

What Place (if any) for Academics in our Post-truth Era?

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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. The purpose of this Ethical Forum is to stimulate reflection on the important questions: 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"?

About the subject

It is not difficult to find reliable information on current economic and political issues. The websites of quality newspapers, public broadcasting institutions and news organizations offer plenty of professional contributions written by responsible journalists (e.g. theguardian.com, washingtonpost.com, economist.com, bbc.com/news, decorrespondent.nl, theintercept.com,...). To improve public debates on social, economic and political issues universities have also created for a and websites to communicate scientific reports and sensible opinions on current issues (e.g. oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk, theconversation.com,...). Despite the availability of this valuable information, we seem to live in a post-truth era: a period in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Why is it that most people rely on social media, popular radio and tabloids for their information? Why are rumors and lies often more attractive to believe than objective facts and reasonable explanations? It seems to be the core business of universities to bring objective facts to the surface and to stimulate impartial critical thinking. Why is this objective difficult to reach and why is the academic contribution in public debates rather small? Is it because the authority of academic knowledge is questioned? Is it because scientists are no longer perceived as impartial? Is it because facts can be framed in different ways depending on the kind of personal belief one has? If we want to allow every individual the right to choose his or her own belief, can there be such a thing as objective truth? In this ethical forum we will focus on two kind of questions. On the one hand we will discuss public trust in academic truthfulness. Are people losing confidence in academic knowledge and does this count the same in exact science and the humanities? Are academics rightfully perceived as partial? Is the lack of public confidence related to resentment towards the "elite" opinion of the academic? On the other hand we will question how people deal with their belief. What kind of information attract people to believe? If the difference between valuable and intentionally framed information becomes blurred, what kind of public belief risks to be counted as true? What do we lose if public trust in academic objective truthfulness is vanished?

Presentation of the problem

Starting with a clarification of the main concept: What does post-truth mean? Post-truth is officially defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>) If it is the core business of universities to bring objective facts to the surface and if we live in a post-truth era, public trust in academic research seems to be weakened. (1) Is this true and if so, (2) what motivated this development and (3) how do we need to respond as academics?

1. Is there a problem?

Some intellectuals deny that we live in a post-truth era. Alessandro Baricco for instance claims that the concept ‘post truth’ is a name given by the elites to lies not told by themselves but by others (<https://thecatcher.it/post-verita-baricco-4445471b2c65>). Baricco claims that if ‘post-truth’ means that public opinion is out of touch with the truth, we need to realise that public opinion has always been influenced by lies. Take for instance Collin Powell’s lie about the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in his address to the VN on February 5, 2003. The only difference with the past is that the lies that are influencing public opinion today are no longer fabricated by the elites but by others. It is because the elites are losing control about what will be perceived as truthful, that they complain about what they call a post truth era. Baricco believes that truth is always encapsulated in a narrative and that there is not such a thing as a final, definite truth. All narratives are set up by people and are in that sense only partially true, what implies that there is no objective truth. Therefore Baricco’s statement that claiming that we live in a post truth era is preposterous.

Others, like Joris Luyendijk argue that people like Baricco overlook an important feature of our era. In previous times politicians like Collin Powell lied because he trusted that what seems to rely on facts would influence public opinion. Today politicians like Boris Johnson or Trump lie because they trust that facts don’t influence public opinion. So they can lie without being disgraced. We do live in a post-truth era because what counts are emotions and private believes.

Does this trend threatens the authority of scientific research? Are there studies about trust in science? If so what do they tell us?

2. What motivated this development?

If we could agree on the fact that we live in a post-truth era what would have caused this situation? One of the possible answers could be: “The messenger failed!”. One could hold that facts and figures are no longer decisive because the journalists and researchers who produce them, can’t be trusted. Too often it turns out that their research was sloppy, the data were manipulated, the conclusion was biased, the design sponsored by interested partners, etc.

Some people believe that scientists can’t be trusted because they are partial. For them there is no doubt that ideological presuppositions affect the kind of research questions and conclusions they make and since the political spectrum of scientists is more progressive than that of the majority of the population, the risk that their findings are biased is real.

Finally scientists are also blamed to be out-of-touch. They locked themselves away from practical life and their theoretical and abstract thinking is quite irrelevant in the real world

Even if these contentions are right, they don’t explain why facts have lost their impact on public opinion today, because the amount of crooked, biased or partial journalists and scientists can’t have changed so dramatically to create an unprecedented post-truth mentality.

