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Contemporary democracies find themselves in a paradoxical situation, characterised by a simultaneous deficit and excess of trust. Many citizens refuse to believe in the truth of much that is told to them by hitherto authoritative elites and institutions. They choose not to trust them because they have lost faith in their good intentions (Newton, 2017; Muñoz, 2017; Tsfaty and Ariely, 2014; Coleman et al, 2012). Other citizens are willing to offer exorbitant credulity to charismatic figures who have convinced them that they are embodied projections of their wildest social fantasies. Through performances of populist ventriloquism, leaders and followers find themselves entangled in a web of misplaced trust, each believing that the other is their mirror reflection (Freedman, 2017; Coleman, 2016; McDonnell, 2016).

Neither blind faith nor permanent disbelief are conducive to democratic agency. If citizens are to possess the kind of political efficacy that is consistent with even the most basic democratic norms, they need to be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood. At the very least, they must aspire to act upon what is materially real rather than upon phantoms of their imaginations. Realising such an aspiration entails a combination of experiential observation and interpretation - without which the political world would be reduced to mere rumour and report - and mediated trust - without which a capacity to imagine, manage and counteract the non-immediate world would be impossible.

The work of distinguishing between political truth, lies and various shades of grey can be arduous and dispiriting. Few citizens have the time or energy to do it very effectively. They rely upon short-cuts, preferring to be somewhat in the picture than wholly in the dark. But even this economical strategy entails choosing between competing heuristic sources. Apart from the very few people who possess the resources, forensic skills and obsessive commitment to evaluate every single political claim that is ever made to them, political truth-seeking is always a matter of deciding who and what to trust. To trust in others – witnesses who were on the scene of an event when we were not; experts who have worked their way through complex accounts and explanations; storytellers who have taken the time to compress diffuse events and trends into a comprehensible narrative – is not an act of gullibility, but common sociality. However, the terms of trust matter. Incurious trust is a lethal combination. Unless people care about their capacity to arrive at cognitive, affective and moral judgements in response to truth claims, they will be radically vulnerable to inaccuracy and insincerity. One does not need to believe in Truth as an ontological absolute to be bothered by differences between what is credible and what is bogus.

Claims that we are living in a state of such profound epistemological instability that we lack a cultural consensus about how to evaluate truth-claims raise urgent questions about public communication and the nature of mediated trust. These questions go beyond whether citizens trust too much or not enough and call for a new debate about the terms of political trust, which have tended to be rather lazily defined by liberal democracies. Academic literature is replete with empirical studies about how much people (dis)trust politicians and journalists (Brants, 2013; Birch and Allen, 2015; Whiteley et al, 2016); which citizens are the most and least likely to be trusting (Van Ingen and Bekkers, 2015; Botzen, 2015; Koivula et al, 2017) and institutional strategies designed to 'restore' political trust (Fledderus, 2015; Moynihan and Soss, 2014; OECD, 2017). These are all valuable, but do not in themselves address the normative question: What kind of political truths should we trust and why?

A key objective of this special issue is to explore how far research can take us beyond the journalistic short-hand of 'post-truth' and allow us to understand the changing character of public communication

and the new challenges facing individuals and societies that are committed to democratic norms and practices. When I accepted the invitation to edit this special issue my hope was to bring together a collection of articles that would be taken seriously within and beyond the academy. I urged contributors to focus upon the specific responsibilities of mediators in an era in which truth has become a watchword of radical resistance to the inanities, banalities and routine calumnies of atrophying democracy. The contributors to this special issue have fulfilled that brief with admirable perspicacity.

The authors of the first three articles attempt to make sense of the concept of political truth in the light of contemporary contestations. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston focus on the notion of disinformation, defined by them as 'intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals'. They see disinformation as emanating from systematic and strategic attempts to disrupt authoritative information flows, largely, but not exclusively, by parties and movements of the authoritarian right. They are surely correct in arguing that public willingness to assent to such disinformation is a consequence of a long-term decline in citizens' trust in most of the institutions implicated in the maintenance of established political order. The mass (legacy) media's seeming role as a mouthpiece for such institutions and their conventional modes of truth-telling has tainted them, opening up a gap in which networks of alternative mediators are now able to advance 'an agenda that mixes tax and regulatory benefits for the wealthy, with disinformation about climate change, immigration, refugees, government waste and ineptitude, and a host of other issues aimed at stirring political crowds'. In outlining the key features of what they refer to as the new disinformation order, Bennett and Livingston provide a valuable basis for a broad, potentially comparative discussion of a phenomenon that is too often explained in terms of disparate acts of political mendacity or 'fake news'.

