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What place (if any) for academics in our post-truth era ?

Personal synthesis of the 16th Ethical Forum of the University Foundation

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“To us academics, the public debate often seems corrupted by oversimplification, misinformation, confusion and plain lies. Sometimes these prove decisive in determining the outcome of an election or a referendum. And when academics try to share their knowledge and correct the mistakes, they are now dismissed as belonging to a biased elite at least as often as listened to with the respect they believe they are owed. What explains this apparent decline in people’s trust in academic authority? What should academics do to regain it? What is their responsibility in a “post-truth” public realm crowded with “alternative facts”?”

These were the claims and questions proposed by way of background for the 16th Ethical Forum of the University Foundation, coordinated by Bart Pattyn, professor of media ethics at the KU Leuven.¹ As suggested by the cautious use of the “seems” and “apparent”, the claims were offered as conjectures rather than assertions. And only some of them may prove consistent with the facts. In particular, it is important to distinguish the claim that the authority of academics is in decline from the claim that fake news is on the rise.

Is the authority of academics in decline? If so, why?

As regards the former, it may be useful to chop up the claim into several segments. Which academics are we talking about? Only those being labeled or calling themselves “scientists” or experts”? Both natural and social scientists? Meteorologists as well as oncologists, economists or archeologists? And authority in whose eyes? In the eyes of politicians, of the traditional media, of the social media, of the general public, of the academics themselves? Depending on how the question is specified, it may admit of different answers.

In any case, the claim that there might be an overall decline in the authority enjoyed by academics, or by science, has been challenged in the course of the forum, in particular by Peter Achterberg. Star detectives in popular TV series, he pointed out, are now nerds rather than body builders. Didactic science broadcasts are highly appreciated by the Dutch public. And surveys do not document any general downward trend, certainly if the authority enjoyed by academics in society at large is compared to that of politicians, journalists, judges or priests.² Even those most critical of claims unanimously

¹ As usual, the author of this selective synthesis is highly indebted not only to the preparatory work by the coordinator of the event and the team of the University Foundation, but also to the highly informative and insightful inputs by the speakers (Peter Achterberg, Cédric Courtois, Christophe Leclercq, Didier Pourquery, Hilde Van den Bulck, Vincent Yzerbyt), the “interpellators” (Rachel Hoekendijk, Bert Seghers, Rodolphe Sépulchre, Peter Van Roy) and all active participants in the encounter.

² According to a 2017 survey by communication agency Whyte (“La crédibilité des réseaux sociaux a chuté en cinq ans”, *Le Soir*, 3/1/2018, p.15), 82.9% of Belgians trust scientists and experts (down from 91.9% in 2012), compared to 69.4% for the radio (down from 70.8%), 58.8% for the printed press (including their online versions, down from 62.9%), 55.2% for television (down from 69%) and 20% for social media

accepted by mainstream scientists — such as ufologists or the Flat Earth Society — pay far more than lip service to science itself. The credit they claim for their assertions is meant to be founded on sound scientific method. Admittedly, one member of a British government publicly said that the people of his country have had enough of experts. But it does not follow that what he said was true in his country, let alone in the whole world. On closer inspection, this may well prove yet another example of fake news.

This need not prevent some scientists, some academic institutions, perhaps also whole disciplines from being brought into disrepute among the general public, or indeed within the scientific community itself, not least — as illustrated by the intervention of Rachel Hoekendijk — among its youngest members. Several possible causes were mentioned: plain scientific fraud; dubious funding and the resulting conflict of interests; sloppy methodology; low quality recruitment induced by clientelistic practices or by competition, in some domains, with the better pay offered in the private sector; pressure to appear in the media without the appropriate competence and to announce insufficiently validated scoops³; obsession with publication indices and other superficial indicators of scientific productivity standardly used in tenure and promotion decisions.

Is fake news on the rise? If so, why?

What about the second claim? Couldn't fake news be globally on the rise even though academic authority is not globally in decline? ⁴ One cannot start answering this question without an explicit definition of fake news. I propose: information regarded as false by the relevant scientific community. The expression also sometimes refers more narrowly to information that was deliberately faked, generated or disseminated by people who know it is false or at least unverified. But I shall use it here in the broader sense. Might the impression that such information is on the rise turn out to be again founded on an illusion? This would be the case if all that happened is that fake news so defined has become more visible. In the past, lots of rumours were spreading all the time and people expressed all sorts of false beliefs, but they were hardly detected by anyone apart from the people directly involved, and seldom reached the “experts” qualified to assess their validity. All that happened, on this fairly reassuring view, is that the invention and subsequent democratization of the internet has made easily detectable, in particular by the scientific community, what was there before, though hidden from sight. And detection is a precondition for correction.

