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Post-Truth and Public Relations: Special Section Introduction

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Abstract

With spindoctoring, publicity seeking stunts and evidence of mal-practice, public relations is easily associated with the development of post-truth society. The elevation of *bullshit* as political coinage presents a challenge for the rational public debate which the public relations profession at large should have an interest in maintaining. In this introduction, we briefly highlight some of these challenges for public relations. We point to how papers in the special section tie into these challenges, by for instance, helping to understand the construction of truth, how to construct a defense for legitimate public relations and engage with publics, as well as to build a professional practice through developing and measuring communication.

Keywords: Post-truth, trust, value, evaluation, education and capabilities

Should we believe the media hype, there are fundamental changes happening in society's epistemic foundation. Descriptions abound of a "post-truth society" (e.g., Block, 2018; d'Ancona, 2017; Keyes, 2004; McIntyre, 2018; Waisbord, 2018), the word of the year in 2016, according to Oxford Dictionaries. Such changes in how people relate to facts have obvious consequences for public relations, a practice that purports to be in the business of building relationships, community and trust between organizations, stakeholders and the public at large. How do you communicate with someone that insists that all public discourse is just a clash of different politicized narratives and that there can be alternative facts, even if all the rational evidence points to a single version of the truth? How do you relate to others who have little or no regard for what can be considered true? But also: how does public relations benefit and what role does public relations play in advancing a post-truth condition? Furthermore, changes in our societies' epistemic foundations emphasize issues related to the public relations profession's own handling of facts, both externally in stakeholder engagement as well as internally in communication planning and evaluation using valid methods and reliable data. How, for instance, does public relations further develop as a professional and evidence-based practice? These are some of the very practical, but also theoretical challenges for public relations practice and research that lie ahead.

In this introductory essay, we briefly discuss post-truth as it relates to public relations. We also introduce the articles of the special section, which contribute to a debate that must be engaged with and in which some suggest remedies for the situation. The papers in this special section help us to understand how truth is constructed in social media in crisis situations, how to construct a defense for legitimate public relations and engage with publics. Finally, the last paper points to how it is possible to build a professional practice through a focus on measurement and evaluation.

The Condition

The Oxford Dictionary defines post-truth as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Proponents of such labels as "post-truth" or "post-factual" society have pointed to how, for instance, the issue of climate change has been downplayed by key political figures, internationally and nationally. Despite the overwhelming scientific support for the conclusion that we are experiencing human induced changes to the global climate, some choose to state that they do not trust this science. An arena of "alternative facts," to quote Counselor to the U.S. President Kellyanne Conway (Graham, 2017, January 22), might be on the rise. This development is in part ushered in by changes in the global media landscape leading to fragmentation and potentially to "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers." Via the extensive use of computer algorithms to select news, people may have their views confirmed without being exposed to counter arguments. Some evidence in fact indicates that people seek

affirmations, even when they know that they are being misled: they wish to believe them (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). In this environment the discipline of public relations has a heightened ethical role to play. While the use and misuse of facts and research is nothing new, it is possible to talk about an intensification of this phenomenon.

A defining element of the post-truth condition is a certain relativism where personal values, beliefs and emotions take precedence. For example, if you *feel* that the public authorities are hiding facts about immigration issues, that is your truth. If you *feel* that official crime statistics related to immigrants are skewed, that is your right. For instance, when the phrase “Swedish conditions” is used in Norwegian immigration debate, it is meant to conjure up images of a failed immigration policy leading to crime and so-called no-go-zones in Swedish cities. The Swedish police disputes such a description (Radio Sweden, 2016, February 22). Critics still point out that Sweden has twice as many inhabitants as Norway, but almost seven times as many murders (Kval, 2016, October 24). In the UK, if you *feel* that leaving the European Union under any circumstances will give back control to parliament and lead to a better future, despite the economic indicators (HM Government, 2018), then that is your truth. The reverse is also true.

