**PUBLIC RELATIONS IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD**

***Abstract***

This chapter examines how public relations relates to the societal condition of post-truth and what constitutes public relations practice at a time of populist politics, fake news and digital disinformation. The arrival of post-truth public relations is placed within recent media and political history, including the disruptive effects of the rise of populist outsiders that led to the Brexit vote in the UK in 2016 and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States election later that year. The prominence of social media platforms in the distribution of untruthful content is also discussed along with the emergence of an algorithmic style of communication that takes advantage of the platforms’ levels of audience engagement.

In response to these dislocations to established conventions in politics, media and society, some long-established aspects of public relations practice have also been subject to disruption as the sector adjusts to the conditions in which it must operate. The extent of the changes raises question of whether what has emerged can be described as public relations. So in order to further explain the relationship between public relations and the post-truth condition, the chapter includes a theorisation of post-truth public relations as an extreme variant of mainstream public relations that has evolved in response to the post-truth condition.

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**Introduction**

In a review of “PR, lies and post-truth politics” that reached back to Hannah Arendt’s (1972) essay entitled *Lying in Politics,* Anne Cronin (2018, p. 113) posited that the capacity of contemporary public relations “to both manage truths and broker new forms of promise place PR in a privileged position in today’s new socio-political context.” My approach in the chapter that follows is similarly informed by the thinking of political theorists, ranging from Aristotle and Plato to those who have considered more recent episodes of political communications such as Hannah Arendt and George Orwell. As far as possible, I have adopted a historical approach that places the recent mixing of public relations and post-truth within the broader accepted history of public relations and national PR histories. Alongside the historical viewpoint, some of the contemporary cases summarised here draw on interviews with public relations practitioners and other research carried out for my book on post-truth public relations (Thompson, 2020). Beyond historical references and investigations into contemporary PR, my attempt to map the field’s intersection with post-truth has been informed by the researchers examining the relatively novel domain of post-truth from fields of philosophy and social psychology, giving an interdisciplinary perspective to some sections. The volatility of the political sphere in the last 10 years has led to particular attention on political communication and a distinction is made between generic public relations practice and the specific field of political communications, where this chapter will start.

The storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, by supporters of President Donald Trump was a violent attempt to continue a political project that had been based upon untruths from its inception. Many years before his 2016 Presidential campaign, Trump had propagated “birther” conspiracy theories about whether President Obama had been born in the United States and was therefore a legitimate President. Those involved in the violence were encouraged by Trump’s speeches that day and a political communications operation that used mainstream and social media to amplify falsehoods, including the claim that their candidate had won the 2020 election. In the aftermath of the violence, House Leader, Senator Mitch McConnell stated (Philips, 2021): “We cannot keep drifting apart into two separate tribes with a separate set of facts and separate realities with nothing in common except a hostility for each other”.

The events of January 2021 were an unsettling motif of what Pankaj Mishra (2017, p. 9) foretold as an “age of anger” in which racism, misogyny and violent imagery are “routinely on display on social media” alongside “demagoguery in political discourse”. In the political sphere, aggressive communication has been used by charismatic outsiders to promote their claim that mainstream politicians are a selfish clique with no interest in or understanding of ordinary voters. In his book *The Rise of the Outsiders*, Richards (2017) describes how these communicative entrepreneurs emerged in Britain, France, Hungary, Turkey, Ukraine, United States and elsewhere during a period of volatility when voters lost confidence in mainstream politics following the 2008 financial crash.

Beyond the fundamentals of voter alienation in the wake of the financial crisis, the communicative reach of these political entrepreneurs has been significantly enhanced by online communications technologies and the “computational capitalism” (Stiegler, 2019, p. p.12) of social media platforms such as Facebook and twitter, which have has enabled them to directly address supporters, gain more attention and grow their audience. Yet instead of empowering citizens, the quantity of information and media chatter available online and the speed at which it flows on digital media has become a disorientating influence that has removed agency from many citizens and increased their sense of detachment from social and political reality.

