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Public relations, post-truth society and Trump's alarming political triumph

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Abstract

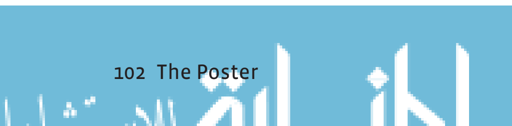
In November of 2016, the US elected its first post-truth candidate. In the wake of the turbulent election and media cycle, it is crucial to take stock of the political, cultural and technological developments that brought us to this point. I argue that the rise and success of a candidate such as Donald Trump is an inevitable upshot of a PR-steeped media environment. This article examines recent trends in PR and digital media that have contributed towards a post-truth social and political paradigm in the United States. I identify candidate Trump as the quintessential post-truth candidate, highlight the deleterious effects of exposure to PR-speak on the electorate's media literacy and discuss the various PR tactics that Trump used to exploit the schismatic fertile ground laid by decades of corporate PR strategy. I consider the dangers of a public inexperienced in critical media evaluation and further fragmented by social media bubbles that promote

groupthink and make citizens more susceptible to falsehoods. Further, I address Russia's recent disinformation campaign that worked to help elect Trump and illustrate how PR strategies originating in advertising are being used not only by political candidates but also by foreign powers seeking to influence US elections. All of these developments related to PR and media technology have corroded national political discourse and culminated in an attack on US democracy in the twenty-first century.

PR's stealth and ubiquity

PR strategists have long sought a cloak of invisibility to sway public opinion and they may have found an answer in the form of branded content. Perhaps the most insidious rising trend in PR culture, branded or sponsored content is defined as 'content that takes the same form and qualities of a publisher's original content' and 'serves useful or entertaining information as a way of favorably influencing the perception of the sponsor brand' (Sonderman and Tran 2013). Sponsored content can take on many forms and is becoming especially prevalent in a media environment dominated by numerous and continuously growing social media platforms. Examples include blog posts, Facebook posts or tweets that have been paid to appear by sponsors, and articles in online newspapers that, while written to appear as legitimate news articles, are actually paid for and often co-written by corporate PR spokespeople. The *New York Times* has even established 'T Brand Studio', an in-house unit that aims to create 'brand stories' that are 'engaging and influential' and appear to contain the same level of quality information as non-paid stories (T Brand Studio 2016). The presence of this sponsored content 'compromises a major tenet of journalism: that news should be determined by the public interest, not by the interest of owners or advertisers' (McChesney 1997: 23). Sponsored content is even easier to sneak into social media as social media accounts are easy to set up and do not require verification to appear legitimate to the untrained eye. PR has seeped into almost every facet of modern media, a 'great dark matter of contemporary culture exerting a considerable but invisible pull' (Deery 2015: 80).

While sponsored content can be a significant source of revenue for news agencies, when packaged as news it can be detrimental to citizens' ability to distinguish between verifiable facts and fabrications. A recent Stanford University study sought to understand how digital natives consume and evaluate online advertisements, sponsored content and news posts on social media for trustworthiness and bias. The study involved students from middle school, high school and college, with various tests designed to gauge each group's 'civic online reasoning', defined as 'the ability to judge the credibility of information that floods young people's smartphones, tablets, and computers' (Stanford History Education Group 2016: 3). Participants were presented with various items claiming to be news, such as tweets, articles, photographs and headlines, and were asked to identify whether



or not they were an advertisement, and evaluate their worth as a news source. The study found that 'more than 80% of students believed that the native advertisement, identified by the words "sponsored content", was a real news story' (Stanford History Education Group 2016: 10). Although the stories were explicitly labelled as sponsored content, some students claimed that they thought this meant that the article was sponsored by the website hosting the content, and still others identified the label but did not know what it meant at all. Perhaps this is because the term 'sponsored content' is its own PR-speak for native advertising, a term devised to mask the true intentions behind the content itself: tapping into an established demographic or emotional real estate to sell a product. Further, 'less than a third of students fully explained how the political agendas […] might influence the content of [a] tweet' in the section on social media claims and 'more than half of students failed to click on the link provided within the tweet' (Stanford History Education Group 2016: 23–24). This indicates that young Internet news consumers lack the skills to critically evaluate and investigate headlines and claims made on social media. This ineptitude feeds the growth of a medium that propagates news extraordinarily quickly without relying on fact-checking and thorough reporting. Coupled together, these factors work to catalyse a burgeoning post-truth society. Thus 'creating the impression of truth displaces the search for truth' (Deery 2012: 51–52).

