

Willful Construction of Ignorance

A Tale of Two Ontologies

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Abstract

From Iraq's mythical weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to Donald Trump's record of more than ten daily false or misleading statements, deception and false claims have been an integral part of political discourse for quite some time. Nonetheless, Trump's blatant disregard for the truth has given rise to much concern about the dawn of a "post-truth" era. The author argues that there are striking differences between the tacit ontologies of truth underlying the WMD deception and Trump's false claims, respectively. Whereas the WMD campaign contested a single reality, Trump's false claims often repudiate the very idea of external truths that exist independently of anyone's opinion. The author considers this ontological shift from realism to extreme constructivism to be the most critical aspect of the current "post-truth" malaise. He notes that an extreme constructivist "truth" has formed an essential aspect of historical fascism and Nazism, as well as of contemporary populist movements, and that those conceptions are incompatible with liberal-democratic norms of truth-seeking. The author concludes by pointing toward potential solutions of the "post-truth" crisis.

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Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. —U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney, August 26, 2002

Just remember, what you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening. —U.S. President Donald Trump, July 24, 2018

Down with intelligence! Long live death! —General José Millán Astray, October 12, 1936

On March 20, 2003, American troops and their allies invaded Iraq, having vowed to rid the country of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that were

threatening the world. Except there were none in Iraq at the time. This conclusion became official in September 2004 with publication of the Duelfer Report, which was based on a thorough search of the country by the U.S. Government's Iraq Survey Group. The Duelfer Report was met with bipartisan acceptance in Congress and by President Bush.¹ In striking contrast to the absence of actual WMDs on the ground, many Americans continued to believe in their existence for at least a decade. In survey after survey, up to 50% of respondents expressed the belief that WMDs had been found in Iraq after the invasion. This pattern was observed from late 2003 (Kull et al. 2003; Kull et al. 2006; Lewandowsky et al. 2005), through 2004 (Kull et al. 2006), and again in 2006, 2007, and 2008 (Jacobson 2010), and finally again in 2014.²

Those findings are remarkable for at least two reasons: First, they illustrate the resilience of misconceptions to correction (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Throughout this period, there was no shortage of information about the absence of WMDs, and yet that abundance of information did not appear to make a dent in the public's misconception. There is even evidence that attempts to correct misconceptions ironically increased people's belief in WMDs (Nyhan and Reifler 2010),³ or entrench other misconceptions surrounding the invasion of Iraq (Prasad et al. 2009).

Second, those widespread mistaken beliefs did not arise from some cognitive accident but were carefully constructed by the U.S. and U.K. governments through a deceptive campaign to mobilize public opinion for the invasion. There are now multiple peer-reviewed analyses of the pre-invasion deception and propaganda efforts by the governments of the United States (Altheide and Grimes 2005; Arsenault and Castells 2006; Kaufmann 2004; Seagren and Henderson 2018) and the United Kingdom (Herring and Robinson 2014a, b; Robinson 2017; Thomas 2017). This deliberate campaign successfully constructed lasting public ignorance about the ground truth in Iraq, albeit at a political cost. After accepting the Prime Minister's actions on Iraq for a considerable time (Baum and Groeling 2010; Kriner and Wilson 2016), the British public ultimately turned on Tony Blair, who is now the least popular among all living former or current Prime Ministers (Curtis 2018).

The chimerical Iraqi WMDs have turned into a poster boy for the effectiveness of "organized persuasive communication" (Bakir et al. 2018), which seeks to convince the public of a reality that is, in fact, nonexistent. Other examples of the carefully curated and deliberate creation of ignorance include the efforts of the tobacco industry to undermine the public's recognition of the health risks from smoking (Proctor 2011) as well as similar efforts by an

¹ Transcript: Bush Responds to WMD Report, FDCH E-Media, Thursday, October 7, 2004; 2:02 PM, <https://wapo.st/2V2WRVr> (accessed Feb. 14, 2020).

² <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2015/false/> (accessed Feb. 15, 2020).

³ This effect depends on details of the wording of the question, and with different questions this ironic backfire effect is not observed (Wood and Porter 2018).

array of vested interests and ideological operators to deny the fact that greenhouse gas emissions are altering the Earth's climate (Dunlap and McCright 2010; Oreskes and Conway 2010). At first glance, this deliberate construction of ignorance in others and without their consent, also known as agnotology (Proctor 2008), seems to have little connection to the deliberate ignorance exercised by a person or with their consent (Hertwig and Engel, this volume, 2016). For example, it is common practice to perform musical auditions blindly, with the candidate performing behind a curtain (Goldin and Rouse 2000) to minimize bias of the selection committee. As I will show, however, the social construction of deliberate public ignorance is intimately related to more personal forms of deliberate ignorance. Indeed, the latter may be part of the solution to the former.

