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JOY TO THE WORLD: THE SATISFACTION OF POST-TRUTH[1]

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Abstract

This article aims to uncover the key preconditions and characteristics of post-truth as well as the contextual factors explaining its appeal. The key factor appears to be post-truth's ability to incite pleasure, in terms of both it being unconstrained by veracity and the advance and the capacity to know what the necessary pleasure-inciting variables are through big data analysis. That neatly corresponds with the general rise to prominence of satisfaction and affective mobilisation in competition over increasingly scarce audience attention, making post-truth a distinctly contemporary phenomenon.

Keywords

Post-truth, big-data, pleasure, affect.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo descubrir las precondiciones y características clave de la posverdad, así como los factores contextuales que explican su atractivo. El factor clave parece ser la capacidad de la posverdad para incitar al placer, tanto en el sentido de no estar restringida por la veracidad, como de avance y capacidad de saber cuáles son

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las variables necesarias que incitan al placer a través del análisis de los *big data*. Eso se corresponde perfectamente al ascenso general del peso de la satisfacción y movilización afectiva en la competición por atención cada vez más escasa de la audiencia, lo que hace de la posverdad un fenómeno claramente contemporáneo.

Palabras clave

Posverdad, big-data, placer, afecto.

Post-truth is one of those concepts that are often discussed and rarely understood and, paradoxically, the *more* it is discussed, the *less* it is understood. Consequently, it is of prime importance to delve into the substance and form of post-truth in order to better understand its proper place in today's political life. Several key themes are revealed to be of prime importance.

First, the role of post-truth narratives is to provide satisfaction through confirmation of audience wishes, desires, stereotypes, etc., simultaneously also guiding individuals through the complexities of everyday lives in the information-saturated communication environment. The latter function is particularly reinforced through post-truth-claims, typically formulated as narratives and, therefore, acting as sense-making structures. Moreover, there is a reason why such post-truth narratives have become not only more prevalent but also more effective than ever before: it is due to the availability of data about target audiences and the technological capacity of gauging through massive sets of such data. The audience characteristics that need to be toyed with can now be known in advance, enabling the creation of narratives that, due to post-truth's disregard for verifiable facts, can be shaped and tailored in whichever way necessary.

The second part of the article mostly deals with the contextual conditions of post-truth, primarily the general drive towards pleasurisation, prevalent across societal domains and clearly manifesting itself within the media ecosystem. The ever-increasing competition between media content providers and, therefore, the scarcity of audience attention are the key driving forces behind this pleasurisation: one simply has to offer greater consumer satisfaction than any of the competing offerings, leading to both increasingly egregious claims and communicative behaviours, such as trolling. That has unavoidably led to a high level of me-centricity among the audiences, resulting in an expectation that communication acts, including truth-claims (and the truths that they postulate), revolve around the individual. Moreover, as the audiences themselves have become increasingly fragmented, the flow of affective reactions to events, information, or claims becomes a key factor that either affiliates or splits communities. Overall, then, due to the neat fit with today's trends and technological affordances, post-truth is seen as a highly potent development.

Telling It as the Audiences Like It

In a general sense, Post-truth should be understood as progressive erasure of the truth/falsehood distinction while uttering statements (and, from an audience perspective, deciding on the currency of such statements). Part and parcel of this erasure is prioritisation of affective identification with truth-claims over more conventional reasoned decision-making processes (for a more extensive elaboration of this view, see Kalpokas, 2019). The preceding definition is expansive enough to account for both the more egregious manifestations of post-truth, such as Trump or the Brexiteers, and more the broader changes in political communication, such as the mainstreamisation of trolling as a political practice. Indeed, the aforementioned irrelevance of the truth-falsehood distinction is crucial: if post-truth was about concealing facts, it would merely amount to old-fashioned lying. Meanwhile, if post-truth involved the expectation that 'the crowd's reaction actually *does* change the facts about a lie', as McIntyre (2018, p 9) suggests, then post-truth would perhaps signify a sudden explosion of sheer madness. In fact, nobody expects the facts to change – what matters is only the public preference for one set of claims over another, both sets being mutually exclusive. Since the very relationship of facts to verifiable reality (previously the benchmark of facticity) has become unimportant, there is no need for the facts to change in the first place.