As sponsored content is becoming a standard revenue model on Internet news sites, it is important to examine how journalistic practices and news consumption habits are shifting to online forms. According to the Pew Research Center, '2015 was perhaps the worst year for newspapers since the Great Recession', ad revenues from newspapers falling 8%. Digital ad revenue went up 20%, with 'two-thirds of this […] [going] to just five technology companies', including Facebook and Twitter (Barthel 2016). Indeed, the use of these two social media sites as news sources has progressively grown to about 18% of adults relying on them somehow for news (Mitchell et al. 2016). With instantaneous sharing and retweeting of articles and, in some cases, politicians' direct words, social media allows news to propagate more quickly than ever. Obama's 2008 campaign made heavy use of social media to rally the democratic base and encourage voting, arguably marking the beginning of a social media-dominated political era. Donald Trump flipped this on its head, using Twitter not only as a PR tool to help followers keep track of his campaign but also as a digital soapbox for his personality and ideology: that of a political outsider bent on destroying the status quo. It is precisely the omnipresence of PR-steeped media that created a fertile ground for his political rise.

Citizens' inability to discern the truth in advertising from PR-speak abetted the advent of a post-truth society. The concept of 'post-truth' as a milieu in which facts matter less than appeals to emotion has already become firmly established in public discourse due to the ubiquity of Trump-like rhetoric in the news and in politics around the globe. The proliferation of PR-dominated media content and 'increasingly obtuse, confusing, and boring' coverage of news and political events contribute towards a rise in widespread public apathy (McChesney 1997: 16). Citizens are

becoming less critical of the media that they consume, which has dangerous ramifications in the political sphere. Donald Trump's meteoric rise from television personality to presidential front-runner to president-elect is symptomatic of a culture that values rhetoric shaped by corporate PR strategy over substantive debate. According to Politifact's Truth-O-Meter, a Pulitzer Prize-winning online publication dedicated to fact-checking political candidates' claims, only 15 per cent of Donald Trump's statements during the campaign were rated 'True' or 'Mostly True'; 51 per cent of his statements fall within the spectrum of 'False' to 'Pants on Fire', ratings that indicate statements ranging from merely 'inaccurate' to outrageous and 'ridiculous claims' (McCaskill 2017). His popularity among conservative voters despite the prevalence of these 'pants on fire claims' suggests the displacement of traditional platform rhetoric by more 'exciting' coverage of 'entertainment and celebrity' (McChesney 1997: 16). It is of course of little surprise that Donald Trump would use rhetoric like this on his campaign trail, given his past as a reality television star on NBC's *The Apprentice* (2004-2017). What is perhaps surprising, then, and quite troubling, is how receptive the general public was to his message during the campaign. His strategy is very much like advertising/PR in that it dismisses or ignores the truth altogether in favour of boosting the brand (in this case, himself), but it is successful because it does not come couched in traditional 'politically correct' language. Trump's new brand of PR cuts through the noise.

PR began to shape American politics decades before the Trump era. The most famous example is the 1960 presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the first televised presidential debate in US history. The story is well known: although Nixon was widely thought of as the winner among radio audiences, for television viewers, Kennedy's more youthful appearance and stage presence gave him a clear advantage over Nixon's sickly and sweaty complexion. President Reagan's success was quite image-based as well; he used his established brand as an actor in the same way that Trump coasted on his established reality show personality to provide an avatar for a simplistic world-view and political platform designed to appeal to racists. What makes Trump unique and worthy of the monicker 'First Post-Truth President' is that he dropped the pretense. Whereas both Kennedy and Reagan had political careers before their presidential campaigns, Trump was successful among his base precisely because he was not a politician. Where Reagan used coded language and 'dog whistles' as part of the continued Republican Southern Strategy, Trump announced his candidacy as a crusade against Mexican 'rapists'. Trump showed that for the first time, platform and policy could be displaced entirely by personality and branding. Bernays wondered if 'politicians of the future […] will not endeavor to train politicians who are at the same time propagandists', and Trump demonstrated that the politician tag was no longer necessary (1928: 105).