The chapter that follows considers how these recent upheavals in communication, media and politics have affected the context in which public relations operates. Specifically, I explore the relationship between public relations and the post-truth condition in society that has emerged alongside the political and cultural disruptions of the recent past. The chapter considers the impact of these changes upon certain sectors and styles of public relations to illustrate these effects in practise. I also lay out an analysis of post-truth public relations, which is unpacked into a set of components around which what follows is organised:

1. The mixed repertoire of post-truth public relations

2. Disregard for facts and prioritisation of feelings

3. Social media and the digital mixology of online engagement

4. The rhetoric of certainty and division

5. Performativity

***Post-truth***

Post-truth is a social condition which arises when audiences accept as true, the ideas and statements that are attractive, pleasing and entertaining to them rather than those that correspond to reality or have some traceable fidelity to a source. The post-truth condition is the result of two changes in communications behaviour acting together: (1) The willingness of senders of messages to use falsehoods in their communication in order to win debates and influence opinion; (2) The acceptance by audiences of “truthy” messages and informational propositions of senders whose messages suit their opinions (Thompson, 2020, p. 87). This definition places post-truth as a matter of epistemological verity in the field of public persuasion and stresses the complicity of audiences. It also takes account of the state of “tribal epistemology” (Wautischer 2020, p. 6) that can prevail when audiences are affected by divisive politics and cultural conflicts. In these conditions, facts can be determined less by their correspondence to an established sense of truth and more by their alignment with the interests of the group to which an individual belongs and endorsement by its leaders.

Lying in the public arena cannot be claimed as a novel habit confined to our times. In his reflections on the reporting of the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell (1970, p. 295) felt that “the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world” and that in the history-making of this episode “for all practical purposes, the lie will have become truth”. Hannah Arendt (1967, p.49) gave a similar reminder that dishonesty has long been an accepted and seemingly essential tool for politicians, in reflections that included specific consideration of the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany in the 1930’s. So, is an idealised world of diligent truthfulness in public relations and political communications an imaginary that never existed? Or has there been such a change in the way untruths are used as a tool of influence and their acceptance by audiences that claims of a post-truth era are justified? Certainly, the term itself has come with health warnings since its inception. One reviewer of the early crop of books on post-truth pointed out there are issues with a term so “self-consciously grand” that it implies an “epochal shift” from an assumed and perhaps over-idealised “era of truth” (Corner, 2017, p. 1100). In *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, Matthew D’Ancona (2016, p. 8), interpreted the post-truth problem as “a crash in the value of truth, comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock” that could return to higher values over time. The BBC journalist Evan Davis (2016) invoked the idea that by 2016, we had already reached a high point of dishonest public discourse with the title of his book, *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It.* The philosopher Steve Fuller (2020) put alarmist tone aside in his portrayal of post-truth as social condition than has arisen as a logical extension of the widespread acceptance of relativism in modern society. This theme was also pursued by D’Ancona (2016, p. 2) in his analysis, which identified “pernicious relativism disguised as legitimate scepticism” as a cause of the decline of the value of truth in public discourse. Aspects of post-modernism such as relativism - in particular, epistemic relativism (or relativism as it relates to the exclusion of the idea of absolute facts) – provide a logical start point for analysis of post-truth topics as well as offering clues in relation to causality. Relativism provided an encouraging backdrop or mood music which enabled post-truth argumentation to exist in society and gain momentum in fields such as the anti-vaccination (anti-vax) movement from the 1990s onwards in the USA, UK, France and elsewhere, for example. When coupled with neoliberal consumerism and the dispersed distribution possibilities of digital media from around 2000 onwards, this underlying epistemic relativism in society created conditions for a marketization of verity, in which niche media channels emerged in order to serve a variety of truths in the form of news, opinion and content that suited the preferences of specific audiences. *Fox News*, founded in 1996, is one example of a media organisation that recognised this market opportunity to offer opinions and information in format of partisan content that suited a right-wing audience, that founder Rupert Murdoch judged to be under-served by existing media. More broadly, the result is that knowledge has become an epistemological selection box, from which audiences chose the most suitable version of truth in order to match an observer’s perspective, a consumer’s interests or a voter’s political preferences.

