the debate about climate-change has introduced further levels of scepticism (and confusions about the relation between evidence and opinion) into public perceptions. He suggestively looks at satire shows’ almost continuous playful engagement with questions of public truth. Here, Stephen Colbert’s idea of ‘truthiness’ from 2005 onwards as deployed in his US TV show is a perceptive, influential and witty forerunner of ‘post-truth’ anxieties (as Colbert himself has sharply pointed out).

Ranging further than the other authors, D’Ancona connects with questions about how the deconstructive ideas of postmodernism might have made the path to relativism that much easier and therefore how a tendency towards a ‘new realism’ would help. It is certainly correct that what we can call questions of uncertainty and of relativism have been asked more strongly in many parts of academic inquiry, developing beyond the established forms of intellectual scepticism. In areas of communication research, particularly parts of cultural studies, levels of scepticism have sometimes moved from finding it more difficult to ground argument in evidence to reflecting on whether there is such a thing as ‘evidence’ at all. The implications of this perspective for taking up positions, either in advocacy or critique, on the production and circulation of public knowledge are clearly troublesome to say the least. However, the impact of postmodernism outside of specific intellectual and mostly academic spaces can be overstated (even if a bit of Baudrillard can help in coming to terms with some of Trump’s pronouncements). Rather than the history of intellectual doubt, the history of strategic disinformation seems immediately more relevant to the present situation.

D’Ancona’s suggestions for a ‘fight back’ connect with those of the other writers reviewed and the more extensive debate in journals and newspapers. An increased professional and public scrutiny of what is in circulation is seen to be required, a new emphasis on civic ‘due diligence’ should be placed and resourceful ‘counter narratives’ offered against the falsehoods and distortions in circulation. Once again, the list of imperatives, each one of them worthy, does nothing to diminish the sense of a response whose effectiveness in relation to the problem as described is deeply uncertain.¹

Because of this, the book’s exhortatory finish, citing Churchill and Martin Luther King to buttress the belief that ‘truth will out’ fails to convince. Moreover, its tone is rather out of keeping with the forensic and unavoidably pessimistic analysis that the earlier chapters offer. D’Anona is not, of course, the first media analyst to have a problem keeping the reader firmly on board when moving from diagnosis to possible cures.
Ari Rabin-Havt’s *Lies, Incorporated* is the only 2016 publication here and its writing goes back at least to 2015, when what constitutes the vivid political foreground of the newer crop of books and commentary had yet to develop a full presence. This allows the remark at the end that ‘the culture of Washington needs to change so lies are no longer an accepted part of the discourse’ (p. 192). Read in the context of what was going to happen 12 months after publication, this is truly a resounding statement of hope unfulfilled. Rabin-Havt’s project is essentially a critical history of political lobbying. ‘Lies, Incorporated’ is used to label the wide range of corporate players and agencies who use the circulation of false accounts to skew the business of government, and who do so with high levels of success despite attempts at rebuttal (‘lies are sticky’ he notes). Like Ball, he observes how the mainstream itself becomes involved even when it is not the source of the accounts:

Lies, Incorporated succeeds by taking advantage of the structure of mass media in the internet age. Bound by the constraints to tell ‘both sides’ of the story, mainstream reporters often give credence to lies. (p. 194)

The book is structured as an examination of selected major domestic issues since the 1950s, including Tobacco and Health, Climate Change, Health Care, Debt, Gun Laws, Immigration Reform and Abortion. The approach is to examine in detail, using among other sources the official documentary record, how Government debate and decisions about these matters were influenced by an almost constant flow of strategic misinformation. This flow, which included fake research findings, was fed into the press and into the deliberations themselves.

Each of the issues has received detailed attention in other publications, but by bringing a number of critical case studies together, Rabin-Havt succeeds among other things in providing a strong reminder that current circumstances are best seen as a development coming out of a long history of truth-pollution and truth-manufacture. This is so, even if we have to recognise the distinctive styling and media–political relations which Trump has introduced into the mix and the radically new flow patterns that social media have generated.

**Making connections: academic research and the public debate on knowledge**

Although these books make various kinds of contact with research, some authors working in academic as well as journalistic space, their arguments primarily connect with the current, largely non-academic wave of anxiety and interest. I observed at the start how the framings, ideas and arguments at work in this wave are of importance for media research to connect with. How might it do this? First of all, it will want to put the labels ‘fake news’ and ‘post truth’ in a longer and broader perspective, one in which consideration is given to previous critical scrutiny of journalism and to the wide variety of ways in which strategic persuasion can occur, intentionally and otherwise.²

It will consequently be very wary in its own employment of the terms. Useful though their alarmism may be for grabbing overdue attention, they have a dramatising and
simplifying tendency that serious limits sustained critical engagement. Among other things, they neglect the way in which the current liveliness of the debate about the issues in different spheres indicates that ‘truth’ as a marker, however buffeted, has certainly not been abandoned. Chiefly, more developed connections with the existing and extensive range of work on change both in media systems internationally and in ‘public sphere’ processes and practices need to be made to situate clearly what is ‘new’. What is happening in the United States is of importance, but too Washington-centric or Trump-centric a view of the issues will exert a reductive influence already apparent in some commentaries. The stark definitiveness of the post-truth idea needs to be exchanged for more flexible thinking both about the pressures on different kinds of truth and yet the continuing requirement for it in public discourse as well in various professional, including scientific, settings. Questions about definitions, evaluations, practices and uses need a tight addressing within comparative frameworks. Media research on audiences and users is starting to have more to say about the changing patterns of engagement, kinds of credibility and implications for thinking and feeling about political and social life given to the range of items (completely escaping older notions of genre) to which many people are now exposed.3 Some of this work needs to be made accessible, both in language and form of publication, for wider debate.

‘Fake news’, as indicated, also needs placing within the record of media research’s attention to the core problems of veracity in journalism and the long-standing issue of just what the ‘news’ as a term covers and what it doesn’t. The lengthy pedigree of ‘fakery’ needs highlighting. I remarked above how it is perhaps ‘false speech’ that is now the key factor playing out in Washington, raising long-standing issues of a different nature to those surrounding journalism, however closely interwoven they become. Of course, alongside much of what is happening, although mostly in the background within these debates, is the changing socio-economic conditions in which citizenship is now lived in many countries and the suspicions towards perceived forms of the ‘official’ and the ‘established’ which are thereby being generated. Such suspicions can drive democratic change but they can also present an opening for further, novel modes of the unreliable and the deliberately untrue.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. Here, see the argument by journalist-academic Beckett (2017), that the ‘fake news’ debate provides a welcome opportunity for journalists to promote and improve the integrity of responsible professional journalism. Richardson (2017) also examines the challenges posed for journalist trainers.

2. Among a wide range of historical and contemporary publications, the 6th edition of Jowett and O’Donnell (2016) attempts to overview perspectives on the continuingly problematic notion of ‘propaganda’ while Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzch (2009) bring together a number of studies which investigate the ways in which ‘truth’ is located in forms of journalism.