Fast forward from WMDs to November 9, 2016, the day after Trump was elected president of the United States. The election result was a shock and surprise to many around the world. The U.K. tabloid, *The Sun*, tweeted⁴ that “the Simpsons’ most absurd prediction in its 27-year history has come true,” with the headline simply proclaiming “D’OH!” One reason for the widespread shock was Trump’s record of dishonesty during the campaign: Politifact identified 70% of his statements as “mostly false,” “false,” or “pants on fire” lies. The opposing candidate, Hillary Clinton, came in a distant second, with barely more than 25% of her statements falling into the same categories. Nonetheless, a few days before the election, a Washington Post-ABC poll found that Trump had opened an 8% lead over Clinton in terms of honesty and trustworthiness. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Oxford Dictionaries declared “post-truth” to be the “international word of the year” in 2016, reflecting the 2,000% increase in its usage during that year (McDermott 2019).

As of May, 2019, the *Washington Post* had catalogued more than 10,000 untruths uttered by Trump during his subsequent presidency, with a daily average of more than 15 erroneous claims during 2018, compared to only around 5 daily untruths in 2017 (Kessler 2018b). President Trump has responded to those fact checks by accusing the media of being “enemies of the people” who spread “fake news.” By contrast, Trump has remained largely silent on rumors and conspiracy theories that are actually fake but target his political opponents. For example, nearly 50% of Trump voters entertained the possibility that Hillary Clinton was connected to a child sex ring being run out of the basement of a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. (Kafka 2016). This conspiracy theory originated with a tweet by a white supremacist and then entered the mainstream through Facebook, ultimately prompting a man to fire a semiautomatic assault rifle inside the restaurant (Kafka 2016). There is no record of Trump disavowing those rumors; in fact, members of his transition team even helped to promote the “pizzagate” conspiracy (Bender and Hanna 2016).

⁴ <https://twitter.com/TheSun/status/796479369048899586> (accessed Jan. 27, 2020).

In apparent contrast to Trump's record of falsehoods as campaigner and president, his polling data have remained remarkably steady during his presidency. As reported by FiveThirtyEight,⁵ Trump's domestic net approval ratings after 716 days in office were only modestly lower than those of some of his predecessors (Reagan and Carter) at the same point in their presidencies. Moreover, an Ipsos poll from August 8, 2018,⁶ revealed that 29% of the public agreed with Trump's assertion that the news media are the "enemy of the American people," and this rose to a plurality of 48% among Republicans.

At first glance, Trump's record of inaccuracy and the curated deceptions surrounding Iraqi WMDs share much in common: both involve dishonesty and the widespread dissemination of misinformation that successfully renders part of the public ignorant, or at least confused, about reality. There are, however, some important differences. Here I focus on the role that is, at least tacitly, assigned to reality in the two cases. The tacit ontology of misinformation was explored by McCright and Dunlap (2017), and I adopt one of their proposed dimensions of classification. In the case of Iraqi WMDs, the false information about their existence was curated by the U.S. and U.K. governments. The U.K. government painstakingly compiled it into "dossiers" (Herring and Robinson 2014a) that were based on government "intelligence" (Thomas 2017). We now know that those dossiers were deceptive (Herring and Robinson 2014a), but perhaps surprisingly, there is relatively little evidence of outright fabrication by U.K. officials, although some intelligence sources were clearly prone to fabrication (Thomas 2017). The U.S. and U.K. governments, therefore, displayed an ontological commitment to a form of realism. They accepted that there was a ground truth and relied on empirical notations, such as "evidence" or "intelligence," to contest the state of that ground truth in Iraq. The fact that Iraqi reality turned out to be different from that which was constructed by the U.S. and U.K. governments does not negate the further fact that the WMD campaign was about a single, albeit contested, reality.

Now compare that to the ontology employed by Trump and his entourage and acolytes.⁷ Trump's false statements cover an extremely broad range of issues, from lying about hush money payments to a pornographic actress (Kessler 2018a) to the invention of six nonexistent new steel plants (Kessler 2017) to blaming a newspaper for "fake news" about himself, when in fact he was never mentioned in the article in question (Cerabino 2018). One notable attribute of many of these false statements is that, unlike the more nuanced

⁵ <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval-ratings/> (accessed Jan. 27, 2020).

⁶ <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/americans-views-media-2018-08-07> (accessed Jan. 27, 2020)

⁷ Although many analyses have justifiably focused on the behavior of the U.S. president, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that Trump is underpinned by an infrastructure of media outlets, websites, conspiracy theorists, and pundits that shares and supports his ontology (Giroux 2018). Similarly, populist movements that eschew conventional notions of truth are active in many other western countries.

WMD claims based on government intelligence, they are readily and rapidly shown to be false. Indeed, some of the claims (e.g., that people went out in their boats to watch Hurricane Harvey; Selby 2018) have an almost operatic quality and are not readily explainable by political expediency.⁸ The obvious falsehoods of some of those statements have been interpreted as showing Trump's "complete disinterest even in old-fashioned lying" (Waisbord 2018a:29). This type of misinformation is not carefully curated but is showered onto the public as a blizzard of confusing and often contradictory statements. McCright and Dunlap (2017) used the label "shock and chaos" to describe this type of misinformation. Shock and chaos are closely aligned with the notion of "bullshit" explored by Frankfurt (2005).