Discussions of facts focus on what is right and what is wrong, but for some, this is simply not relevant. In his treatment of the term *bullshit* philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt (2005) laid out the position of the bullshitter: He or she simply does not care about what is true or false or, at least pays no attention to it in public discourse. Discourse is put to the service of certain goals without regard for such petty concerns as what is true or false. The bullshitter can also get acceptance for this among a core of the electorate, since he or she might be going in a direction of which they approve, or they might appeal to certain values and confirm certain beliefs. For this core, pointing to factual incorrectness or inconsistencies would not necessarily have an effect, besides helping to keep the bullshit narrative alive in the public sphere.

In the book *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* journalist James Ball (2017), highlights the bullshit strategy this way:

make a claim, have it echoed in print, on TV and online, and then get further coverage as the rival campaign challenges its truth if challenged, it provokes a story about the row that repeats the claim for days at a time; if unchallenged, the claim seems unanswerable. (p. 5)

Ball highlights drivers for the rise of bullshit, including both traditional media and the economy of the internet. The problems are well-known: the sliding readership and ad revenues of legacy media, a

decline in the number of journalists, and the need to generate traffic through clicks. Ball, however, also points to public relations as driving the development, at least that part of the industry that conducts publicity stunts: “PRs are definitely a significant player in the economics of bullshit” (p. 208).

So, if it is correct that the epistemic foundation of our societies become more polarized, fragmented, uncertain, and fluid, grasping the ways in which organizations communicate becomes important to understand what contributes to an increase or decrease in social fragmentation. Public relations practitioners are in central positions to distinguish misinformation and disinformation in society (Pamment, Nothaft, Agardh-Twetman & Fjällhed, 2018). How can public relations further “voice, diversity, and engagement” to support “truth-telling ... deliberative, fact-based communication” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 31)? What truths are forwarded by public relations, and how do organizational intelligence and ultimate goals of profit and legitimacy play into this? How does public relations further or hinder the viability of rationality and truth telling in the public debate? How can professionalism in public relations be increased, and with that adherence to the basic credo of professions of serving society? These are a few of the questions public relations must ask, since, ultimately, to paraphrase James Ball (2017), we would not want to bring a knife to the gunfight.

Furthermore, public relations has to acknowledge its own complicity in muddying the waters between truth and non-truth. ‘Putting the best spin on the story’ and hiding certain facts that allow a fuller and different interpretation of the full-truth without deliberately lying, have been the stock in trade of the profession for years. Weak propaganda and worse has been its characterizing feature in the public mind and have contributed to its equivocal reputation. This calls for a careful examination and reflection by the practice and the academy on the very nature of public relations professionalism and what it means and takes to be a practitioner that brings light and well as a particular view to any debate. The challenge for public relations educators is to teach what post-truth is, spell out the consequences of the condition for society, highlight the mentioned complicity of public relations and engage students in discussions of professionalism and ethics in this regard. Basically, the fundamental questions that need to be asked is *what kind of society do we want* and *what kind of discourse would contribute in this regard?*

Articles in this Special Section

In various ways, the contributions for this special section suggest how public relations can cope with the situation described above.

In the first paper, Yang (Alice) Cheng (North Carolina State University) looks at particular strategies

in crisis and how truth is constructed. Set in the Chinese context, this paper speaks directly to the theme discussed, that is, the changing epistemic foundations of societies. China is an example of a country with a national level highly strategic orientation to communication, yet simultaneously it represents a culture, where other factors such as harmony may overtake truth as a virtue in organizations. These pose challenges for complex situations such as crises, and the article “Online Crisis Communication in the Post-Truth Chinese Society: Evidence from Updated Literature” pulls together knowledge on the crisis communication from different disciplines. The article identifies the importance of cultural values and the surrounding political system in addition to the well understood influence of the media. It is noted that when official sources such as the government lose trust, there is space for new types of influencers to meet the communication needs. As public relations practice is significantly involved in shaping what is the publicly expected truth (or image) of a client in the public, the profession has always carried the stigma of propaganda and grappled with credibility (Callison, 2001).