Of course, the fluid relationship of post-truth claims with verifiable reality accords a significant degree of freedom to politicians willing to embrace the new communicative-political environment. Being unconstrained by objective conditions, political actors can tailor their claims in a way that specifically and intentionally answers the needs, wishes, preconceptions, and desires of the target audiences. As a result, post-truth political actors basically become screens onto which the electorate projects their wishes, fears, and desires (Hauser, 2018), whatever their relation to verifiable facts is. In this way, people obtain the pleasure of having their preconceptions, stereotypes, desires, and hopes confirmed and, since pleasurable results of our previous choices reinforce a repetition of choice patterns (de Haan & Linde, 2018, p. 1204), such politicians can easily get into the habit of opting for post-truth. Hence, we can say with confidence that adherence to pleasurable affect is learned as we go. And once we have learned that a particular stimulus (or source of stimuli), such as a source or a particular type of news (even if they are fake) helps maximise our satisfaction, it is only natural that we repeat our custom. Post-truth can, therefore, be seen as aspirational, i.e. as presenting a better

picture of ourselves or of the future than would be possible if relying on verifiable facts (McGranahan, 2017, p. 246), thus further adding to the attractiveness of non-factual content.

On the other hand, it would be erroneous to think of post-truth politics exclusively in terms of doom and gloom. Somewhat paradoxically, it might be asserted that in today's culture of "constant promotionalism" which demands "hyper-competitive, self-branding, bragging, hyperbole" (Harsin, 2017, p. 515), and constant "work on the self" in order to earn an actual or imaginary competitive edge (Lazzarato, 2014), a post-truth politician is perhaps the most truthful one of all, their utterances being merely more dramatic versions of what many potential voters would themselves do at a job interview or whilst polishing their social media presence. This is also why much of what post-truth politicians do should be interpreted as signalling, i.e. making oneself or one's position clearly evident through something costly or outlandish. As Davis (2017) asserts, "sometimes, what you think is bullshit is actually a costly signal delivering useful information" (p. 85). In other words, even if the factual veracity of the claim is not necessarily sold on everyone, the claim is likely to be effective nonetheless as an indicator of where the relevant actor stands on a given issue, and the more outlandish the statement, the more unmissable it is, and the more it serves as an illustration that the actor has taken the effort to assert themselves and their stance and to satisfy their target audience. All that, in combination, is likely to be taken as a sign of care and attention by the relevant segments of the electorate.

Still, completely random claims, however appealing, would not be effective enough to produce collective results. Instead, truth claims, regardless of their veracity, must fall into narrative structures that explain and give meaning to everyday life. Essentially, as the rise of post-truth has demonstrated, "truth, as in fact or piece of information, has no intrinsic value": instead, "it is up to the narrative to create that value" (Holmstrom, 2015, p. 124). However, the narrative itself has a very dubious relation to truth: to be more precise, "the truth in the narrative is (…) not in its verifiability, but in its verisimilitude – the appearance of it being real or true" (Holmstrom, 2015, p. 124). In particular, people need a catchy and convenient narrative because it "provides explanations", i.e. "describes the past, justifies the present, and presents a vision of the future": while having increasing amounts of pure information "only muddles our understanding of the world", clear-cut narratives, regardless of their veracity, seemingly put things back in order by providing "relevant information, talking points, and an explanation of how the topic in question fits into their worldview" (Holmstrom, 2015, p. 120-121). Narratives

"explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shape perceived interests" (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 76). Indeed, a narrative that gives sense to the disparate elements off representation and also makes one feel like (s)he is part of the story being told, hence encouraging to emotionally and otherwise invest in a particular issue under description. Moreover, narratives help to sift through the noise and conflicting information that one is now permanently bombarded with by offering a simple and seemingly uncontroversial answer, which (re)establishes the order of things. Where previously one encountered only a cornucopia of disparate things, now one encounters an ordered totality, which makes sense as to how the status quo has developed, its normative value (good or bad), and direction of action (protect or change). Hence, narratives, post-truth or not, are efficient means of dealing with information overload. And, again, post-truth narratives have a clear advantage in this context: if one is unconstrained by factual reality, it is much easier to concoct a narrative that provides easier, clearer, and more palatable explanations that fit audience preconceptions, desires, and aspirations than a more truthful alternative would.