Trump's approach to his public image runs counter to many traditional beliefs about candidate PR. Trump's strategy would rely not on 'expensive television ad campaigns, bus tours, or earnest

meet-and-greets' but instead on 'stadium rallies and ubiquitous presence on television and media' (Sherman 2016). These stadium rallies would feature bought-and-paid-for planted supporters, a form of astroturfing where actors received '$50 to wear Trump t-shirts and wave placards' (Sherman 2016). Of course, Trump's television omnipresence would be guaranteed by his outrageous statements in-lieu of sponsored ads. Very little focus and attention was paid to matters of policy or platform. Whereas Clinton opted for the more traditional route to have her tweets vetted by advisers (often producing a feed that appeared artificial or manufactured, as her detractors pointed out), Trump's rapid responses would be straight from the horse's mouth. Trump was interested mainly in 'the theater of the campaign', 'making sure the flags hung perfectly, the eagles faced out, the carpet was red'; its outward appearance takes precedence over everything else (Sherman 2016). Trump recognized that the current social and media landscape would respond just as well, if not better, to an advertising campaign masquerading as a political campaign than it would to a typical campaign. Trump's image is just as manufactured as Clinton's – he played the *Apprentice* character for decades until it became one with his public persona – but he succeeded because his image projected the façade of authenticity by virtue of its shock value. In the media horse race driven by attention-grabbing headlines over discussions of policy, Trump's reality show persona would thrive.

Trump's relationship with the media is not as adversarial as he would have his voters believe; it could even be described as symbiotic. Because of advertising dollars, contemporary journalism is driven by clicks. The oft-mentioned 'clickbait' refers of course to outrageous or unbelievable headlines intended to grab viewers' attention. Many mainstream journalists realized late in the campaign that they had abetted Trump's brand through continuous coverage. In 2016, an entire special issue of *New York Magazine* entitled 'The case against the media by the media' presented the mainstream media's *mea culpa* for playing into Trump's hands. Trump understands that 'journalists can be like a school of fish', and during the campaign he directed media attention to his tweets and brazen claims, knowing that these would attract clicks and facilitate business for the media whose coverage of more substantive issues would be marginalized (Keller quoted in Anon. 2016). Mainstream media seeks to captivate audiences by creating 'staged battles' akin to 'a professional wrestling match' (McCarthy quoted in Anon. 2016). These 'he-said-she-said' debates are meant to convey journalistic neutrality on divisive or Trump-related issues but often confuse and disorient, rather than inform, the viewer. For example, CNN's hiring Donald Trump's former campaign manager as a commentator only helped to legitimize Trump's lies. According to Dean Baquet, executive editor of the *New York Times*, this tactic 'fuzzies up the definition of journalism, [a]nd has done some damage to all of us' (Anon. 2016). In this way, 'devices like he-said-she-said are substitutes for real knowledge' (Rosen quoted in Anon. 2016). Viewers tune into panel shows and become passive observers entertained by a simulacrum of debate, or simply agree with whatever facts or falsities are uttered by the panelist whose ideology aligns with their own. These televised arguments are not conducive to imparting truth.

The erosion of truth

Signs of a laissez-faire attitude towards truth in reporting have been recognized at least as far back as Stephen Colbert's 'truthiness' segments during the Bush era, and can be more distinctly seen in the controversy surrounding journalist Candy Crowly during a debate between President Obama and Mitt Romney. Romney accused the Obama administration of failing to identify the attack in Libya as an 'act of terror' and debate moderator Crowly immediately stepped in to fact-check Romney's claim, identifying which parts were correct and incorrect. Republicans' outrage over this was immediate and widespread. The *New York Post* published an editorial entitled 'Candy's Not Dandy' that attacked Crowley for 'media bias' and insinuated that she was a fraudulent debate moderator. This exact scenario was repeated during debates between Clinton and Trump when the Clinton campaign publicly asked journalists and moderators to fact-check the debate. Many conservative news agencies, including *The Washington Times* and Fox News, repeatedly said that it is not the moderator's job to fact-check, with Fox News anchor Ainsley Earhardt quoted as saying 'it's up to [the viewers] to know the facts and to know when they're being lied to' (Fernandez 2016). This begs the question that McChesney poses, 'But where would citizens get informed?' (1997: 43). As he and the Stanford study suggest, the problem is that audiences are less able to discern when they are being lied to because the sources that they formerly went to for information on politics are failing to provide adequate information on the truth. Sponsored advertising content stands alongside real articles, and news agencies refuse to take a stronger stance against misinformation for fear of appearing biased and alienating potential readers. The media has thus relinquished its traditional watchdog role. When news and 'facts' become commodified, people can buy into the ideas that appeal to them. This leads to a form of selective depoliticization, especially among the dispossessed, who pick and choose which 'facts' to rationalize their political support. It is these 'dispossessed' with whom candidate and now President Trump is quite popular.

