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The crisis of democratic culture?

Politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia [...] political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind. (Orwell 1945: 15, 20) We are trying to make sure voters receive messages on the issues and policies they care about, [that] they are not bombarded with irrelevant materials [...]. That can only be good for democracy. (Alexander Nix, quoted in UK Parliament 2018: 3, 97) This piece assesses the risk of disinformation primarily, but not exclusively, in the Anglo-American context. It unpicks assumptions behind post-truth and fake news; considers precedents for disinformation and queries the extent of its novelty. Are these manageable challenges to democratic cultures or a crisis? It concludes that whatever the terminological tangles, industrialized disinformation signal threats to the public sphere, threats underscored by historical events highlighting the vulnerability of democracy. Yet threats to democratic systems have not deleted their scrutinizing capabilities from below (voters) and from above (the legislature). Therefore challenges, for all their potency and potential, have not yet reached crisis. 08_MCP_14.3_Bendall Robertson_383-392.indd 383 11/28/18 8:12 AM 384 International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics Mark J. Bendall | Chris Robertson

Definitional difficulties Both fake news and post-truth have dictionary definitions. Post-truth is a self-consciously grand term of epochal shift [trading heavily on assumptions about an era of truth we apparently once enjoyed.] [...] the 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. Corner

(2017: 1101) This piece will interrogate those assumptions and assess the nature of change. Fake news has been referred to as a 'fraudulent media product' (Corner 2017: 1102). It links to two related phenomena. First, it embraces what is considered unreliable in the media environment; second, it has become a weaponized term by populist governments to delegitimize news with which they disagree or which seemed temporally inconvenient. For example Trump declaring CNN as fake news; his disowning as 'fake' his critical interview with The Sun about PM May despite a publicized recording confirming its veracity. The absence of shame here exemplifies Scullion's (2017) decivilizing thesis. Shamelessness as flat contradiction between statement at one media appearance and the other links to this new casualness about obvious disinformation in political life (Schlesinger 2016). It implies an unassumed lack of accountability for deception. So problematic is the concept that a DCMS Select Committee report recommended – following advice from academics at Bournemouth University – that, rather than 'fake news', nomenclatures such as disinformation and misinformation would be apposite. Precedents of post-truth Corner (2017) rightly points to assumptions behind the term. Precedents caution any claims about the novelty of post-truth. The problematization of truth is well-rehearsed by post-modernist debates. Incredulity towards metanarratives, the idea that few can agree on what is 'real', have been asserted by Lyotard (1984) and others. Long before postmodernists doubted 'eternal verities', political theorists counselled the need for deceptive statecraft. Machiavelli noted that masses are readily deceived: few can touch; all can see (Harris 2010). As the leader alternates between bravery and cunning, these truth games were deemed necessary to harbour stability. Disinformation could produce order. The notion that post-truth does the exact opposite – that it destabilizes regimes into crisis is considered in conclusion. Beyond political leadership, deception grew more sophisticated and monetized with the twentieth century PR industry. Bernays (1928) in Ewen (1996) discussed how to manipulate the popular mind, to create a need for product. Manipulation could move from commercial to directly political purposes, whether during war-time with fake stories propagated about German armies eating babies in the First World War or, in peacetime, with the Zinoviev letter an attempted smear of

a Labour government. In the foreign policy, Chilcot Report (2016) judgements about Blair's 'emotionally true' comments regarding Iraq, or, in domestic policy, questions over Vote Leave tactics at the Brexit referendum confirm this well-established tendency to dissimulate in politics.

08_MCP_14.3_Bendall Robertson_383-392.indd 384 11/28/18 8:12 AM www.intellectbooks.com

385 The crisis of democratic culture? Ultimately, the novelty of manipulation can be questioned through Herman and Chomsky's (1995) acknowledgement of media distortion in democracies decades before contemporary 'fake news' debates emerged. Organized lying assumed new intensity outside capitalist democracies. The Frankfurt School (1940) warned totalitarianism could proliferate in democratic contexts, as the demise of the Weimar Republic evidenced. Arendt (1973) explained how a climate of confusion served the needs of leaders. Left vulnerable by socio-economic upheavals, a muddled mass could be susceptible to Goebbelian big lies. Cambridge Analytica applauded the effectiveness of fascist techniques, such as leveraging an enemy, to academic whistleblowers. This indicated the contemporary vitality of techniques in democracies (Briant cited in Graham 2018). Therefore, doubts about universal truth and belief in the value of organized disinformation clearly pre-date the Trump-era use of the post-truth concept. Yet if disinformation is nothing new, the currency of the term implies fresh phenomena. The next section considers this.