The changes inherent in today's communication environment, including construction of post-truth narratives, must be understood in relation to advances in big data analysis. In a general sense, Big data refers to unprecedently large agglomerations of data that include "emails, videos, audios, images, click streams, logs, posts, search queries, health records, and more" (Kemper & Kolkman, 2018, p. 1). In effect, big data can be seen as a byword for the entirety of the digital traces of our lives and, therefore, (almost) complete information *about* our lives. The prime use for big data is as an input to (and increasingly as the basis of) decision-making processes. Instead of abstract models and rules that can never be fully precise, big data is claimed to reveal "the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the world" (Chandler, 2015, p. 850), i.e. to give a real-time actual representation of the world in all its granular detail. As stressed by Faraj et al. (2018), such capacity to collect and analyse information, compose descriptive and predictive accounts of the world and customise one's approach towards specific individuals, including tailored messaging leveraging "aspects of personality, political leanings, and affective proclivities" should not be seen as an aberration of sorts but, instead, as "the culmination of the digital quantification logic" (p. 64). Such datafied processes direct, among other things, the selection of information that we encounter, primarily (but not exclusively) on social media and as search results: the information to be displayed to us is chosen as 'relevant', i.e. as congruent with the data that is available about us (see e.g. Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Crucially, such algorithmic ranking and selection of content

directly affects "not only what we think about (agenda-setting) but also how we think about it (framing) and consequently how we act" thus shaping the realities lived by individuals and, through them, social order (Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 245-246). As a result, the lived realities and social orders inhabited by individuals increasingly find their grounding not in facts that apply to everyone universally but in the subjective characteristics of target audiences.

It is definitely convenient for actors willing to maximise the appeal of their narratives, at the expense of veracity if necessary, if the key building blocks that need to be included are known in advance, and big data analysis offers precisely that. However, there are also further developments that merit attention. First, we are still used to the traditional idea of a narrative as something that has a beginning, middle, and end, i.e. of narrative as a linear structure. In big data analysis-enabled construction of narratives such linearity is typically absent. That is because the performance of one's narrative can be observed in real time across different segments of the target audiences, particularly through techniques such as opinion mining and sentiment analysis (see e.g. Balazs & Velásquez, 2016; Giatsoglou *et al.* 2017; Puschmann & Powell, 2018). As a result, if the narrative is not performing as expected with a certain segment, the offering for that particular segment can be tweaked so that one part (or more) of the main narrative branches out and acquires a life of its own while other segments of the audience continue being fed with the main version or yet different branches thereof, depending on the ways in which satisfaction is best maximised. The consequences reach, of course, beyond mere narrative conventions: such splintering of accounts of the social world puts into question the entire idea of the public sphere (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). And if there is no more shared public sphere that is, at the very least, constructed through shared partaking in discussion of different interpretations of matters of common concern, then the distinction between truth and falsehood is eroded even further: no development of a shared experience and the necessity to explain and defend your interpretation but it is maximisation of satisfaction derived from a narrative regardless of the broader context that becomes paramount.