If mainstream media disseminated Trump's campaign message for free, right-wing media outlets solidified loyalty to the Trump brand among his base and thereby advanced the post-truth paradigm. The aforementioned *New York Post* is owned by Rupert Murdoch's news company. Murdoch, a right-leaning media tycoon, is known for acquisition strategies that involve purchasing working-class newspapers such as the *Post* and having them maintain a tabloid format filled with 'coverage of crime, sports and celebrities' while using them as a platform for anti-liberal sentiments (McChesney 1997: 16). The Fox network utilizes similar formats in its programming, with many of its presentations blending opinions and entertainment with news so as to become indistinguishable to a non-discerning viewer. Trump's own strategy relied heavily on directing his followers to right-leaning news media; 'fully 78% of his posts with links directed followers to […] media organizations such as Fox News' (Pew Research Center 2016). 40% of Trump voters named Fox News as their primary

source for information during the campaign, comprising 19% voters overall. Whereas liberal voters tend to diversify their news sources, conservative voters 'are tightly clustered around a single news source, […] with 47% citing Fox News as their main source for news about government and politics' (Mitchell et al. 2014). Further, 'fully 88% of consistent conservatives trust Fox News', an overwhelming majority that has no analogue among liberal voters (Mitchell et al. 2014). The concept of brand loyalty has thus been extended to media platforms. This puts the majority of conservatives, and in turn a startling number of the overall electorate, under the influence of a single media empire. Fox is also notorious for downplaying or otherwise marginalizing stories that cast conservative politicians in a negative light. This was made possible by the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine under Ronald Regan, which had 'required stations to devote a reasonable time to discussions of serious public issues and allowed equal time for opposing views to be heard' (Bagdikian 1983: 226). Free of regulation, the Fox network, like Trump himself, often runs stories that deflect blame onto Democrats, marginalizing stories that are damaging to Trump.

The fractured online media landscape and a corporate controlled news network work in tandem to influence vulnerable segments of the population. The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine and the ability to curate news feeds via social media facilitate the creation of media 'bubbles', wherein citizens can read and consume media that never challenges their own views. It is possible to 'go through each day as a well(-ish) informed person without ever hearing a sliver of news that contradicts what you already believe' (Cillizza 2016). Conservative voters are particularly vulnerable because they are subject to the whims and desires of those in control of Fox News. On Fox, viewers overwhelmingly receive one spin that aggressively pushes a conservative agenda. This is then reinforced by a litany of one-sided talk radio shows – a form of media favoured by conservative commentators and another consequence of the Fairness Doctrine repeal – and social media bubbles. Trump did not create this ground; conservatives laid the groundwork for decades by constantly referring to a liberal bias in the media, eroding confidence in mainstream media while simultaneously building and strengthening their own mainstream, right-wing media machine. Their efforts were accelerated by the advent of social media that supplanted more rigorous forms of journalism. Trump merely took full advantage of conservatives' mistrust of 'liberal media'.

Constantly being on the receiving end of 'deliberately ambiguous communication that spins and obfuscates' inevitably leads to widespread disillusionment (Deery 2012: 45). According to a recent Gallup poll, Americans' confidence in almost every recognizable institution except the military is at an all-time low (Norman 2016). Trump's campaign of falsehoods was successful because of this very real phenomenon; he constantly repeated the same verifiably false statements about immigration, Obama's birthplace and military strategy, while he also accused media institutions of falsehoods and insisted that it is not their place to fact check. In doing so, Trump distorted truths by conflating them with the opposite and reinforced the importance of his own post-truth rhetoric.