When Trump's falsehoods are challenged, the responses provide insights into the underlying ontology. First, Trump rarely, if ever, apologizes for his utterances.⁹ Second, his spokespersons have repeatedly sidestepped accountability by postulating a seemingly constructivist view of the world, which quite explicitly repudiates the idea of external truths that exist independently of anyone's opinion. Thus, Trump's counselor Kellyanne Conway famously declared that she was in possession of "alternative facts" when defending claims that Trump's inauguration crowd was the largest ever: it was not. Similarly, when Trump attorney Rudolph W. Giuliani sought to explain in August 2018 why the White House had been delaying an interview between the president and special counsel Robert Mueller, he proclaimed that "truth isn't truth." Those deflections are not isolated occurrences but arguably form a pervasive pattern that has been labeled "ontological gerrymandering" (McVittie and McKinlay 2018). Ontological gerrymandering is not confined to the United States. When a British right-wing personality's claim that a car accident had been a terrorist incident was challenged, she dismissed the correction as "blatant state propaganda" and added (Charman 2017):

I have no belief in fact. Fact is an antiquated expression. All reporting is biased and subjective. There is no such thing as fact any more.... There is no truth, only the truth of the interpretation of truth that you see.

This apparent ontological shift from realism to an unbounded constructivism has been noted by several scholars (e.g., McCright and Dunlap 2017; Waisbord 2018a). I consider this shift to be the most critical aspect of the current "post-truth" malaise. This conclusion is accompanied by an important qualifier. There is widespread agreement in the social science literature that much of knowledge is socially constructed and that it is the objective of the social sciences

⁸ The operatic aspect of Trump's rhetoric may be more than a coincidental wrinkle. The 2016 presidential campaign has been likened to a continuous spectacle (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017).

⁹ A notable exception is an apology during Brett Kavanaugh's swearing-in ceremony, when the president apologized to the new Supreme Court justice "for the terrible pain and suffering" that he and his family endured during his confirmation hearings (Arnold 2018), which were dominated by allegations of sexual assault against the nominee.

to understand this constructive process (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1991). I accept the idea that knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is socially constructed and that this process is subject to critical and scholarly examination. However, unlike some strong critics of constructivism (e.g., Boghossian 2006), I do not accept that constructivism in its academic and philosophical sense inevitably entails an “anything goes” relativism. Raskin and Debany (2018:348) articulate strong reasons why epistemological constructivism does not imply ontological relativism: “If a rock is hurtling toward us, we will construe it ontologically as real, hard, and potentially dangerous. To do otherwise would be foolish.” Thus, from here on, when I refer to constructivism, I refer specifically to an unbounded overextension of this concept entailing an “anything goes” ontology of truth. Below, I will place this unbounded and overextended constructivist conception of truth into its political and historical context and then examine its psychological fallout and technological foundation. This analysis yields some tentative paths toward a solution.

Constructivist Conceptions of Truth: Political and Historical Context

Explicitly constructivist approaches to truth were at the core of the ideology of Italian fascism and German Nazism. Both rejected positivist thought, or the idea that absolute answers could be obtained by consideration of evidence (e.g., Varshizky 2012). Instead, Nazi writers such as Alfred Rosenberg proclaimed the existence of an “organic truth,” whereby “only that is true which promotes the existence of the organically closed, inner-worldly national community” (Voegelin 2000:62). On that view, truth is a personal experience, based entirely on intuition, which “can only be revealed through inner reflection and acknowledgement of the mythic experience of the soul” (Varshizky 2012:326). Knowledge, evidence, and science can be true only “if they serve the purpose of the racially bound nationhood (Volkstums)” (Voegelin 2000:62).

One’s personal constructed truth is thus inseparable from the existence of an overarching myth, created to “bind the masses emotionally and to arouse in them the politically effective expectation of salvation” (Voegelin 2000:62). Although, in principle, there are no constraints on the nature of the myth, it is typically palingenetic (promising a “rebirth”) and ultranationalist (Colasacco 2018). It is this adherence to a myth in preference to individual choices or evidentiary considerations that identifies fascism and other totalitarian ideologies, such as Communism, as political religions (Voegelin 2000). Of course, the existence of a myth is by itself insufficient for people to have the “mythic experience” required to absorb a constructed truth. What is needed in addition, therefore, is a propaganda apparatus that brings the populace into the fold (Colasacco 2018; Voegelin 2000). There could be no fascism without persuasive propaganda (Arendt 1951; Eatwell 1996).