The second development worth noting is an increased opacity in the key nodal points of narrative structures. As already indicated, narratives are frequently amended and forked as a result of data feedback. However, the analysis of such data that renders the latter meaningful is typically carried out by proprietary algorithms, whose the inner workings are impossible to know, giving rise to 'data black boxes', i.e. routine instances whence one can observe the input and the output, but the actual analytic processes

remain unclear (see e.g. Müller *et al*, 2016; Perel, 2017). That, in turn, raises the questions of agency, transparency, and responsibility. In terms of agency, the question concerns the role of the ultimate decision-maker: are political communication and campaigning choices still being made by political actors, even though they are increasingly making such decisions on the basis of information the origin of which they can neither fully understand or is that agency now more with technology companies that create and own the crucial code? A corresponding transparency problem revolves around the issue of how both the public and the political actors are to verify the information upon which decisions are being made if its creation process is intentionally opaque. Consequently, one more major issue is who is to be held responsible if decisions made on the basis of such non-transparent information prove to be wrong, not only in terms of mismanagement but also in terms of structural changes, such as the furthering of post-truth.

Just Give Me Pleasure

To understand today's politics, one has to first conceive it as a mediatised domain. The concept of mediatisation is used in communications studies to denote how today's social world is "*changed* in its dynamics and structure by the role that media continuously (…) play in its construction", particularly with regards to how the social world's "forms and patterns are, in part, sustained in and through media and their infrastructures" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 15). Under the influence of mediatisation, "core elements of a social or cultural activity (like work, leisure, play etc.) assume media form" (Hjarvard, 2014, p. 48). Part and parcel to this shift, the media "have become an integral part of other institutions' operations, while they also have achieved a degree of self-determination and authority that forces other institutions, to greater or lesser degrees, to submit to their logic" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 106). In specifically political terms, "mediatisation of politics means the diffusion of a specific media rationality into the sphere of the political" (Marcinkowski, 2014, p. 6), implying that political actors respond by following media, instead of political, logic (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013, p. 342) – at least, that is, in democratic societies that enjoy free media. In this environment, political claim-making becomes subservient to the demands of the media, which typically means that speed, attention-grabbing, and consumer satisfaction take precedence over veracity and reasoned discourse.

Moreover, the media have become integral to the creation of social reality as such since they "constitute a *realm of shared experience*" by offering "a continuous presentation and interpretation of 'the way things are' and by doing so, contribute to the development of a sense of identity and of community" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 126). Moreover, moving on to information supply in today's deeply mediatised (see Couldry & Hepp, 2017) societies, mere information availability has turned into information overload that creates "a temporality that is concerned with 'the now', and is stretched and condensed in various ways" (Coleman, 2018, p. 68). As a corollary, today's information overload reduces the time available for reflection, meaning that "the management of the flood of available knowledge" becomes a key skill and one that necessitates "rapid classification of facts as good or bad, likable or not", often leading to "withdrawal into default beliefs and opinions, often those of the group to which one belongs" (Damasio, 2018, p. 215) in order to simplify (or, rather, outsource) choice. However, while making the information overload easier to bear, this solution simultaneously and severely hinders our ability to break out of our filter bubble.

More generally, one can observe a trend towards pleasurisation and capitalisation on positive affective experiences in a broad spectrum of social and private activities, extending even to something as banal as e.g. chores in the "smart home" (see Strengers & Nicholls, 2018), as well as gamification of most areas of life (Papsdorf, 2015), conjoined with the playful nature of today's media (see e.g. Sicart, 2014). In political communication as well, emotional triggers have "consistently been found to enhance user engagement", ultimately leading to "emotional content generating higher numbers of likes and comments" (Noon Nave *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). This should come as no surprise since it is typical for media of all sorts to encourage the consumption of their content through affective bonds with particular genres or specific personae in terms of "a particular energy, mood, or movement" that is even prior to feeling but feeding (or annulling) the latter, thereby being both fundamental and even more impulsive and difficult to conceive (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 21). Consequently, affective flows provide the basis for "the cultivation of subsequent feelings, emotions, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours", leading, in turn, to an "affect economy", in which the value of something (an idea, an individual actor etc.) is measured by the intensity of reactions that they can evoke (p. 23). Once again, affective impact, and not veracity, is key.