Post-truth: The extent of novelty and continuity McLuhan (1994) posited that the salience of a new type of communication is not just the content but the social and political changes it occasions.

Famously, the medium is the message where time and space has shrunk. Amplification of disinformation on social media brought global reach and granularity previously unavailable. The electronic global village connects core with periphery. This new hybrid media system is fertile ground for post-truth to sprout (Chadwick 2013). Previously, established media were gatekeepers, or filters (Herman and Chomsky 1995). In Web 2.0 politicians can bypass these outlets – labelled as 'fake' – and directly communicate with publics. New technology, combined with increased casualness about accuracy from formal political actors Schlesinger (2016) identified, represent a new delivery route for selling truths. Despite his proclivity for physical barriers, Trump exploited an

increasingly boundary-blurred media environment. Possessing 40 million Twitter followers, when Trump retweeted comment from selectively garnered Breitbart content, a fringe far-right site was awarded mass visibility. The claim is not made that everything Breitbart produces is fabricated; rather that it had a niche appeal and its injection into the mainstream of the body politic is distinctive. For a president to instil pseudo-legitimacy exacerbated divisiveness and hate crimes (Statista.com 2018) to expand his political base. This, a moral panic directed by human hand, coupled with the use of bots to distort online election debate, is a challenge to democratic norms evidenced by academic research (Ferrara 2017). Further, the repetition of prejudices by mainstream politicians (Trump, Johnson) seeks to normalize far-right perspectives by thrusting them centrestage to instil public veneration. This potentially reorients what then constitutes the mainstream. For far right to be re-framed as orthodox right is indicative of post-truth politics. Social media intensifies systemic manipulation. Political marketing and propaganda have long existed as Lippman would attest, but the microtargeting revealed by Cambridge Analytica is based on academic research that shows the 'efficacy of using social media, natural language or Internet clickstream data for psychological profiling or mass persuasion' (Wylie 2018: n.pag). Militarily influenced psychological manipulation was deployed against 08_MCP_14.3_Bendall Robertson_383-392.indd 385 11/28/18 8:12 AM 386 International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics Mark J. Bendall | Chris Robertson an electorate without voter consent. The use of 'Facts underpinned by emotion' (Nix, cited in DCMS Report, 2018: 92) allowed a fine-grained manipulation of voters from their social media profiles. This raises ethical questions. Whilst the techniques are novel the manipulation is less so: it 'industrialises what good salespeople have always done, by adjusting their message and delivery to the personality of their customers' (Wade 2018: n.pag). This is a bipartisan matter, as the Obama campaign successfully utilized citizens' Facebook profiles. However, the novelty of hostile state manipulation using social media did not feature in Obama's campaign, based on current academic knowledge. Hence the industrialized use of digitalized disinformation, could be perceived as novel, expanding on military and commercial utilization of manipulation. This combined with the sheer number of overt

and covert stakeholders, does layer unprecedented complexities into any analysis, given the resources of academics are dwarfed by the potentially salient material. Conclusions: Is this a crisis? Whilst organized disinformation has centuries-old roots, social media intensified its reach. This section will consider how far this represents a challenge to, or worse, a crisis within Anglo-American democracies whilst drawing warnings from divergent sociopolitical contexts. Criteria for democratic crisis is restricted here to a systemic failure in scrutiny, whether legislative or electoral. Is the post-truth phenomenon restricted to Anglo-American culture or is there evidence of a wider pattern? Trump attracts most attention, however, it is also necessary to consider other sociopolitical contexts and not isolate post-truth debates to western contexts. Waisbord (2018) notes that in Latin America, post-truth politics allied with populist movements. He sees many parallels with authoritarian movements worldwide. The root of populism's opposition to truth is its binary vision of politics. For populism, 'the people' and 'the elites' hold their own 'version of truth [...]. Even when in power, populism insists on this vision of truth as necessarily divided, a principled shared by right-wing (Trump in the United States, Erdogan in Turkey) and left-wing populism (Chavismo in Venezuela)' (Waisbord 2018: 25). Waisbord (2018) identified five concerns: depoliticization, cynicism, simplified issues, exclusion of citizens and press negativity. Degradations of political culture include: voters shun the political sphere unable to discern what truth is; complex issues become vulgarized – famously the Brexit bus promising millions to the NHS. Press negativity, labelled a 'feral beast' (Blair 2007), risks framing public life around error and disorder. Voters ignore verifiable information through psychologically embedded partisan selectivity and heuristic cues. The impact for Waisbord (2018) is a crisis in public communication. The current media ecology favours populism; populism privileges disinformation. These trends could represent a crisis in countries where the public sphere cannot counter post-truth narratives, particularly in authoritarian nations where military legacies ingrained populism. Digital disinformation can produce calamitous social and political impacts. As the UN and the UK DCMS Report (2018) note, Facebook accounts exacerbated tensions in Myanmar and hence allegedly influenced genocidal events befalling the Rohingya (OHCHR 2018). The EU has