Concerns about the incentives for public relations practitioners to be untruthful in order to win in the arena of public persuasion have long been addressed in practice by the codes of ethical conduct of professional associations such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the UIK and in the academic realm by the fields of media and public relations ethics (see Bivins, 2018, for example). In the Classical era, the philosopher and ethical thinker, Plato, was highly critical of the relationship intermediary services offered by the Sophists in Ancient Greece, who were singled out more recently as the “post-truth merchants” of 5th Century Athens (Fuller, 2018, p.29). Plato (2017) criticised the Sophists for their disregard for truth, dismissal of expertise and the way they played rhetorical games in order to win public arguments on behalf of clients for financial gain. Yet despite his concern about the Sophists’ dishonest public argumentation, Plato gives examples in *The Republic* of situations in which it was acceptable for the ruling classes to deceive citizens as long as the ends justified the means if they were acting for the good of society.

Around 2,000 years later, in his book, *Propaganda,* Edward Bernays (1928) made a similar argument with his proposition that it was the task of the public relations counsellor, when working on behalf of powerful interests such as governments in democratic societies, to persuade citizens what is best for them and their nation. In his exposition of modern public relations, Fuller (2020, p. 39) went further with his claim that public relations is a form of post-truth politics and that if Plato was alive in contemporary society, he would fail to see the irony of the depiction in Aldous Huxley’s book, *Brave New World,* of “a society largely governed by state-run advertising campaigns”. At the time and place of writing (Spring 2021 in the UK) this circumstance of continuous and ubiquitous government propaganda during the Coronavirus pandemic in the form of posters, internet advertising and public relations outreach has already been accepted as the norm in many democracies, despite its goals being the ethically dubious goal of generating a “state of fear” in the population (Dodsworth, 2021, p. 2). Putting aside the special circumstances of the pandemic, modern post-truth conditions are being cunningly exploited by nation states such as Russia, political entrepreneurs such as Donald Trump and maverick business leaders such as Elon Musk, who are successfully gaming reality and using a new mixed repertoire of post-truth public relations.

**The mixed repertoire of post-truth public relations**

Amidst the disruptions in media, politics and truth, public relations is finding a place for its intermediary work in a highly competitive marketplace for communications services. This means advisers and executives in all sectors – whether in politics, the not-for-profit sector or business – are under increased pressure to deliver results and prevail in the public arena. The field of reputation management, for example, serves a client base comprised of “highly successful hard-nosed people who are used to winning” who hire public relations people in order to get the outcome they want (Thompson, 2020, p. 68). The resulting pressure at the sharp end of public relations practice, in which rich and powerful people seek to amend or contest facts, has led to the intersection of public relations with private investigators and legal firms with specialists in defamation, privacy and media law. Reputation managers are now major players in the game of truth, or what the *Financial Times* called “the information wars” in which “spies, moneymen, lobbyists and PR firms jostle to serve the world’s kleptocrats and their rivals” (Burgis, 2017, p. 16).

This mix of approaches, skills and techniques of reputation management is one example of the interdisciplinary repertoire and scope of contemporary public relations. In political communications, a combination of direct outreach through social media channels and divisive, high conviction rhetoric has been deployed by provocative populist politicians. In his analysis of the promotional strategies of right wing groups in the USA, Wendling, (2018, p. 20) traced “a raw online communications strategy” framed in cultural and racial confrontation back to the 2010 founding of the Alternative Right website. From this foundation, the alt-right’s online presence expanded through various successful media channels, including the *Breitbart News* site, which was run for some time by Steve Bannon, who favoured a mixture of confrontation with mainstream news providers and politicians, alongside highly opinionated and partisan content. Bannon went on to be Donald Trump’s campaign director in the 2016 Presidential election and ran what was criticised at the time by commentators in mainstream media as a chaotic campaign of over the top public performances, incivility and shameless lying. Yet , Trump emerged triumphant as “the greatest political entrepreneur of our time” as a result of these partisan messages and a confrontational public relations style that succeeded in appealing to the huge “disgruntlement market” of modern voters (Gray, 2016, p.12)