There is, however, a more alarming interpretation of what is going on. On this second view, the internet has not only made the existing fake news more visible. It has massively increased its volume. One might have expected the opposite. After all, the internet offers unprecedentedly easy ways of checking the credibility of whatever information one receives. This development can even be observed live in our auditoria. Instead of swallowing unquestioningly and writing down religiously the uncontroversial

(down 38.8%). In 2017, individual scores were collected separately for Facebook (18.6%) and Twitter (17.5%), as well as for online rating platforms such as TripAdvisor or booking.com (47.9%) and for Wikipedia (73.6%).

³ According to a study by Peter Burger (University of Leiden), 29% of the news published about medical research is exaggerated. Both researchers and journalists bear some responsibility for it, but the key role turns out to be played by the universities' communication departments (“Universiteiten dikken medisch nieuws aan”, *De Morgen*, 4/1/2018, p.11)

⁴ « Fake news » was the word of the year 2017 according to the readers of the daily *Le Soir* (« Fake news' sacré nouveau mot de l'année », *Le Soir*, 29 December 2017).

truths that flow out of our mouths — as their predecessors used to do —, you can see today’s students grab their smartphones or dive into their laptops in order to check the consistency between what they hear from us and what more or less reliable sites, starting with Wikipedia, have to say on the matter. The practice thus exemplified is admittedly forms a permanent threat to our authority, though only to the extent that the latter is undeserved. It should therefore be regarded as a major positive contribution of the internet to the truthfulness of what is being said, believed and propagated.

However, this positive effect is arguably dwarfed by another development triggered by the democratization of the internet: the proliferation of both means of generating information by people less competent and less scrupulous than the average professional journalist or author of ways of disseminating this information both quickly and widely without any quality filter. Among the mass of fake news thus produced and disseminated, some can be regarded as particularly obnoxious because of the way it is mobilized and strengthened by simplistic populist discourse. As emphasized in particular by Hilde Van den Bulck, this sort of fake news — in which conspiracy thinking occupies a prominent place — finds a receptive audience among the “left behind”, people overwhelmed by the complexities of today’s world and anguished by the economic and cultural insecurity in which they are made to live. Perhaps if this insecurity could be addressed with appropriate socio-economic policies, there would be little to fear from the spreading of toxic fake news.

In any event, people receptive to such fake news should not be regarded as psychopaths or mentally subnormal. As stressed by Vincent Yzerbyt, they are simply the sites of cognitive mechanisms that we all share. Human evolution has produced in all of us a tendency to see purpose and agency in the events around us even when none is involved. Much religious thinking can be interpreted in this way, and, as pointed out by Bart Pattyn, the scientific mindset is closely linked to a disenchantment of the world that is not easy to accept, especially for people who feel they are losing all grip on their fate. Moreover, evolution has equipped us with a strong confirmation bias: we are more ready to receive and further transmit information that coheres with our prior beliefs and with our desires. The scientific spirit, constantly in search of refutations, has to fight against these inbred tendencies to which all of us, scientists included, are subjected. And this fight is arguably becoming more difficult. Why?

It may well be true that academics, scientists, experts have lost none of their authority. But their authoritative utterings on any given subject have a harder time percolating into the brains of lay people — which we all are on most subjects. In the past, scientifically grounded analysis could impregnate public opinion through the use made of experts by traditional quality media, both printed and audiovisual. The knowledge vulgarized in this way could then trickle down to the general public through the popular press and hearsay. Today, this channel is getting cluttered. An increasing proportion of the population gets most of its information from social media strongly shaped, for the reasons sketched above, by biases and filters that have little to do with a concern for the truth. Those bombarded by information that reaches them through this channel see their ability to perceive and absorb information close to saturated by it. As a result they become insulated from the percolation of reliable information and sound argument. This is particularly the case on issues that trigger strong emotions or are policy-relevant, or both. Moreover, even a rudimentary understanding of the mechanisms of the propagation of information will enable self-interested individuals or organizations to saturate with fake news the channels through which a large chunk of

the population gets the information on the basis of which it forms its opinion on such issues. This is why science retaining its authority overall is fully consistent with the proliferation of fake news on a large set of salient issues.

What should be done?

Should anything be done about fake news? After all, the claim that God created the universe or stories about the resurrection of Christ have been routinely classified all along as fake news by many scientists without prompting a campaign to block their dissemination. We have learned to live with disagreements about matters of faith as long as they do not trigger behavior that violates some basic principles of our liberal societies. Perhaps most fake news can be regarded as innocuous enough not to be bothered. But some of it pollutes public opinion to such an extent that it becomes completely impermeable to reliable information and sound argument on issues that are crucial to our common future. In such cases, what could and should be done.