In her article, Barbie Zelizer offers a quite brilliant historical account of the conditions that have allowed truth to be regarded so casually by both contemporary journalists and political leaders. Zelizer argues that it was the collusion of Anglo-American journalism with the xenophobic and paranoid narratives of Cold War ideology that laid the ground for the ethical laxities that have made it possible for the pro-Brexit and Trump presidential campaigns to prosper. In these various contexts journalists 'sidelined the meanings of the events being covered and failed to give the public what it needed to know'. Zelizer argues that far from being historical aberrations, the most egregious excesses of post-truth politics are in fact the waning expressions of an exhausted Anglo-American imaginary:

The massive failure of journalism's imagination that helped usher in Brexit and Trump makes a strong case for journalism's necessary and immediate reset. Neither Trump nor Brexit is an anomaly. They are a farewell bid to institutions as they exist today, to a textured institutional culture invented two centuries ago that for better or worse has supported the core of the Anglo-American imaginary as a source of inspired conduct for too long.

Building upon these attempts to provide some theoretical depth to the concept of post-truth, my own (Stephen Coleman's) article suggests that the contemporary post-truth phenomenon is a pathological consequence of the modernist tendency to regard political truth as an objective phenomenon. Political truth is never neutral, objective or absolute – that's why it is *political* truth. The normative realisation of democratic politics depends upon the communicability of intersubjective perspectives rather than the quest for capital-T Truth. Three key principles of political communication are set out

that might strengthen the quality of intersubjective political judgment: the principle of social curiosity; the principle of collective interpretation; and the principle of working through disagreement. The article concludes by considering debates about political truth surrounding the Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017 and the need to respond to such tragedy through intersubjective judgment.

Limor Shifman's article examines 'testimonial rallies': Internet memes in which people post personal photos and/or written accounts on social media as part of a coordinated political protest. In a superbly constructed argument, Shifman interrogates the meaning of the claims to authenticity that give these expressions of commitment such force. She raises astute points about the conceptual shift that seems to have occurred in recent years from the term 'right' as an indication of truthful correctness to a signal of ethical believability. Testimonial rallies stimulate important questions about the fragile balance between internal and external authenticity and what this balance means for shared meaning.

Marianna Patrona's study of the ways in which Greek journalists have upgraded 'opinion to the status of factual news reporting' is particularly insightful, partly because of its meticulous methodological approach to interpreting the discursive construction of a politics of fear that represents 'social problems in simplistic terms of victim and villain stereotypes', and partly because it usefully connects the current debate about post-truth to much older scholarship about propaganda. Anyone who has read Yanis Varoufakis's (2017) account of how the political leaders of the European Union sought to throw the Greek population under the neoliberal bus will find much in Patrona's analysis to explain how political truth became the first casualty of market failure.

Ric Bailey's thoughtful article moves away from conventional political discourse to a consideration of political satire. To what extent has it contributed to the epistemological uncertainties that this special issue explores? How can – or should – political comment be regulated when such comment is not supposed to be taken seriously? As chief political adviser to the BBC, Bailey is well positioned to discuss the nuanced relationship between truthfulness and parody and its regulatory mediation by the disputed notion of 'due impartiality'. This article examines US and British satire and Bailey argues that 'The challenge for satirists and journalists alike in UK broadcasting is to find the new "due" in "due impartiality" to ensure that those in power are still held fully to account, but without allowing any perception of partisanship to risk eroding further the vital relationships of trust with the broader audience'.

Finally, Jason Hannan adds an interesting twist to Neil Postman's (1985) classic thesis, suggesting that we are now not so much amusing, as trolling ourselves to death. Postman's great polemic against the superficiality of television's 'Now This ...' culture seems presciently relevant to an age in which populist leaders are more comfortable representing themselves in front of the cameras than representing the experiences and challenges of real people. Hannan's claim is that trolling has become a mainstream element of contemporary public communication, shaping politics and even legislation: 'While television might have turned politics into entertainment, social media have turned it into a global schoolyard, but one without any teachers to uphold rules or to put bullies in their place'.

The objectives of this special issue are threefold. Firstly, we wish to take the heat out of the post-truth debate and shed some historical, political and philosophical light upon the concept. As John Corner (2017) has rightly noted, talk of post-truth is too often 'calculatedly alarmist and self-consciously dramatic' in its tone. To some extent, what we are considering here are age-old questions about epistemological trust. The terms of trust have certainly become more fragile, but their vulnerability to

manipulation is inherent to politics. Secondly, it would be helpful to highlight a distinction between the naked falsehoods of 'fake news' (both in terms of the everyday circulation of provable errors and their Orwellian incorporation within the self-serving doublespeak of authoritarian rulers) and more complex contestations about first-order political truths which depend upon deep discursive justifications. To put it simply, deciding whether it is a lie to claim that American Muslims were dancing in the street to celebrate 9/11 (a claim by the US President that has never received an iota of verification) presents a qualitatively different challenge from deciding whether it is true to say that governments care less about poor people than the rich. Some claims can be easily disproved by anyone who is able and prepared to consider the evidence. However, deep political truth depends upon forms of refined, intersubjective judgement that transcend positivist certainty. Thirdly, in the spirit of such judgment, the aim of this special issue is to provoke discussion – including challenge and correction. It would be rather ironic if the aim of these articles were to make dogmatic claims about how to determine political truth. That is why we are inviting debate, within and beyond the academy, about the issues raised in this issue.

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