not faced this level of crisis, yet it www.intellectbooks.com 387 The crisis of democratic culture? media messages across Europe and the spike in hate crimes reported against immigrants (UK.gov 2018). The capacity of digital disinformation to inflame racial division as migrants flow out of Africa and the Middle East underscores that the post-truth discussion is more grounded than a polite semantic debate. Digital disinformation lends credence to conspiracy theories (Hofstadter 1960) in filter bubbles. This can propel real-world confrontations or avoidance of those who challenge rather than confirm biases. How far is this specific example of disinformation around 'the other' symptomatic of a multi-factoral malaise? Do multiple challenges, synergistically, constitute crisis? Drawing together several strands: we are witnessing a toxic combination of policy blunders on austerity, war and globalisation coupled with a new hybrid media and political system [...]. Combined with what has been dubbed 'post truth politics': appeals to emotion are dominant and factual rebuttals or fact checks are ignored on the basis they are mere assertions. This combination arguably results in swathes of expressive voters moved by dangerous rhetoric and nativism. (Suiter 2016: 25)

The term 'crisis' has been used both by communication professionals (Waisbord 2018; Nussbaum 2018), and also by parliamentarians. It is claimed the fake news environment threatened the integrity of democratic systems. This has been echoed too by the VC of Oxford: in an era of great divides in educational attainment, 'this has the potential to undermine the bonds that hold representative democracy together [...] if knowledge is seen as a perk of the plutocracy, the underlying consensus, the basis of truth on which decisions are made, could be eroded' (Richardson 2018, original emphasis). Attacks on experts by prominent parliamentarians sought to stigmatize peer-reviewed evidence as it privileges popular impulses. Attacks on universities are symptomatic of delegitimation of public sphere actors who have the cultural capital to challenge disinformation.

Calling an event a crisis is in itself an effective PR tool, but the question is how far democratic norms have been dented, or destroyed? Final analysis may be premature with incomplete FBI investigations into Russian involvement in the 2016 US election; the full impact of 'dark ads' or fake accounts during the Brexit referendum still opaque. Despite the inferno of disinformation, for a challenge to

become a crisis democratic structures would have had to wilt under its heat. It is not yet clear that this has happened. Robust investigations into social media and disinformation on both sides of the Atlantic sometimes compelled organizations to testify (Library of Congress 2018). Some political figures put information into a hierarchy of credibility and call out the fallacious. The DCMS Report of 2018 proposed measures to return transparency. Creating the equivalent of Ofcom for social media companies and clearer labelling as to the prominence of advertisements especially at election could fortify the public sphere. The need for greater ethical reflection by social media companies – some of which including CEO Zuckerberg refused to give evidence – reminds us of the values of the public sphere – intelligibility, truth, sincerity which the committee found lacking from digital power elites. What further measures could be implemented to prevent a challenge becoming a crisis? The responsibilities of the mainstream press merited