In this new condition, political news and current affairs have to compete with any other kind of media offering – which typically manifests "intense experiential immersions with strong affective valences" – from games and messaging apps to latest

celebrity gossip, resulting in "intense and incessant competition for attention" (Dahl-gren & Alvares, 2013, p. 54). Hence, the key to political ordering power (or, at the very least, to achieving influence) is in acquiring the capacity to frame and shape discourses – and that is mainly achieved by maximising consumer satisfaction. Moreover, the social media environment "collapses storytelling conventions that distinguish fact from opinion and from emotion into subjectively narrated realities", thus disrupting dominant narratives with "affectively charged micro-narratives" that enable people to "feel their way into their own place in politics" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 131). Essentially, if all information appears equal and the main distinguishing factor is how one *feels* about a claim, the "me-first" affirmation becomes even more crucial. In this environment, action is *connective* rather than collective whereby, "participation becomes self-motivating as personally expressive content is shared with, and recognized by, others who, in turn, repeat these networked sharing activities" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752). The ensuing result is formation of communities united by a shared affective reaction to information, claims, events, trends, etc. (actual as well as alleged), i.e. affective communities.

If, as McIntyre (2018) alleges, "the selective use of facts that prop up one's position, and the complete rejection of facts that do not, seems part and parcel of creating the new post-truth reality" (p. 34), then we are indeed witnessing a turn towards me-centric maximisation of affect and experience. Here, the entirety of the world, including truth and fact, is expected to be congruent with and, to put it more strongly, revolve around, the person making the judgement. This me-congruence criterion should not come as a surprise: since people want the "mental models of the world" that they build for themselves to be complete, they are likely to accept information that, while factually not exactly correct, fills any remaining gaps in pre-existing models, allowing a sense of completeness and, therefore, personal fulfilment (Ecker, 2018, p. 80). The reliance on experience should, in turn, come as no surprise because "it is the behavioural impulses generated by emotions that give or deny humans the energy to act on their perceptions" (Markwica, 2018, p. 87), and it generally appears that affects, emotions, and other unconscious processes make up around 98 per cent of brain activities while conscious reflection makes up merely 2 per cent (see e.g. Franks, 2014). Therefore, whatever plays on the emotions relevant at the time, is likely to prevail overall.

There is, of course, a danger in this rise of me-congruence. While certainly empowering by enabling previously neglected or underrepresented standpoints to flourish, the ensuing disruptions of hegemonic truths also pose the danger of opening a Pandora's

box of issues that had been neglected for a valid reason, such as bearing no relation to reality whatsoever. The problem is even further exacerbated by our unprecedented ability to immerse ourselves in networks of the similar and the likeminded, thus causing the (most likely mistaken) impression that (almost) everybody agrees with us (McIntyre, 2018, p. 60) and shielding ourselves from competing truth-claims or, at least, arguments in support of them. And when it comes to affective exchange, which is pre-cognitive by definition, one does not even have to put in conscious effort to seek information that props up one's own position: one only has to side with a pleasure-maximising affect through the experiential "click" that the providers of information are at pains to induce. Furthermore, due to the ubiquity and personalisation of media use, as manifested by near-permanent immersion in smartphones and other devices, such affective stimuli increasingly come from the virtual environment (Miller, 2014) of which malleability and customisability are key, even though such customisability often comes courtesy not of individual agency but of algorithmic governance. Such governance typically comes in the form of "hypernudging" individuals (see Yeung, 2017) through a big data-informed process of altering the choice environment in such a way that individuals end up 'freely' choosing an option prescribed by political, business, or other actors. And perhaps the surest way of maximising and maintaining the power of such hypernudging is through assignment of individuals into virtual groups and communities, united by shared me-congruent affects and experiences.