**Facts and feelings**

During the second half of the twentieth century, alongside development as a professional activity concerned with distribution of information to the public and an educative approach to persuasion (L’Etang, 2004, p. 22), the invention of news and staging of stunts in order to generate news remained a mainstay of public relations work. Edward Bernays’s staging of a fabricated protest by women who lit cigarettes and smoked in public during New York’s Easter Parade in 1920 as part of a campaign on behalf of a tobacco company is a celebrated early example of “pseudo event” designed solely to generate media coverage (Boorstin, 1962, p.12). Perhaps a more serious manifestation of deceitful post-truth public relations over a 50 year period has been the repeated setting up of front groups and fake grassroots campaigns by public relations firms as part of their campaigns. These groups deliberately misrepresent the sources of finance and membership that fund their work as “secret persuaders” (Palenchar & Fitzpatrick, 2009, p.272) and their existence is itself a form of untruth. Yet public relations people’s perception of the effectiveness of these tools led to networks of transatlantic deception being formed from the 1970s to the present day in London, Washington and elsewhere on behalf of varied interests from oil and gas production through to right wing politics. For example, in the wake of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in what became the first Gulf War of 1990, the Kuwait government funded Hill and Knowlton to manage its response in Washington. The firm established a network of around 20 public relations and lobbying firms to support the Kuwaiti cause and then created the front group *Citizens for a Free Kuwait* from scratch, pocketing $10.9m of the $11.9m of funding provided by its client, the government of Kuwait, while just $17,861 came from private individual supporters (Stauber & Rampton, 1995, p. 73). Thirty years on, in November 2020, the New York-based global consulting firm FTI came to public attention for its use of fake Facebook profiles to monitor activists on behalf of oil industry clients alongside initiating and running of fake grass roots pro-fossil fuel campaigns that were in fact funded by FTI’s clients (Nauman, 2020). This exposure confirmed that a deceptive and inauthentic tactic which large public relations firms were denying and apologising for from the 1970s onwards is still in use today.

While national and international politics have been the high stakes arena for post-truth in the last 10 years or so, business has also become a field in which participants can play fast and loose with the truth, and corporate wrongdoers can avoid detection for longer periods. The US fund manager Jim Chanos of Kynikos Associates has claimed that we are currently living through a “golden age of fraud” brought about by “Trumpian post-truth in politics, where my facts are your fake news; and Silicon Valley’s fake it until you make it culture” (Agnew, 2020). Examples in the USA include Theranos, a West Coast healthcare start-up founded in 2003 by 19 year old Elizabeth Holmes that grew to a $10bn valuation by 2013 before collapsing when the *Wall Street Journal* questioned the truth of its technical claims. This in turn led to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) charging the founders with fraud in 2018. Public relations, misinformation and untruthful corporate promotion played an important role in the marketing of Theranos, which aggressively exploited the narrative of its female leader, generating extensive and favourable press coverage of Elizabeth Holmes, including cover stories in *Bloomberg, Forbes, Fortune, Inc*, and *Glamour*. The SEC’s complaint of “massive fraud” centred on the fake claims made in Theranos’s investor relations, marketing and public relations effort, alleging that the company, Holmes and former president, Ramesh “Sunny” Balwani, “made numerous false and misleading statements in investor presentations, product demonstrations, and media articles” about its product and its capabilities (Schroeder, 2018).