Much of his campaign involved positioning himself as an anti-establishment candidate, a Washington outsider who is just as fed up with Washington and media doublespeak as the average voter. The massive amount of support that he received in the primaries and in the election itself reflects the gradual breakdown of truth's value in the wider culture. Trump's success illustrates McChesney's claim about the 'loss of intrinsic meaning' in language used by advertisers but applied in a political context (1997: 48). All that Trump had to do was 'convince people' that his message was true through 'decontextualized facts, half-truths, and outright lies' for it in effect to 'become true, duly rewarding the creator of the message' (McChesney 1007: 49). Trump's language, much like advertising language, 'takes vague notions of important states and lends those a form' (Fowles 1996: 163). This explains his popularity among less educated voters; much like advertising, Trump is proving that many voters do not want their politics 'to deal in realities', appreciating instead politics that 'offer gossamer' (Fowles 1996: 163).

Online resources such as Politifact and *The Washington Post*'s Pinocchio fact checker are working overtime to constantly check Trump's barrage, but fact checking does not necessarily persuade readers to revise their opinions. In March of 2017, the Royal Society's *Royal Society Open Science* published an extensive and illuminating study on the effects of Trump's use of political misinformation. The study involved two experiments that investigated 'the impact of source credibility on the assessment of veracity' by asking participants to 'rate their belief in factual and incorrect statements that President Trump made on the campaign trail' (Swire Briony et al. 2017: 1). The study found that

> [Republican supporters] did not change their voting intentions nor feelings towards Trump when the misinformation was attributed to the political figure […] [that] the degree that Republican supporters updated their belief that Trump's misinformation was false was not significantly correlated with a change in voting intentions nor feelings towards Trump.
>
> (Swire Briony et al. 2017: 11)

The results 'suggest that the public, or at least Trump supporters, are not overly concerned with a candidate disseminating misinformation and seem to be looking to qualities other than veracity' (Swire Briony et al. 2017: 11). This points to the erosion of truth's value in the contemporary American political landscape. The mainstream media's fact-checking efforts, defined as left-wing by decades of Fox dictating what's 'right', are therefore rendered ineffective. Fact-checking is seen only as a way for 'corrupt and liberal' journalists to 'couch their biases' (Cillizza 2016). The new paradigm favours anyone who speaks the loudest directly to voters by convincing them that their opinions are the only 'facts' that they need. When people become unable to tell fact from fiction, retreating to their own biases is the easiest way to continue holding an opinion that will guide their votes. But Trump appears to make truth more nebulous among more than just his supporters. The study found that 'if

the original information came from Donald Trump, after an explanation participants were less able to accurately label what was fact or fiction in comparison to the unattributed condition, regardless of their support for Trump' (Swire Briony et al. 2017: 11). This is a testament to the power of Trump's repetitive approach to message dissemination, whereby he bludgeons listeners until they are so weary that they can no longer separate truth from fiction. When the truth is difficult or impossible to discern because it has been drowned out by an onslaught of PR doublespeak and constant lies, even the politically alert become susceptible to confusion and manipulation. Trump is both a symptom of post-truth and an instrument in its wider reach.