The affinity between fascism and constructivist views of truth are firmly established. However, it does not follow that Trump and other populist politicians can legitimately be considered to be fascists. There is little appetite among scholars to label Trump a fascist (e.g., Colasacco 2018; cf. Giroux 2018; Peters 2018). In particular, there is no evidence that Trump explicitly seeks to overturn the institutions of constitutional government and replace it with a totalitarian “new order” in a revolutionary national “rebirth” (Colasacco 2018). Trumpist politics are also not accompanied by an identifiable myth, other than the rather diffuse—though potentially pal-ingentic—appeal to “Make America Great Again.” Trumpism, and similar movements in other countries, is thus best understood as a form of radical right-wing populism. Nonetheless, the similarities between fascist conceptions of truth and the ontology employed by Trump and his ideological allies must not be overlooked. I suggest that the “post-truth” discourse is inseparably tied to a constructivist ontology, which in turn is theoretically and empirically inseparable from populist politics and its psychological underpinnings and fallout.

Constructivist “Truth,” Populism, and Its Psychological Fallout

A defining attribute of populism is its Manichaean view of the world, as a binary conflict between “the people” and its enemies (Waisbord 2018a). Those enemies may be the “elites” or other out-groups such as immigrants (or both). A corollary of this binary view is the affirmation of “commonsense” truths against “elite” lies. In consequence, facts can never penetrate the unfalsifiable premise of populism that there is an eternal conflict between “the people” and “the elites.” As Waisbord states (2018a:10):

Critics can never offer facts that question, challenge, or complement populist assertions. Populism’s view of good people and bad elites is immune to factual corrections and nuances.

Instead, populists negate the possibility of truth-seeking as a shared goal of a society (Waisbord 2018b). The disregard for facts exhibited by Trump and other populist politicians must therefore be understood as a necessary consequence, rather than an incidental by-product, of their ideology. Populist conceptions of truth are incompatible with liberal-democratic norms of truth-seeking.

An ontological analysis, however, can only go so far: It can identify the nature of populist rhetoric and contrast it to democratic norms. It can explain the supply of constructivist rhetoric. It does not, however, explain why there is demand for misinformation. Why do large numbers of people tolerate a political leader who is sprouting 15 identifiable falsehoods every single day?

To answer this question, we must first understand what has replaced evidence-based truth-seeking in populist discourse. If *Washington Post* fact

checks find no traction with segments of the public, what does? In line with the fascist ontology of truth, Trump and other populist politicians' appeal to their intuitive authenticity to project an (largely imaginary) image of honesty (Theye and Melling 2018).

Authenticity is a potentially multifaceted construct (Kernis and Goldman 2006). Here we are concerned with one dimension of authenticity; namely, the relationship between a person's behavior and his/her claims. It is this consistency between an actor's "front door" and "backstage" that can project an image of authenticity to others (Hahl et al. 2017). There is much evidence that Trump is considered authentic by his followers. In one survey during the primary season (December 2015), 76% of Republican voters considered Trump to be authentic (Sargent 2015). In November 2018, a Quinnipiac University poll found that 77% of Republicans (but only 6% of Democrats) considered him to be honest. Conversely, 92% of Democrats found him to be dishonest, compared to only 18% of Republicans.¹⁰

Several markers of authenticity can be identified in Trump's rhetoric. For example, Enli (2017) found that more than one third of his tweets expressed political incorrectness, name-calling, and insults. Altogether, Trump has insulted 487 things, places, and people on Twitter (Lee and Quealy 2018). Those clear norm violations are signals of authenticity because while they place Trump outside the conventional sphere of politics (Theye and Melling 2018), they also signal his willingness to speak his mind without artifice. Similarly, continual violations of the "establishment" norm of truth-telling, or departure from conventional cognition (Lewandowsky et al. 2018), enable Trump to project himself as an authentic champion of "the people."

Those signals of authenticity are, however, not universally accepted; among Democrats, after all, Trump is nearly uniformly considered dishonest and is the subject of considerable derision. What determines acceptance of authenticity as a replacement or surrogate of honesty? Research has identified trait variables as well as contextual factors that drive endorsement of authenticity.

In terms of trait variables, there is some evidence that American conservatives are more susceptible to fake news than liberals. For example, Pennycook and Rand (2019) found that the ability to differentiate between real and fake news was lower among participants who supported Trump than among Clinton supporters. Similarly, endorsement of pseudo-profound bullshit statements (e.g., "consciousness is the growth of coherence, and of us"; Dalton 2016) has repeatedly been shown to be higher among conservatives than liberals (Pfattheicher and Schindler 2016; Sterling et al. 2016). A recent big data analysis has found that conservatives were more likely than others to share fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess et al. 2019). Although these findings are based on a small number of studies, and are thus best considered suggestive rather than conclusive, the strong underlying

¹⁰ <https://bit.ly/2FoZhqd> (accessed Jan. 28, 2020).

correlation between intuitive thinking and susceptibility to fake news observed by Pennycook and Rand (2019) meshes well with populist ontology.