**Social media and the digital mixology of online engagement**

With its strengths in understanding news and narrative, public relations has become a powerful component in the digital mixology (Thompson, 2020, p. 129) of online advertising, content creation and search engine optimisation (SEO) that enables effective online campaigning on social media platforms. After years of experience in the online advertising (or AdTech) business, Facebook, Google and other platform operators had witnessed the power of “compelling content” –including invented news stories - to generate digital footfall and advertising revenues. The algorithms behind the content management systems (CMS) had long enabled platforms to deliver dynamically-generated and customised web pages. From around 2010 onwards, the difference was the way users were served content that targeted them by becoming a little more partisan over time based on their preferences, resulting in the most incendiary subject matter becoming more and more effective in sustaining attention. This development, alongside Facebook’s failure to monitor right-wing hate speech and misinformation in its home market and to protect the public from the negative effects of the networks, was confirmed by the October 2021 revelations and document leaks of the whistle blower, Frances Haugen (Milmo, 2021).

Whether deployed by Donald Trump in politics, the anti-vaccination lobby in the public health field or Tesla CEO Elon Musk ranting against traders talking down his company’s stock, the affordances of social media can make it hard for audiences to discern facts from opinion and fake news. Moreover, the tempo of news distribution on social media favours small, nimble and maverick operators who are able to post swiftly rather than the more institutionalised corporations and mainstream media channels that are likely to have fact-checking and due diligence processes to undertake before distribution. The result is a digital public relations ecosystem of influencers, attention-seeking social media posts, and gaming of search engines that has evolved to take advantage of the media logic of the platforms. This digital mixology of computational distribution offers distraction and engagement for audiences, with online media channels proliferating that seem to favour extremes rather than the views of the moderate centre. In the case of Facebook, by 2012, years of concerted corporate effort to host “compelling content” for its growing user base meant it had transformed itself from social network into “a people-centric propaganda engine,” (Moore, 2018, p. 158). While Facebook members thought they were sharing their personal data on the site with online friends, the company was harvesting multiple data points to build profiles that could be segmented for micro-targeting based on individual affinities, attitudes, life stage, location, relationship status, purchasing record and other personal data as the basis for online campaigns.

In response, Google’s provision of platform services than enabled communicators to undertake personalised campaigns started with a change to the terms and conditions of its privacy policy. This enabled Google and those clients who paid for its marketing services to extract personal data from the varied accounts users may have for its difference applications - GMail, YouTube and others - and use that to build an aggregated data picture of an individual. The result was a set of data products, including *Google Customer Match*, that enabled communications and marketing clients to target campaigns by integrating “information customers have already shared with you” (possibly without their knowledge or active consent through cookies or other forms of online tracking) along with “online and offline data to reach and re-engage with your customers across Search, YouTube and Gmail” (Google, 2019). In the 2016 US Presidential election campaign, Facebook and Google made these tools available to both Democrat and Republican campaigns, handing over what was in effect a nationwide dataset that could be used for computational political communications. Messages could be micro-targeted based on age, probable political affinities and policy issues of concern. Kreiss and McGregor (2018, p. 160) reported that several platform companies were openly promoting their data services at the US Democratic Party Convention while on the Republican side, experts were loaned to assist the Trump operation, with one employee seconded from Facebook being named at the 2016 campaign’s “most valuable player” (Warzel, 2016).

**The rhetoric of certainty and division**

Robert Heath (2000) provided a compelling answer to critical questions regarding the role of public relations in society with his elaboration of a process of rhetorical exchange that supports the resolution of social issues through public debate. The outcome was envisioned by Heath as a fully-functioning society in which all voices could be heard and account taken of their views. The challenge to this optimistic conceptualisation lies in the uneven distribution of vocality, when some voices are louder than others in public debate because of recurring imbalance between the rhetorical volume available to civic activists compared with well-funded corporate or government interests (Demetrious, 2013).

Social media provides an environment in which the different sides of a debate in society can receive and even seek out information that matches their ideologically-based realities, whether it is the belief that vaccines are harmful or that Donald Trump won a majority of votes in the 2020 US election. The intimacy and pliability of social media can give users a privileged sense of discovery over what they regard as special facts that suit their side of the debate. The result is that a collective narcissism can take hold among these divided groups, giving different factions an exaggerated sense of superiority based on their beliefs. At the 2018 BledCom PR Symposium, Michal Chmiel (2018) presented the findings of an innovative experiment with 240 participants that was undertaken in order to better understand the communicative effects of collective narcissism in a PR context He measured readers’ responses to a fake public relations message on vaccine effects while controlling for both the collective narcissism trait and support for certain political ideologies. Those readers who thought the story had come from a person similar to themselves (i.e. in the same ideological grouping) were more likely to share the message through social media even though they had assessed the reliability and truthfulness of the core message to be poor.