One reason why assignment into groups reinforces the power of hypernudging has already been discussed: the exchange of information and affect further reinforces one's own position. However, there is at least one more reason: affective group formation has, as its corollary, disintegration. After all, "when people emotionally, ideologically, culturally, or socially align with similar others, they also disalign with the contextually unrecognisable other" (Döveling *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). It is in the nature of affective publics that they are discursively convened through either similarities or differences in affective encounters with the world (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 131). It is crucial to stress that whereas groups based on more tangible and verifiable criteria, such as information or physical encounters, could be more open to negotiation or discussion, affiliation with different affective patterns "often invites demarcations of emotional boundaries", thereby "leading to the emergence of divergent, even opposing groups of polarization and emotion" (Döveling *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). That, in turn, gives rise not only to opposing emotional agglomerations but also "affiliative truths" (i.e. highly polarised accounts of the environment, leading to immediate siding 'for' or 'against'), resulting in the creation

of groups of fans and haters of a particular truth-claim (McGranahan, 2017). Crucially, such alignment typically has little to no relation to the veracity of the truth-claim in question. However, due to the data-rich nature of algorithmic sorting, ascription, and governance, the affective triggers necessary to hypernudge individuals and subsequently seal them within groups and communities are known in advance from the informational traces that we leave through the use of search, social media, apps etc., as already discussed in relation to big data.

As usual, it might be somewhat unfair to immediately strike an overly dramatic tone. Since the data used for algorithmic governance does not come out of nowhere but is aggregated while we go about with our everyday lives, it could be easily (and reasonably) claimed that any hypernudging thus derived, and affective group formation thus induced, in fact reflects our lives in an intimate way – perhaps even before we properly understand the relevant aspects of our lives. Indeed, as Lury and Wakeford (2012) stress, affective interactions would, perhaps, most accurately reflect "*the happening* of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency, and sensuousness" (p. 2). Indeed, since "human bodies are continuously and simultaneously affected by different entities and themselves continuously affect others", their interactions become immersed in "a 'web' or 'field' of affect that has both stable and dynamic properties", constituting ties that "can be longer-lasting or relatively brief, exhibiting dynamic fluctuations" (von Scheve, 2018, p. 54). Therefore, once (hyper)nudged into communities reflecting their affective patterns, valences, and capacities, individuals end up sustaining their shared existence as well as communal knowledge produced and maintained through affective exchanges regardless of its (post)-truthfulness. Therefore, to reiterate, we get what we (are deemed to) need. And if we seem to possess a predilection towards some form of post-truth, then that is what is going to be served to us.

There is, nevertheless, a normative basis for me-centric affective engagement with the environment. It is based on the concept of homeostasis that, while usually referring to self-regulation of processes, should be, in case of humans, extended to refer to life beyond its physical minimum, ensuring that "*life is regulated within a range that is not just compatible with survival but also conducive to flourishing, to a projection of life into the future of an organism or a species*" (Damasio, 2018, p. 25). A key aspect is the inseparability of feelings and physical existence, partly due to the nature of feelings as "a cooperative partnership of body and brain, interacting by way of free-ranging chemical molecules and nerve pathways" (p. 12), meaning that feelings both react to bodily states and also feed back, affecting bodily states as well. Such inseparability of the body and

the mind and the presence of affective flows not only between minds but affecting the body as well demonstrates a physical need for pleasure and satisfaction: when positive affects are encountered, bodily functions are improved and physical, as well as mental, well-being increases and vice versa (see, generally, p. 108-109). Hence, post-truth plays a key role in ensuring an at least perceived mental quality of life that, in turn, improves the bodily one. Thus, what we are dealing with in this article is not mere decadent hedonism – it pertains to newly expanded means of ensuring overall well-being, even if one has to go post-truth to achieve it.

In the environment described above, it comes as no surprise that "social media management becomes a must" for any aspiring political actor, meaning both self-presentation and the ability to gauge the affective valences circulating on social media and tap into them (Mazzoleni, 2017, p. 142) in order to attempt to shape them in accordance with particular political interests. Moreover, since emotion triggering (as well as emotion-laden content per se) has been demonstrated to increase user engagement (Noon Nave *et al.*, 2018, p. 2), it becomes highly unreasonable *not* to make use of the trends. In this context, political affiliation should not be treated very differently from fandom, referred to as a dynamic and creative "relationship between the individual fan, other fans and the fan object" wherein fans themselves play an active role in constituting the properties of the object of fandom as well as fandom itself (Dean, 2017, p. 412). In other words, political offering (a person, a group, a set of ideas, or a 'truth') is created *within* the process of being offered in an interrelation between the communicators and the audiences through constant flows of affect and affective orientations that "help to form bonds between individuals that sustain a sense of *community*" (Dean, 2017, p. 413). An important technique for achieving affective affiliation between supporters and making use of identity-forming and identity-affirming nature of fan-like political bonds is trolling.