Turning to contextual variables, Hahl et al. (2018) identified experimentally some of the conditions under which a “lying demagogue” might be considered authentic. They presented participants with a fictional election in which an incumbent was cast in two different lights. When the incumbent was described as having taken advantage of his position and shown disregard for an out-group, thus compromising institutional legitimacy, a challenger from that out-group who uttered an overt lie accompanied by a misogynistic statement was considered to be more authentic than an honest challenger. By contrast, if the incumbent was not compromised, then a lying challenger was judged less authentic than an honest challenger.

In a nutshell, lying may be considered authentic if a person is an outsider who is disadvantaged by an institution that is perceived to be in a crisis of legitimacy. These conditions identified by Hahl et al. (2018) mesh well with Trump’s projected image as an “anti-establishment” candidate who shares his supporters’ anguish at a presumedly oppressive “political correctness” (Theye and Melling 2018). Just as with the ontology of fascism, however, those conditions must be combined with effective propaganda before large segments of the population come to endorse populist demagogues. I address the specific propagandistic circumstances of the current “post-truth” malaise below.

The endorsement of an authentic demagogue has cognitive flow-on consequences. In one study (Swire et al. 2017), participants were presented with claims made by Trump on the campaign trail. Participants were asked to provide belief ratings, before false claims were corrected and true claims affirmed. Subsequent belief ratings were sensitive to this intervention. People adjusted their beliefs in the appropriate direction (i.e., increase for true and decrease for false claims). However, the feelings and voting intentions of Trump supporters were unaffected by those corrections; that is, the extent of belief shift was uncorrelated with voting intentions. One interpretation of those findings is that the accuracy of Trump’s statements is of no concern to his supporters.

In another study, partisans were found to engage in a form of “fake news” themselves. Schaffner and Luks (2018) presented participants with two photos of presidential inaugurations side by side and asked them to indicate which one had more people in it. One of the photos was from President Obama’s inauguration, the other from President Trump’s inauguration. Both photos were taken under identical conditions at the same time, and there is no ambiguity about the fact that far more people attended Obama’s inauguration than Trump’s. However, the “alternative facts” surrounding this event that had been invoked by Trump’s counselor, Conway, were sufficient to convince a sizable share of Trump voters to identify the wrong photo. It is particularly noteworthy that highly educated Trump supporters showed greater inaccuracy (26%) than their less-educated counterparts (11%). Schaffner and Luks (2018:136) interpreted their results to reveal expressive responding, “whereby individuals

intentionally provide misinformation to survey researchers as a way of showing support for their political viewpoint.”

The preference for authenticity over truth seems to be widely shared by supporters of Trump. We therefore confront a state of Western democracies in which multiple ontologies of truth are in irreconcilable competition. How did we get here and how can we restore the pursuit of evidence-based truth as a consensual feature of democratic societies? Answers to those questions can be found mainly in the political domain. The “post-truth” world arose from socioeconomic and political factors, and ultimately the solution will therefore require socioeconomic and political measures. Those political analyses are beyond the present scope.¹¹ Here, I focus instead on selected psychological aspects of the technology and communication strategies that have enabled a populist ontology of truth to find traction in Western societies.

The Road to “Post-Truth”

We live in an era of “cultural chaos” (McNair 2017): new communication technologies have “made public access to potentially destabilizing information easier, and elite control of unwanted information harder” (McNair 2017:504). WikiLeaks or Ed Snowden, for example, have subverted conventional authority and, in concert with social media, have arguably contributed to protests and democratization efforts in some instances (Jost et al. 2018). But the same cultural chaos, in which information is no longer distanced so that violence in Burkina Faso can unsettle people’s sense of security in Castrop-Rauxel, has given rise to a heightened *sense of crisis* (McNair 2017). A sense of crisis is a necessary condition for “authentic lying demagogues” to find traction (Hahl et al. 2018). And once demagogues find traction, their ontology of truth creates the necessary conditions for “shock and chaos” misinformation (McCright and Dunlap 2017) which further amplifies the cultural chaos in a never-ending feedback loop.

I take shock and chaos misinformation to refer to falsehoods that are dispersed not with the intent to persuade consumers of a particular state of the world, but to disrupt, undermine, and cast into doubt targeted information. Here I focus on three principles of shock and chaos misinformation: incoherence and conspiracism; diversion and deflection; and flooding and trolling. Much existing analysis has explored those principles with respect to Russian state-sponsored efforts (Jamieson 2018; Paul and Matthews 2016). I accept that focus; however, I consider it to be for computational convenience only.

¹¹ To provide brief pointers, some societal mega trends that may be particularly relevant to the emergence of the post-truth society are listed in Lewandowsky et al. (2017). Funke et al. (2016) provided a quantitative model of the temporal linkage between financial crises and subsequent outbursts of populism.

Analyses of shock and chaos misinformation applies equally regardless of the particular source.