Second possible reason for the post-truth trend could be: “The audience failed!” People tend to prefer fast above slow thinking and they are easily influenced by populist propaganda. After all, they tend to support the interests of their in-group while they have a propensity to attribute problems to members of the out-group.

The vulnerability of people hasn't changed much over time, indeed, but the knowledge about the psychological mechanisms that make people partial and credulous could have been improved. The post-truth era could be the result of the use of more refined demagogic techniques in the hands of communication specialists, spin doctors, advertisers, PR agents, lobbyists etc. to influence the consumer preferences and the political opinions of their audiences. Not only the socio-psychological theoretical knowledge improved, but also the tools to study these preferences. Indeed, search engines, social media providers, firms who make use of spyware gather impressive amounts of data to analyze lifestyle profiles (combining the kind of news one is interested in, with the kind of products one buys, or the place where one is living, or the kind of computer one is using, etc.) Lifestyle research based on this kind of datamining seems to provide insights about the nature of an audience of which that audience itself is not aware.

The idea that the audience is vulnerable and that the knowledge and the tools to manipulate the audience have improved, is only relevant if there are instances with a motive to manipulate the audience. Are there such instances? That seems to be the case. Political organizations e.g. in the US have the resources and the motives to make use of the vulnerability of people to convince them to support certain politicians. Possibly also multinationals, media concerns (6 corporations are responsible for 90% of the media in the US: News-corp, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, Comcast, CBS) will make use of these techniques in the struggle to get the biggest share of the market.

A third explanation of the recent developments, less focused on individual motives and psychological dispositions of individuals or corporations concerns the culture in which the social-interactions between individuals and corporations take place. Not the players but the game changed. In recent years we moved from a positional society to a society in which the categories and distinctions between roles, functions and status have become more difficult to define. (cf. Mary Douglas). For the problem we discuss, this cultural evolution affected the authority of journalists and scientists. It goes without saying that the status of a position from which a proposition is made, doesn't make that proposition more true, but if within a community that status is taken seriously the chance that that proposition will be heard and taken seriously is much bigger than in societies where everyone is taken on the same level. The expertise necessary to judge within a particular situation in a very sensible way is of no avail, if there is no audience that is prepared to take that judgement more seriously than the impulsive judgment of someone who haven't thought about the issue. In a culture where it becomes difficult to make a difference between objective information and advertisement, news and promotion, personal opinion and scientific statements etc. it will be more difficult to trust the importance of facts and figures.

Next to this kind of cultural development there is a tendency in our culture to diffuse conflicts by claiming that the subject under discussion is a matter of personal choice and that opinions about it are relative. This strategy was and is rather successful in dealing with passionate discussions about religion. Saying that believing is a matter of personal choice and that any belief is equally relevant, makes a struggle useless. The same strategy was used to diffuse other possible conflicts as well for instance between people who believe that there is an objective way of dealing with what is aesthetically or morally relevant. In our culture we tend to claim automatically that the kind of preference for music or art is a matter of personal choice and that taste is relative. It all depends on what kind of person you are. At least there is no difference between high culture and low culture. Even when it comes to decide what is morally good or bad, one claims that this is a subjective matter. Only basic rules need to be respected (no-harm principle, respect for each other's free choice, ...). We seem to be at the brink in the cultural evolution where not only religious, aesthetic and moral beliefs are privatized and relativized, but also claims about the truth. Post truth seems to be the name of the disposition where one believes that truth is a matter of personal choice. That is also what Baricco seems to suggest: Each person has his or her narrative about the truth and there is no objective truth. What seems to count is what kind of personal beliefs there are on what

is true. This makes the beliefs of a scientist that has studied the matter, as valuable of the beliefs of anyone else. So Trump can claim at the end of a discussion with a journalist around the eavesdropping of the Obama administration: this is your opinion, I have my opinion and that is it.

3. *How do we need to respond to this development as academics?*

Perhaps we need to reaffirm that truthfulness is quite central in our academic research and that our academic responsibility requires scrupulous respect for the methodological requirements of our disciplines and honest communication about what we really can claim as truthful in an independent and impartial way. It is true that academic research is promoted because it creates innovation and economic developments, but these are by-products. They are not crucial to live up to our academic ideals. At the end the value of this honesty will reveal itself.

Another strategy could be that we make our scientific insights more relevant by discussing the relation of these findings among us with other findings made in other disciplines so that we can overcome the fragmentation of research question and stimulate reflection on the coherence of problems. Therefore we need to stimulate conversations on all kind of relevant social, political and domestic issues. We can't expect that other instances will be able to deal with the fragmentation of all kinds of conclusions. So we need to engage in projects like <https://theconversation.com/uk>.