Trump and social media

It is no secret that Donald Trump is the most prolific Twitter user in presidential campaign history, his impulsive and aggressive style constantly the subject of evening news reporting and political parody. Trump's tweets, however, represent a seismic shift in the way in which political figures operate because they invert traditional strategies employed historically by PR agents. Typically PR is focused on specific word choice and carefully crafted press releases to present a client in a favourable light, especially in the political realm when grooming a presidential candidate. Trump eschews this strategy entirely and instead capitalizes on the fractured nature of online news media to create pseudo-events, events that are 'actual but designed in order to be mediated' (Deery 2012: 52). Tweets like the attacks on Meryl Streep, his use of the 'Rocket Man' insult aimed at Kim Jong Un and misogynist attacks on *Morning Joe* anchor Mika Brzezinski's appearance are intentionally placed to provoke media coverage – and in turn his critics – while invigorating his base. Indeed, seemingly every tweet that Trump makes on his personal account is picked up by media outlets, who then broadcast them to audiences nationwide; each tweet is its own pseudo-event. This is precisely one of the reasons why Trump was able to win the election despite spending only a fraction of what Clinton spent on advertisements (Pearce 2016). It is a form of marketing communication strategy in that 'its goal is to build an image or motivate an action', in this case build Trump's 'alpha male' persona and motivate his supporters to vote and continue to support his policies (Baran 2013: 309). The success of Trump's messages is then not predicated on any factual basis but is instead 'measured by how widely [the message] is reported in the media' (Deery 2012: 52). Repeated multiple times, the same untruths and half-truths become 'true enough' to supporters who have been conditioned by traditional forms of public relations. Twitter's position as one of the most prominent social media sites means that Trump's words spread quickly, each of his tweets garnering tens of thousands of likes and retweets to other feeds that in turn reach more followers. It is crowd-sourced opinion distribution. A far cry from the advent of national newspapers in earlier America that allowed advertisers to reach the general public, Twitter provides Trump and others with an almost global platform for disseminating

ideology, completely unfiltered and without fact-checking. Trump's strategy is doubly successful: on the one hand, the tweets contain such outrageous statements, half-truths and lies that they take on pseudo-event status on traditional television news media – who rely on his scandalous outbursts for ratings – ensuring the Trump brand's continued presence in the public consciousness. On the other hand, the tweets act as a form of memetics that propagates quickly through the social media platform with no regard for truth or decorum as Twitter cannot censor the president. Trump's tweets epitomize a post-truth society by demonstrating the 'replac[ement] of the traditional concern with the truth of ideas and beliefs', instead dealing with success solely as 'an expression [of] their rate of spread' (Kantorovich 2013: 1).

If Twitter provided an unfiltered platform for Trump's brand, Facebook was the platform that he used to run a more rigorous, complex PR operation that paved the way to victory. This was the campaign's most significant innovation. Before the Internet age, PR's speed was a product of the human factors required to facilitate its spread. For example, if a PR campaign sought support from diverse subsections of the population, 'telegrams and letters were dispatched to leaders of [these] religious, political, social, and educational groups asking for their point of view' on the PR subject, who would then provide input and discuss it among their represented groups (Bernays 1928: 137). With Facebook's advertising platform, there is no need for a campaign to go through a human intermediary for a message to reach these groups. Facebook's advertising platform collects vast amounts of data on all account holders, and allows advertisers to present their ads to extremely specific, granular demographics. The ads reach the target of the appeal directly at a speed that is virtually instantaneous. The Trump online campaign used this to its advantage, circumventing many of the limitations of traditional PR platforms to cultivate a base more far-reaching than was previously possible.

The Trump campaign's online effort was spearheaded in part by Brad Parscale, who worked in tandem with big data company Cambridge Analytica to target specific micro-demographics with political ads on Facebook. Advertisers have considered data analytics a holy grail practically since their inception. Companies use online data to create profiles for consumers, which they can then deploy to more effectively target specific groups of people and tailor their advertisements to these groups. Much of the Internet landscape, including and especially social media platforms, is designed around this data mining and profiling to enhance effectiveness. As the saying goes, if you aren't paying for the service, you are the product. Parscale admitted that the campaign used 'embeds', employees of Facebook, Twitter and Google who would work at Trump campaign headquarters to teach them the ins-and-outs of the platform, 'every single secret button, click, technology [they] have' (Stahl 2017). The tech employees were selected based on their political affiliation; right-wing employees were specifically chosen because of their loyalty to Donald Trump (Stahl 2017). This represents a radical shift in PR: the tech companies crucially provided not only a