Incoherence and Conspiracism

Conventional wisdom holds that persuasive campaigns should avoid contradiction (Paul and Matthews 2016). In stark contrast, Russian sources routinely issue highly contradictory accounts. For example, after the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 by a Russian-made missile in 2014, Sputnik, RT (formerly Russia Today) and other pro-Kremlin websites first denied the involvement of a Russian missile. Then the same sources blamed the downing on a Ukrainian attack. Then they said the pilot had deliberately crashed and that the plane had been full of dead bodies before impact. Finally, these sources argued that the incident was part of a conspiracy to besmirch Russia (Lewandowsky and Lynam 2018). Similar incoherent narratives were provided by Vladimir Putin during the crisis that led to the annexation of the Crimea by Russia (Paul and Matthews 2016; White 2016). Although contradictory messages can enhance persuasiveness under certain circumstances (Reich and Tormala 2013), those circumstances (high trust in the source, strong arguments) do not typically apply to Russian sources with a Western audience.

The incoherence of shock and chaos may thus serve a different purpose. Incoherence is a known attribute of conspiracy theories (Lewandowsky et al. 2016; Wood et al. 2012), and the mere exposure to conspiracy theories, in turn, is known to reduce trust in official information (Einstein and Glick 2015). Similarly, when people are asked to construct a narrative from a set of available information, the presence of extreme conspiratorial statements reduces reliance on official information (Raab et al. 2013). The (sometimes) preposterous claims by Russian sources (Richey 2018) or Trump (Lewandowsky 2019) may thus fail to persuade but they do succeed in creating doubt about official information.

Diversion and Deflection

On November 19, 2016, President-elect Trump unleashed a Twitter fusillade against a Broadway play in New York City, claiming that the cast of *Hamilton* had “harassed” Vice-President-elect Pence, who attended the performance. Ostensibly, this tirade was triggered by the cast reading an open letter at the end of a show, pleading for respect for a “diverse America.” Curiously, Trump’s tirade coincided with the revelation that he had agreed to a \$25 million settlement (including a \$1 million penalty to the State of New York) of lawsuits targeting his (now defunct) Trump University. This timing may have been entirely coincidental, but the confected Twitter outrage may also have been a targeted distraction as some observers suggested at the time (Bulman

2016). Diversion has been nominated as one rhetorical category in a taxonomy of Trump's tweets (Lakoff 2017). The possibility that the Hamilton tirade was a strategic diversion finds indirect support in an analysis of Google Trends (Lewandowsky et al. 2017), but an overall quantitative analysis of this particular strategy is lacking to date.

Closely related to diversion is the strategy of deflection (Lakoff 2017), whereby another party is accused of dishonesty or "fake news" while the deflective message is itself false. Trump has been shown to use the accusation of "fake news" to spread his own mis- and disinformation, using the accusation to frame his own messages as truth (Ross and Rivers 2018). The idea that Trump might deliberately engage in such diversionary tactics is consonant with the observation that similar methods are employed by corporate actors in their attempts to "greenwash" their actions (Siano et al. 2017).

Flooding and Trolling

One overarching attribute of shock and chaos misinformation is its sheer volume (Paul and Matthews 2016; Richey 2018). Volume matters because the signal-to-noise ratio on the Internet is diluted every time another falsehood is published. A vast number of false stories also prevents rebuttals to be issued because fact-checking is necessarily more painstaking than inventing the claim that the Pope had endorsed Trump and that Clinton sold weapons to ISIS (Hallin 2018).

One particular flooding technique involves "trolling," a disruptive online bullying behavior that involves "posting inflammatory malicious messages in online comment sections to deliberately provoke, disrupt, and upset others" (Craker and March 2016:79). Trolls create a rhetorical environment in which any substantive and serious response would only elicit further abuse, thereby shutting down the possibility of civil conversation. Moreover, the mere presence of uncivil comments is sufficient to cause attitude polarization (Anderson et al. 2013).

Individuals engage in trolling in pursuit of satisfaction; the personality traits psychopathy and sadism are strong predictors of trolling behavior (Craker and March 2016). However, trolling has also been weaponized by the Russian government. Using "troll farms" of professionals who flood the Internet with disruptive content, weaponized trolling can shut down legitimate conversation (Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2018). Russian trolls have demonstrably created discord around events in the United States and Germany (Prier 2017). It is now also clear that trolls interfered in the U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom in 2016, and the French presidential election in 2017 (Prier 2017). Although Russian trolls favor the extremist right wing overall (thus supporting Trump, Brexit, and LePen), they also frequently stoke both sides of an issue to maximize discord and division (Romano 2018).

For example, Russian trolls have been found to engage on both sides of the vaccination issue, amplifying both scientific content as well as anti-vaccination disinformation (Broniatowski et al. 2018). Given the crucial role of the perceived scientific consensus in determining the public's attitude toward issues such as vaccinations and climate change (Lewandowsky et al. 2013; van der Linden et al. 2015), the amplification of both sides of the issue serves to create a false equivalency that is likely to erode the perceived scientific and public consensus (Broniatowski et al. 2018).

