Editorial

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Post-truth?

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Have we entered a post-truth era? Did we turn a corner with the US election, with its steady stream of fake news, its easily debunked but widely circulating conspiracy theories, and outright lies placed front and center?

Some might accuse US politics, like most other electoral politics, of having been a post-truth arena for a long time. However, by the rules of the game in democratic contests, politicians generally only bend the truth. When caught lying outright – for example in attempts to escape responsibility for their actions – they provide complex justifications and near-apologies. The Trump campaign abandoned that game, working more in the bombastic modes that Trump had successfully used in reality TV, not a genre noted for its concern with realism. In an article in *The Atlantic*, Salena Zito (2016) writes that Trump supporters were 'taking him seriously, not literally' (while the press was taking him literally, not seriously). Recently, frustrated Trump spokeswoman Kellyanne Conway said to an interviewer: "Why is everything taken at face value? … You always want to go by what's come out of his mouth rather than look at what's in his heart" (e.g. Blake, 2017).

Steve Fuller (2016) encourages STS to claim the post-truth era as its own, as a consequence of the universalization of symmetry. I think that this – at least if a post-truth era is one in which bullshit is highly valued – misses a central and productive tension within STS. Embracing epistemic democratization does not mean a wholesale cheapening of technoscientific knowledge in the process. STS's detailed accounts of the construction of knowledge show that it requires infrastructure, effort, ingenuity and validation structures. Our arguments that 'it could be otherwise' (e.g. Woolgar and Lezaun, 2013) are very rarely that 'it could easily be otherwise'; instead, they point to other possible infrastructures, efforts, ingenuity and validation structures. That doesn't look at all like post-truth. A Twitter account alone does not make what we have been calling knowledge. Epistemic democratization has to involve more equitable political economies of knowledge – and so critique does not 'run out of steam' with symmetry (Latour, 2004). If the post-truth era starts by blowing up current knowledge structures, then it isn't very likely to be democratization, and in fact most likely leads to authoritarianism.

Yet STS suggests that the emergence of a post-truth era might be more possible than most people would imagine. The *fact* as we know it is often a *modern* fact, arising out of particular configurations of practices, discourses, epistemic politics and institutions (variously understood and analyzed by, e.g., Dear, 1985; Poovey, 1998; Shapin, 1994). As

solid as those configurations now appear, it is not far-fetched to imagine them disrupted. The enormous attention to 'fake news', with much effort to distinguish the real and the fake, shows that many people are concerned that we may be entering a post-truth era.

Twitter may be part of the dissolution of the modern fact. Even if not, we in STS should be part of the analysis of how this and other social media platforms can easily be used as tools of very ugly kinds of politics. *Guardian* commentator Lindy West, announcing that she is abandoning Twitter, writes that 'it may simply be impossible to make this platform usable for anyone but trolls, robots and dictators' (West, 2017). Well-organized prompting encourages digital brownshirts to pile abuse (including offline abuse, after 'doxxing') on vocal opponents of white supremacist and similar groups, and on the politicians with which they ally. Given that the company Twitter has made no significant efforts to deter abuse, the platform has stabilized as a site for actions that would be illegal in many places.

Whether in the echo chambers of social or older media, we might be just as concerned with the (truth-era) power to direct attention as we are with fake news. Both play into instrumental and behaviourist approaches to politics (and other arenas), treating voters as people to be manipulated rather than as people to be convinced. We in STS know that epistemic competition is as much about choosing which truths can be considered salient and important as about which claims can be considered true and false, and these choices have important consequences (e.g. Sismondo, 2015).

By itself, voting is an inarticulate action. But it is relatively easy to hear strong voices behind recent votes, like the concern with immigration in the UK's Brexit vote: both the possibility of large numbers of political and economic refugees in the future, and the current flows of professionals, labourers and students that are slowly culturally integrating urban areas in the UK and Continental Europe. The coalition that Donald Trump assembled similarly included people generally fearful about legal and illegal immigration, voters concerned about free trade and the erosion of good jobs, people upset at all parts of the political establishment and its connections with Big Finance, a broad range of white supremacists and vocal misogynists and – of course – those deeply concerned about Hillary Clinton's emails. That coalition was fuelled by intense feelings of anger directed scattershot at inconsistent targets; anger was something on which the voters were taking Trump seriously.

One part of the US vote was a loud vote against expertise. Clinton became, among other things, a symbol for technocracy, and this was articulated as a struggle to 'connect' with voters. Views and debates within STS about the nature of expertise seem oddly irrelevant in this context. The differences between accounts of expertise in realist terms (Collins and Evans, 2002), as institutionally constituted parts of larger regimes (Jasanoff, 2004) or as discrete networks (Eyal, 2013), while stark for readers of this journal, are subtle given the wholesale rejection of expertise by voters and the more selective rejection of expertise being continued in some announced appointments. It seems that optimism about the coexistence of democracy and expertise may be misplaced, or perhaps that expertise in general is being seen as 'sectarian' (Turner, 2001). If so, we might want to see this phenomenon in terms of post-truth.

Incoming EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt publicly rejects the expert consensus on climate change (although incoming Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, as CEO of

ExxonMobil has publicly voiced support of action on climate change). Officially, Pruitt's position is that there is not yet enough evidence to establish that human activity is causing climate change, which suggests a very 'high-proof' position on consensus and expertise (Edwards, 1999). In this, his stance is consistent with the fossil fuel industry's agnotological (Proctor, 2008) project of creating ignorance, where any disagreement is amplified to try to create a picture of complete dissensus (Oreskes and Conway, 2010). As Oklahoma Attorney General, Pruitt was found to have sent letters to the EPA that had been written by lawyers for Devon Energy, thus thinly disguising the interests that stood behind those letters; this is a common industry approach running from tobacco (Proctor, 2011) to fossil fuels (Oreskes and Conway, 2010) to pharmaceuticals (Sismondo, 2015).

Under serious consideration (as of this writing) for FDA Commissioner is Jim O'Neill. O'Neill has argued that the FDA should approve drugs only on grounds of safety, not efficacy. Set aside questions about whether this is possible, whether one can judge the safety of toxic substances without some reference to efficacy. If such a policy were put into place it would amount to a simple rejection of much of the expertise embodied in the FDA and its procedures. Individual physicians and patients would be in the position of needing to replace that expertise.

We can see some fast responses in the STS community. For example, at the University of Toronto, Michelle Murphy and colleagues have set up a project to archive government data and documents vulnerable to becoming unavailable (see https://envirodatagov.org/event-toolkit/). The project started with hackathon days, identifying, downloading and archiving data. The organizers' Canadian experience is relevant, because under the Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015), the Canadian Government engaged in concerted agnotological efforts, especially around climate change, including locking down government data and banning government scientists from speaking publicly. These actions sparked the creation of projects such as the Politics of Evidence Working Group (see https://politicsofevidence.wordpress.com/).

Another group of STS scholars, led by Jacob Moses and Gili Vidan at Harvard University, is currently organizing a blog under the title 'First 100 Days: Narratives of Normalization and Disruption'. The blog is described as a 'writing effort in response to the recent US presidential election and related electoral trends around the world.' It seeks to 'address issues of expertise and democracy' (see http://first100days.stsprogram.org, including the call for proposals for posts). That site will no doubt report on other STS engagements with the possibility of a post-truth era.

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