Trolling itself is a multi-faceted phenomenon, despite being perceived, in everyday discourse and media representations alike, as merely "a blanket term for any type of negatively marked online conduct" (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017, p. 1339). However, that is not necessarily an accurate depiction. While many trolls are, indeed, on a mission to inflict harm and distress on others, the more mainstream ones involve everyday internet users who simply aim to make fun of things without being intentionally harmful (p. 1341), simply employing irony, sarcasm, and the language of memes for not only their own enjoyment but also that of their online friends. In fact, "trolling can rightly be said to be the new normal" (Hannan, 2018, p 220). Hence, as Sanfilippo et al. (2018) claim,

"not everyone who engages in the behaviour is, in fact, a troll" and, therefore, a distinction must be made between mean trolls and light-hearted trolling (p. 35-37). Moreover, the mainstreamisation of trolling has had a notable effect on both everyday *and* political communication as "trolling is now an open practice, in which many trolls no longer bother hiding behind fake names and fake pictures' (Hannan, 2018, p. 220). The prevalent use of irony and sarcasm, typical of the language of trolling, has even become necessary for drawing attention to oneself and retaining audience attention in a media environment where "popularity now competes with logic and evidence as an arbiter of truth" and tends to win convincingly while "lengthy, detailed disquisitions do not fare well against short, biting sarcasm" (p. 220). Crucially, engagement in trolling is no longer characteristic to lay citizens only – it has become part of the political mainstream as well, with politicians regularly trolling one another online, being trolled by citizens, and even ever more often trolling the citizens back, turning trolling into "a new genre of political speech" which "has become so common that new norms and expectations have quickly developed around it", turning political trolling into "a media spectacle" (p. 220). In this environment, a politician is expected to "expertly troll" an opponent because both political commentators and the public are judging their trolling ability (p. 221). Trolling as a political practice is particularly apt for affective mobilisation (the latter is further strengthened by sarcasm and irony) and makes perfect sense in the context of affiliative truths whence, having entangled an audience within a network of affective flows, one is essentially preaching to the converted (who are affectively induced to follow). Here, again, veracity becomes subservient to consumer satisfaction: there might well be a kernel of truth in one's trolling, but that truth is not the valuable part.

The valuable part is, once again, the engagement and stimulation of one's target audience and the 'stickiness' of the message, in both substance and style. As long as the substance is appealing to the target audience by responding to its tastes, stereotypes, fears, insecurities, hopes, desires, etc., irrespective of the veracity of the content, as long as that substance is targeted in such a way that individuals are imperceivably nudged towards making a prescribed decision, and that is done in a way that attracts audience attention and focuses it on what is happening (trolling and signalling are thus two sides of the same coin), success is more than likely. And with the availability of data to inform communication decision-making, the efficiency of post-truth choices for political actors can be maximised, while risk of missteps and mishaps can be minimised. However, the glaring problem for politics and the public sphere is, of course, that it can all easily end in a slippery slope: if one actor engages in post-truth, it becomes irrational (at least

from a political effectiveness and chance maximisation point of view) for other actors *not* to follow suit. And if (when) political discourse ultimately fills up with trolls, signallers, and other post-truthers, more and more effort has to be put into standing out of the crowd, resulting in ever more outlandish narratives and communication acts.

Conclusion

Post-truth is definitely to be seen as political communication's answer to the societal developments and technological affordances of today. Building on the progressive pleasurisation of media and society and the availability of data necessary to exploit these trends, post-truth politicians are capable of producing narratives that are more than likely to captivate audience attention in ways unconstrained by verifiability and relationship to facts. It is precisely in this neat fit with the current trends that the strength and appeal of post-truth lies. Consequently, it is safe to assert that post-truth is the key paradigm of today.

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