The Remainder of the Iceberg and Implications for Common Knowledge

This discussion has omitted numerous other variables that determine the efficacy of shock and chaos misinformation. Foremost among those are computational propaganda tools such as social-media “bots,” micro-targeted messaging, and avatars (e.g., Howard et al. 2018) as well as more basic adverse attributes of social media, such as the misogyny it supports (Eckert 2017) and the simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility it fosters (Ott 2017). I also omitted discussion of security issues, such as state-sponsored cyberattacks to obtain confidential information (e.g., Farrell and Schneier 2018; Inkster 2016) and skirted the implications of big data analyses of news consumption (e.g., Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Schmidt et al. 2017). A full understanding of shock and chaos misinformation requires examination of all variables.

Even the present selective discussion should, however, suffice to establish the risks of shock and chaos misinformation. Democracy requires a body of common political knowledge (Farrell and Schneier 2018). This common knowledge provides the stabilizing expectations that enable societal coordination (e.g., knowledge and confidence that the voting system is fair and that an election defeat does not prevent future wins). Prolonged exposure to shock and chaos misinformation may pollute the information environment sufficiently to compromise this tacit, but crucial, shared knowledge (Farrell and Schneier 2018; White 2016).

Exiting the “Post-Truth” World

The antidotes to the populist ontology of truth, and the shock and chaos misinformation it entails, follow naturally from the preceding analysis. This analysis identified two main elements of the “post-truth” world. First, authoritarians, autocrats, and populists avoid deliberation and actively seek to suppress or subvert reasoned discourse (Hinck et al. 2018). Second, “post-truth” propaganda does not necessarily seek to persuade but to divert, distract, deflect, and to undermine common knowledge (Farrell et al. 2018; Paul and Matthews 2016).

Deliberative Democracy

An antidote to the first element involves deliberative forms of democracy, such as citizens' assemblies and other deliberative fora in which randomly chosen citizens consider issues in depth and with expert input (Chambers 2018). Under the right circumstances (e.g., expert facilitation), deliberations by groups of citizens can be inclusive, depolarizing, and constructive (Chambers 2018; Curato et al. 2017).

The constructive role of deliberative bodies can be illustrated with respect to several recent referenda. In the United Kingdom, the Brexit referendum was marred by a surplus of misinformation, much of it disseminated by tabloid media, that has been characterized as “systematic epistemic rights violations” (Watson 2018). The referendum has engendered a crass majoritarianism, with growing and toxic polarization. In striking contrast, Ireland was able to conduct two referenda on highly emotive issues (marriage equality and abortion) without experiencing a comparable toxicity. One ingredient of Ireland's success was citizens' assemblies which were convened by the Irish government and informed the subsequent popular vote, based on extensive expert interrogation (Farrell et al. 2018). The key role of deliberation is further supported by the fact that a citizens' assembly constituted in the United Kingdom after the referendum (for research purposes) yielded recommendations for Brexit that were far more nuanced and pragmatic than the rhetoric during the campaign (Renwick et al. 2018). It is of particular interest that the assembly favored a continuation of free movement (i.e., free immigration from EU countries) even though removal of that right was a centerpiece of the campaign to leave the EU (and is now presented as an achievement by the U.K. government).

Deliberative assemblies cannot be a panacea to guard against populism. However, their design ensures resilience against the processes of demagoguery and propaganda reviewed earlier. This resilience has been repeatedly confirmed in real settings involving citizens' assemblies. Notably, Ireland has been largely spared the populist tendencies observed in other comparable countries (Culloty and Suiter 2018; Suiter et al. 2018).

Journalistic Norms and New Narratives

The antidote to shock and chaos misinformation cannot only involve point-by-point rebuttal (Richey 2018). This is nearly impossible in light of the sheer volume of misinformation, and, in the end, debunking it is also often distressingly ineffective (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Instead, putting aside regulatory (Wood and Ravel 2018) and technological (Lewandowsky et al. 2017) countermeasures for now, shock and chaos can only be met by proactive messaging and pursuit of an alternative narrative (cf. Lewandowsky et al. 2012).

Several alternative narratives have been tabled (e.g., Hellman and Wagnsson 2017). One intriguing option is to avoid covering shock and chaos

misinformation. This was practiced by the French press during the French presidential election in 2017. When the campaign of President Macron was hacked and emails leaked, the press did not cover the content of those emails. Instead, the media focused on the hacking and the influence operation behind the hack, refusing to give credibility to the leaked information (Prier 2017). Similarly, the Irish media have successfully served as gatekeepers against populism (Culloty and Suiter 2018; Suiter et al. 2018). In striking contrast, the American media appeared more concerned with the content of Democrats' hacked emails than the fact that they were obtained illegally. Only after the election of Trump did the *New York Times* concede that it had become "a de facto instrument of Russian intelligence" by publishing multiple stories that cited hacked content (Lipton et al. 2016). Recommendations by legal scholars not to publish hacked content have followed (Zelinsky 2017), and the *New York Times* has urged the media to ignore Trump's "Twitter exhortations" (Bruni 2019). Ironically, this is a recommendation for the deliberate creation of public ignorance, ostensibly for the public good.