The insights from Chmiel’s experiment could be detected in public debates and the tone of rhetoric during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, in which varied viewpoints seemed to fight divisive ideological battles of false binaries based upon either nationalistic authoritarianism or a vehement anti-science philosophy. The rhetoric of war was used by several leaders, with President Macron of France, for example, repeatedly stating in his national TV addresses that “we are at war” (Holroyd and Chadwick, 2020). In the UK, government assertions that the country was the best prepared in the world to deal with a pandemic were followed by predictions of a victory against the virus - in which the British people would prevail. Before the UK imposed lockdown restrictions, the UK’s Transport Minister, Grant Shapps (McGuinness, 2020) claimed that the March 2020 lockdowns in Europe were “popularistic” and that “the UK was “not doing the things that are happening elsewhere” because his government was relying on science, when in fact there was just a time lag in the spread between mainland Europe and the UK. Despite increased voter approval for some politicians during the pandemic and relatively high levels of vaccine take-up, failures to provide straightforward health information has led to some specific problems of public trust. In 2021, there was a high level of suspicion of vaccines in France for example, while the confusing and selective “number theatre” by Boris Johnson and others in his UK administration on figures for cases and deaths has been described as “embarrassing” by David Spiegelhalter, Winton Professor of the Public Understanding of Risk at University of Cambridge (Duffield, 2020).

**Performativity**

The theatre of numbers that featured in the UK government’s presentation of figures relating to the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak is not the only incursion of drama into public relations in recent years. The confrontational political sphere and competition for voter attention has accelerated the emergence of a performative mode of communication, in which theatricality and comedy are prioritised over substantive policy matters. This aspect of the post-truth era has enabled the rise of a class of media-savvy political entrepreneurs whose existence owes more to performative public relations and a confected promotional presence on social media than policy knowledge or governmental experience. The electoral successes of Donald Trump, Beppe Grillo of Italy’s Five Star Movement and Volodymyr Zelensky, the satirical entertainer who won the April 2019 Ukraine presidential election, are all examples of candidates successfully making a transition from the insubstantial worlds of reality television, comedy and digital marketing to the domain of national politics.

While modern politics has yielded many examples of public figures deliberately behaving badly as part of their political communication and breaching the norms of civic courtesy and honesty, few business leaders have adopted the same approach. Elon Musk, chairman and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Tesla combined attention-seeking performativity and offensive rhetoric in 2018, when he intervened to offer services on behalf of his tunnelling venture, during the attempted rescue of 12 boys from a cave in Thailand. In a Twitter post, he insulted the British caver who had rescued the boys and accused him of being a paedophile. This led to a libel trial which Musk surprisingly won. The closure of the libel case seemed to mark a turning point that saw the first case of a Fortune 500 CEO adopting the Trumpian public relations format of self-help and direct and uncivil communication with audiences through social media rather than via specialist advisers. Despite being covered prominently and largely positively in the media, the Tesla CEO “decided shortly after he won the case that he was finished trying to be nice to the journalists, seeing them as biased against him” (Bilton, 2020, p.98).