A first set of options concentrates on regulating the internet. Some proposals sketched during the forum turned out to be controversial. For example, Peter Van Roy advocated the emergence of a “strong internet” with traceability to individuals. But Cédric Courtois warned against the repressive potential of such a set up in a context in which political authorities may use such information to repress opposition. Another option consists in getting either governments or the administrators of Google, Facebook or Twitter to censor what they regard as “fake news”. However such action is likely to be too slow. It is also likely to be counterproductive, as awareness of such censorship will make some people even more suspicious of an elite plot that tries to hide inconvenient truths. A third option is the “co-regulation” articulated by Christophe Leclercq, i.e. self-regulation by the social media subject to the threat of (inter-)governmental regulation in case self-regulation proves inadequate. This must not take the form of censorship but of the development of credibility indices to be incorporated into the algorithms that determine the relative saliency of information items. There could be several such indices between which people could choose, and this choice would affect what items the browser would propel to the top of the first screen in response to any search. There are today quite a few fact-checking initiatives. Their work could be coordinated and expanded so as to help provide a metric for the reliability of (ultimate) sources.

A second set of options focuses on education. First, there is scientific education generally, from an early age. This should not consist in teaching a set of scientific dogmas — whether post-Galilean astronomy, evolution theory or climate change predictions. It should consist in getting pupils to understand and learn how to practice not *the* scientific method, but a variety of scientific methods, experimental or not, how to settle matters of fact, how to establish causal links, to the extent that they can, without hiding the uncertainties which scientists sometimes have to put up with.⁵ Next, there is education to a critical use of the media, again from an early age. Pupils should learn as soon as possible that not everything that can be read on the web is true, and that there are often ways of detecting the source and of assessing its reliability. Acquired early, a disposition to do so might turn into a healthy lifelong reflex. Finally, there is the

⁵ Along these lines, here is a response to the Flat Earth theory mentioned earlier: See Ian Whittaker, [“You don’t need to build a rocket to prove the Earth isn’t flat – here’s the simple science”](#), *The Conversation UK*, 27 November 2017.

education of journalists, whose professional skills *and* ethos need to be adjusted to the new potentials and temptations created by the internet.

A third set of options focuses on scientific communication, the dissemination of scientific knowledge in the general public.⁶ The traditional channel largely consists in “experts” being called upon by journalists in order to feed the latter’s articles or broadcasts, in lending themselves to interviews or in writing opinion pieces. However, as mentioned above, this channel has become less effective, owing to the emergence of the bottom-up social media, which, for a growing proportion of the population, saturate the information channels that reach them. In some cases, expert knowledge still manages to percolate, but in many other cases, it is blocked off. Hence the importance of new initiatives, such as *The Conversation*, launched in Australia but now present in the United Kingdom, the USA, South Africa, Canada, Indonesia and France.. The initiative is mainly funded by a consortium of universities and scientific institutions. As explained by Didier Pourquery, editor of *The Conversation France*, its aim is to provide up-to-date and reliable scientific information on a wide variety of subjects free of charge and in a short, readable format. Readability for a broad public is not easy to achieve, and *The Conversation* offers training sessions for researchers, who are asked to produce a short piece explaining some aspects of their research to colleagues from other disciplines. One important side effect of the initiative is that it enables traditional media to discover younger or more discrete researchers who can profitably substitute or supplement the experts they usually recruit.

The power of this third set of options — and indirectly also of the other two — depends on the formal and informal incentive structure within our academic institutions. It is important that academics should not be pressurized by their institutions into manufacturing scoops, into advertising non-validated results, into showing up in the media when they have nothing to say, or nothing they know anything about. The ivory tower, protected from media attention as well as from political and economic pressure, remains an essential ingredient of any university campus. Yet, it is important that informal *and* formal sanctions — tenure and promotion prospects as well as the esteem of one’s peer group — should reward a competent and intelligible contribution to the enlightenment of the general public.

Such a contribution will often need to reach beyond the very narrow domain in which one can claim to be a genuine expert. It will often need to integrate a critical synthesis of the product of research done by many others, often even in disciplines different from one’s own. Moreover, to be useful as possible, it will need to spell out the policy recommendations that follow from one’s description and explanation of the facts. This unavoidably requires articulating one’s factual synthesis with value judgments, which one must be prepared to state explicitly and to defend. Is this not going beyond the role usually ascribed to “experts”? Perhaps. But the steering of our complex, fast-changing societies requires academics prepared to play this role of “responsible inexperts”. Reflecting on the ethical judgments that underlie any critical stance or policy recommendation is therefore required from any academic wishing to contribute to the public debate, as is relentless vigilance against any influence these ethical judgments, or indeed our individual or collective interests, might exert on our factual assertions. This holds more than ever today, if our era is to be prevented from really becoming post-truth.

⁶ See the dossier of *FNRS News* (111, December 2017, pp. 8-19) on “Communiquer la science autrement”.