A more proactive narrative seeks to counterbalance the sense of cultural chaos with a message of order and structure (Hellman and Wagnsson 2017). The details of such narratives are beyond the present scope of this discussion. However, given the widespread discontent that provides the breeding ground for populism, it is crucial for a counternarrative to be built on a message of inclusivity and solidarity that can withstand populism (Stacey 2018).

New Norms of Citizenship

Finally, even positive narratives require a receptive audience. There has been a decline in trust in traditional media, at least among some groups. For example, in Germany the mainstream media are routinely besmirched as *Lügenpresse* (lying press) by populists (Quandt 2012). For journalistic norms and new narratives to be an effective solution to exiting the post-truth era, people must learn to dismiss false information and fake news. There is some evidence that this skill can be acquired (Lewandowsky 2019). Specific recommendations of how this skill can be exercised have been provided by Lewandowsky and Lynam (2018). It is encouraging that "fake news" finds much less traction among young "digital natives" than among the elderly. In a big data analysis, Guess et al. (2019) found that people over age 65 share articles from fake news domains seven times more frequently than the youngest age group. Behr (2017) describes a broader educational context that would be required to achieve a restoration of democratic spaces for deliberation and diversity.

Finally, and somewhat ironically, deliberately choosing not to know may be another arrow in the quiver against the deliberate construction of social ignorance by demagogues. Deliberate ignorance may be a strategy to shield oneself from misinformation, Trump's barrage of falsehoods, and conspiracy theories. This is a nontrivial task, as lies, "fake news," and conspiracy theories

are, by design, made to be more interesting and novel than simple facts and truths. It may take considerable cognitive effort to mentally quarantine the claim that Hillary Clinton is a shape-shifting reptile or that she sold arms to ISIS. Accordingly, deliberate ignorance can be understood as a smart strategy to protect oneself against the deliberate construction of public ignorance.

Evidence on this issue is ambivalent. As noted earlier, partisans are willing to shift their belief in specific statements made by Trump (e.g., disbelieving falsehoods after they have been corrected) but those changes do not affect their support or feelings for Trump (Swire-Thompson et al. 2019; Swire et al. 2017). In the present context, one could interpret those results to imply that people remain deliberately ignorant of the truth value of Trump's statements (unless they are corrected in an experimental intervention), and that this ignorance shields people from having to update their core beliefs about Trump. This interpretation is supported by another aspect of the findings by Swire and colleagues, namely that Trump supporters expressed nearly the same extent of belief in both true and false statements made by Trump before the experimental intervention. However, this interpretation must necessarily remain tentative for now.

Other relevant evidence can be adduced from a recent study by Lewandowsky, Jetter, and Ecker (submitted), which related Trump's Twitter vocabulary to media coverage of issues that were politically threatening to the president. They found that increased coverage in the *New York Times* or *ABC Evening News* of the Mueller investigation into Russian influence during the 2016 election triggered increased Twitter activity by Trump on unrelated topics that represented his political strengths (e.g., job creation). That increased Twitter activity, in turn, *reduced* subsequent coverage of the Mueller investigation by the media. In the present context, one can interpret this as a failure of strategic deliberate ignorance on the part of the media. Instead of ignoring irrelevant tweets, they were successfully diverted from the Russia-Mueller coverage by Trump.

Concluding Remarks

Democracy is a never-ending quest (Przeworski 2016). Democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that citizens are irreducibly diverse (Galston 2018). Populism's binary view of the "people" versus the "elite" cannot accommodate that diversity and will therefore inevitably continue to search for new enemies that, once identified, will need to be combated. Ultimately, the logic of populism will threaten the rights of minorities and enable a creep toward autocracy (Galston 2018). Democracy also requires common political knowledge that is accepted by all actors (Farrell and Schneier 2018). The blizzard of shock and chaos misinformation that is propelled by the logic of populist ontology is undermining that common knowledge.

Turning to the global level, a populist vision is incompatible with a multilateral international order that is governed by law and compromise (Kasner

2017). It is at this level of abstraction that the carefully curated deceptions involving Iraqi WMDs share further common ground with the shock and chaos fake news that are entwined with a constructivist view of truth. As Walter Benjamin, a German philosopher who fled from the Nazis, noted from exile in 1935 (Benjamin 2004:1239): “Fascist ideology, culminate[s] in one thing: war.” The cost of failure to reclaim a realist ontology of truth may therefore be high indeed.

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