As one of the most discussed notions in public relations scholarship of late, engagement (see, Johnston & Taylor, 2018) might hold a remedy for post-truth tendencies by focusing specifically on the procedural, mutual, and emergent aspects of social truth(s) and emphasizing elements of mutual definitions of the situations as well as collaborative action in the face of complex societal issues. The second paper, by Gregoria Yudarwati (Universitas Atma Jaya Yogyakarta), adds a unique perspective to this research by applying appreciative inquiry, as a specifically publics-centric engagement approach, in an exploratory case study on development communication in Indonesia. The paper is titled “Appreciative Inquiry for Community Engagement in Indonesia Rural Communities”. The author uses the approach to place a particularly strong focus on the involved actors’ beliefs, communication patterns, ways of sense-making, as well as their related emotions. Through different stages of engagement (from early discovery of a mutual challenge to later solutions and design-oriented actions), the author shows how the approach may enable a supportive atmosphere that facilitates community participation and ownership in a complex renewable energy project.

The two last papers of the special section concern measurement and evaluation. The first of these is titled “Reviewing the ‘march to standards’ in public relations: A comparative analysis of four seminal measurement and evaluation initiatives” by Alexander Buhmann (BI Norwegian Business School), Jim Macnamara (University of Technology Sydney) and Ansgar Zerfass (University of Leipzig). In the paper, Buhmann and colleagues discuss measurement and evaluation, which in turn can be said to be crucial for helping organizations and their public relations practitioners to strive for professionalism. At the core of this paper is a discussion about progress in setting accepted standards for measurement and evaluation, defined as “a formulated rule for common and voluntary use, decided by one or several people or organizations” (Brunsson et al., 2012, p. 616). The argument is

that standardization can promote confidence in public relations work because evaluation assists with three main problems: first, and at the micro level *comparability*. Standards ensure that the same measures are being used across programs and organizations and therefore facilitates legitimate and rigorous comparisons to be made. Second, at the meso level, they help with *applicability*: practitioners can argue that standards require them to use research-based evaluations and therefore can put together a more effective case for resources to fund such activity. Third, at the macro level standards help improve the *credibility* of the profession: they are a sign of professionalism and maturity. The paper goes on to explore four instances of where standards have been developed and discusses their trajectories and merits, limitations and levels of success. Buhmann et al. conclude by accepting that although progress has been made, there is still significant issues around acceptance and adoption.

This paper would necessarily also entail a perspective beyond sectorial interests and towards some kind of understanding of the public interest. As minimum formulated explicitly or implicitly as “society is better off for having our profession because...”. The very last paper, by Catrin Johansson, Christina Grandien and Kicki Strandh (Mid Sweden University), addresses organizational improvement and measurement. Recent analyses on misinformation (see e.g., Flynn & Li, 2019) suggest that among the best defenses against untrue messages are developing a strong organizational identity, and communicating a clear narrative of what the organization is about. “Roadmap for a communication maturity index for organizations: Theorizing, analyzing and developing communication value” will shed light on the areas where organizations can mature, including understanding, function, organization, prerequisites, competence and practices. Building on the CCO (Communicative Constitution of Organization) tradition from organizational communication, the Communication Maturity Index (CMI) categorizes organizations from immature and emerging to established and mature.

Overall, communication is a strategic asset of the organizations in the new post-truth environment, and much of the ethical weight rests on public relations. At the same time, the public obviously has a role to play in the development of a post-truth society too by critically questioning claims put forward in public and to be consistent in the judgment of bullshitters and their behavior. The post-truth condition is detrimental to democratic societies. We do hope this special issue serves as an international step into understanding this new, ethically challenging role for public relations in particular.

Endnote

This special section is based on an open call for papers following the Research and Practice Colloquium of the World Public Relations Forum (WPRF) held in Oslo, Norway in February 2018. One panel and 18 papers were presented, with participants from countries such as Finland, Indonesia, United States, Denmark, South Africa, India, Argentina, United Kingdom, Sweden, Poland, Canada, and Singapore. The Research and Practice Colloquium has become a unique opportunity to engage professionals, academics and students from across the world in the key challenges facing the profession, to advance thinking and research and share best practices. It builds a bridge between the academic and practitioner communities and is for the benefit of both.

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