On 7 August 2018, at a time when his electric car company was being targeted by short sellers on the stock market, Musk (2018) tweeted that he was “considering taking Tesla private at $420. Funding secured”. Musk’s claim that he had a line of funding to buy company’s stock at a price of $420 per share was intended to hurt the many traders in the financial markets who were betting against Tesla by shorting the stock. Yet this episode of post-truth financial public relations proved expensive for Musk as his claim was false and no funding was confirmed. After being charged with fraud by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and subsequently paying $40m in settlement penalties personally, Musk remained unrepentant and doubled down in his ridicule of the regulator as the “Short-seller Enrichment Commission”. Musk later parted with his external public relations firm and then dissolved Tesla’s in-house public relations team, in another first for any car maker. A *PR Week* report stated that journalists had not heard from the “once super-active PR department” for months and that instead, the “main channel for product promotion is CEO Elon Musk's Twitter account, which has more than 39 million followers” (Stam, 2020), effectively making Musk – who was by now the world’s richest man - his own director of communications.

**Conclusion and future directions in post-truth public relations**

This chapter has offered an analysis of post-truth public relations as an extreme form of practice that has evolved in response to the post-truth condition in society. Although it represents a minority of public relations work overall, the style and techniques of post-truth public relations have been prominent in populist politics and in high-growth fields of business such as technology. After considering some of the field’s deceptive practices, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that as the public became more aware of the intermediary function of public relations, they also became more attuned to its artificiality. As public figures in business and politics used media relations techniques to give “public relations answers” in interviews, public trust in what they were saying was undermined, enabling a condition that has in turn charged public life with a combination of artificiality, grandiosity and untruth. Yet, while I conclude that this aspect of public relations may have contributed to the conditions in which post-truth practices have emerged, the evidence is incomplete and signs of direct causal links between public relations and post-truth remain weak. Moreover, there is surely no question of public relations being its sole instigator. A much broader coalition of social, technical and political forces were at work for some years undermining public trust in authoritative sources of information - such as politicians and mainstream media - and generating the conditions in which a post-truth approach became viable. Alongside the fundamentals of a volatile state of national politics in many democracies, there have been transformational shifts in the way citizens choose to engage with information and news through online media. However, the locomotive that pulled the post-truth condition into being in the early 21st Century was the increasing acceptance of relativism in post-modern societies. This continuum of relativism in general – and epistemic relativism in particular - gradually eroded the idea of a set of truths that were certain, timeless and universally valid. Furthermore, the dominant trend of individualistic consumerism in modern neoliberal societies has led to market demand for the capability to choose and consume desirable facts, amusing images and entertaining narratives and that suit individual opinions rather than challenge them. The affordances of digital media mean that individualised channels of content can be easily selected and customised – whether relating to celebrity news, climate change or anti-vaccination campaigns – and then delivered and distributed online at speed and at low or zero cost. Communicative entrepreneurs in business, politics and other fields were swifter than those in the mainstream to spot these new conditions and, in the wake of post-truth relativism, exploited the gaps in public information that emerged as the state of truthiness took hold. Rather than playing by the old rules of public relations and mass media by making arguments and contesting facts in the realms of news and public information, post-truth players such as Beppe Grillo, Elon Musk, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, understood that they were now able to redefine the rules of the game of public relations by going direct to their publics using social media. A solid online presence may have been supplemented by entertaining performances, live rallies and dramatic claims. Using varied performative approaches, they then took advantage of the freewheeling conditions on disintermediated media channels to use untruth, uncivility and factionalism in their quest for attention and public engagement. The result is a public sphere in which reality remains subject to gamification and in which political deliberation based upon fact can be swiftly replaced by a public relations of distracting chatter and exaggerated theatrical performance.

Reflecting upon the swift and yet stealthy emergence of the post-truth condition, an important question for future work is whether we have arrived at a level of acceptance of its presence or whether the option remains to return to the imaginary of a more truthful state we used to know as normality? Or will the credibility crisis that has affected the institutions that hold and disseminate information – from universities to governments, media and public relations firms – endure and generate further dislocation from the more truthful conditions of the relatively recent past, in which the facts, frames of reference and other aspects of knowledge are agreed ahead of discussion? More fundamentally, in order to verify the existence of a post- truth style of public relations and confirm its practice beyond the overused examples of Donald Trump and others, there is a requirement for more case studies based on accounts from practitioners working in diverse fields, alongside instances where the role of public relations can helpfully be analysed with a post-truth lens.

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