08_MCP_14.3_Bendall Robertson_383-392.indd
387 11/28/18 8:12 AM 388 International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics Mark J. Bendall | Chris Robertson

more reflection, some of which parasitically feeds on, and regurgitates, social media content. Parliamentarians called for more integrity in legitimate press, yet the second phase of the Leveson Enquiry has still not occurred – when press, police and politicians could not exonerate themselves from allegations of collusion as the government did not authorize further investigation. This lack of scrutiny by the legislature indicates the British state has proved more determined to illuminate disinformation from foreign actors than domestic networks. For full democratic health potential conflicts of interest that long pre-dated ‘post-truth’ should be probed. Can one conceive of a crisis coming from external sources or in fact from the internal capitalist relations within democracies? The report often returned to Russia as the malign external actor. Clearly the FBI arrests of Russian agents indicated this is more than Russophobia (Priestap 2017) yet it is equally clear that the military industrial complex sprawls across a number of NATO countries. Members of the board of Cambridge Analytica and its parent company included UK military figures and senior Conservatives. ICA had immersive contacts with UK defence industries and government departments. Famous Conservatives were involved in the more notorious examples of

disinformation during Brexit. One wonders if the report has been as critical of leading Conservatives MPs as hostile foreign actors? Hence it is appropriate not just to focus on external forces but to recognize corporate networks within democratic systems that seek to exploit digital information for the vote. A further measure to forestall a democratic crisis is to increase the capacities of voters to detect rather than digest disinformation, and to increase numbers which already resist preferred readings. The Select Committee recommended increasing digital literacy in schools. Yet as Prensky (2001) has shown digital natives are often more adept at spotting media malice than their parents. Greater education of all citizens in digital skills and fact checking could help counter these threats to democracies. To claim a full-blown crisis one would have to verify that citizens' critical faculties had been nullified by disinformation before any such campaign of digital literacy had been inculcated. Yet, a lack of evidence hinders this claim. A task for future academic work is to conduct more granular audience studies or ethnographic work into citizens exposed to fake news and post-truth, a task Facebook facilitates as of 2018. How far if at all did disinformation inform voting intentions in the EU referendum in the UK or US election of 2016? From the Frankfurt School through to Waisbord (2018) at times there is a presumed gullibility – reductively assuming voters cannot decode messages for themselves. The shadow of the hypodermic syringe model – often discredited in media studies – seems to fall across many accounts (Garland 2002). Yet Hall (1973) established that, despite encoded messages and preferred readings, some voters will read 'against the grain' and take negotiated or oppositional stances as they decode. For all the concern around Trump with his use of disinformation, and possible external influence on the election, it is still the case that three million more Americans voted for Clinton than him. It follows that media, communication and politics scholars need more information about how organized deception – whether from within or outside a state – is received. This point does not reject the powerful manipulative capacities of a Web 2.0 post-truth. It does emphasize how reductive it would be to assert all citizens are uniformly impressionable. The mass unsubscription from Facebook (The Guardian, 12 April 2018) indicated that exposed manipulation

08_MCP_14.3_Bendall Robertson_383-392.indd 388 11/28/18 8:12 AM

www.intellectbooks.com 389 The crisis of democratic culture? produces resistance, not automatic compliance. Trust and share price can desert modish companies, not just established media and politicians. If voters were ever to lose all critical faculties in an era of disinformation that would represent an existential crisis. More evidence is needed though to claim this was more than a risk. Conclusively, the trends analysed do not total a collapse of legislative and popular scrutiny. Those trends therefore do not indicate a crisis. Whilst the piece did not have the space to discuss that the fourth estate and the judiciary still function despite the shadow of disinforming populists, these factors would only further have reinforced the contention that pluralized systems in the United States and United Kingdom have been challenged, rather than fatally compromised. The potential of disinformation to destabilize any system, though, is borne out by its impact on selected authoritarian states: weaker public spheres insufficiently challenged malicious othering – most glaringly in Myanmar. The more disinformation acclimatizes democracies to populism, the greater the risk that challenges culminate into crisis. With the advent of research into social media databases, such as Social Science One (Tett 2018) it is also a normative responsibility of the academic community to insist more loudly on the value of reliable, verifiable information, as a counter-narrative to post-truth relativism. Emboldened populists are far from neutral about academics: if judges or established press can be targeted as enemies of the people, the academy could fall within those cross-hairs too. Educationalists have a role in deterring crisis, not just commentating from supposed neutrality and relative privilege. More academics need to spend time out of assessment silos and safe archives; need to be heard in the cacophonous public sphere, rather than cede space to siren songs of disinformation. For if disinformation tips from challenge to crisis, if populists manage not just to confront democratic checks on their agendas, but to burn them, history warns us how safe archives can become very flammable, very quickly.

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