platform to promote the Trump campaign but also a backdoor into their infrastructure for the campaign to understand, manipulate and more adeptly exploit the way the platforms advertise and attract users' attention. Parscale's team then created microtargeted ads 'programmatically' with an average of 50,000–60,000 ads per day that differed in 'language, words, colors', even hot button issues (Stahl 2017). They used web analytic tools such as A-B testing to present different ads to different users and refine their targeting, and in some cases ads would be created to target specific individuals (Stahl 2017). The Trump campaign employed data firm Cambridge Analytica to assist in their profiling. The firm, created by right-wing radical and founder of Breitbart news Robert Mercer, worked with Republican candidates Ted Cruz and Ben Carson and the pro-Brexit 'Leave' campaign to 'probe the underlying traits that inform personality' and 'nuance messaging to resonate more effectively with those groups' (Illing 2018). Only with recent developments in technology has it become possible to run as granular a campaign as this. Trump's voters often express pride at how personally they relate to his words on television and on Twitter. His Facebook ad campaign was designed specifically to resonate with their personal thoughts and opinions, stoking fears and mistrust. His campaign marks the first time, however, that the line between campaign and media platform has been blurred to such an extent. Candidate Trump often gave the appearance of being freewheeling and untamed, and his campaign's online component had a similar degree of improvisation, although it was far more precise and sophisticated in its focus and application. Social media companies enabled this type of operation organically, representing a radical turning point for PR and political campaigning.

Russian interference

Trump's unfiltered appeals to his base via social media received a boost from Russian propaganda attempts that exploited the same channels, taking advantage of legal loopholes and advertiser-friendly affordances of social media. Facebook offers sophisticated tools for advertisers on their platform, tools that allow advertisers to target specific and granular subsections of Facebook's user-base to achieve optimum message penetration for their product or service. But Facebook does not discriminate to whom it sells this service, and during the 2016 election campaign Russian operatives were able to purchase and use these tools created for advertisers and direct them to achieve political ends. As reported by *The Washington Post*, to influence the election in Trump's favour, Russian agents 'took advantage of Facebook's ability to send contrary messages to different groups of users based on their political and demographic characteristics' and 'among religious groups' (Entous et al. 2017). A disinformation campaign in this mould works by manipulating fractured news bubbles that media consumers set up and rarely venture outside of. Intent on 'voter suppression', Russia's campaign 'sowed chaos' by purchasing 'at least $100,000 in ads' and 'writing posts

[…] with the apparent goal of appealing to one audience and alienating another' (Entous et al. 2017). The ads were created on the basis of 'evolving lists of racial, religious, political, and economic themes' (Entous et al. 2017). Advertisers were able to purchase ads and specify categories of users to target, including users who 'expressed interest in the topics of "Jew hater" "How to burn Jews" or "History of why Jews run the world"' (Angwin et al. 2017). This approach constitutes a decisive break from the previous paradigm of public relations that would attempt to be more innocuous, sanitary and bland so as to reach the widest possible audience. With the advent of the Internet's niche demographics and outlets, along with technology that allows simultaneous mass market penetration and message specificity, advertisers can propagate messages that are inflammatory or play to more unscrupulous biases.

This campaign bears all the marks of the Russian Firehose Propaganda model, as outlined by the RAND think tank. The model's distinct features include a 'lack of commitment to consistency' and 'high volume, rapid, continuous' media (Paul and Matthews 2016: 2). Crucially, the schisms that Russia appears to have exploited 'were similar to those that Trump and his supporters pushed on social media and right-wing websites during the campaign' (Entous et al. 2017). Thus the Russian campaign worked parallel to the Trump campaign to influence the electorate, augmenting the effects of Trump's own divide-and-conquer efforts.

Russian political technologists utilized the Firehose model on both Facebook and Twitter to compound and amplify the Trump campaign's message. Much like Trump's effective repetition to force results, the Firehose model was employed with paradoxically surgical precision in swing states, where, on Twitter, 'the number of links to Russian news stories, unverified or irrelevant links to Wikileaks pages, or junk news […] was twice that of the content from experts and the candidates themselves' (Howard et al. 2017: 3). Sharing of these articles was encouraged by Russian botnets, 'able to rapidly deploy messages, replicate themselves, and pass as human users' (Howard et al. 2017: 1). These Twitter botnets worked in tandem with accounts that 'promoted disinformation campaigns spread through overt outlets' to 'boost the signal' (Gallagher 2017). Twitter's ease-of-use API allows for this sophisticated astroturfing to occur; botnets are relatively simple to set up or purchase, especially with the resources of a government. But the campaign was successful because, in keeping with the Firehose model, it misled a susceptible populace conditioned to be receptive to the messages. Typically online an 'endorsement by a large number of users' is enough to 'boost consumer trust, reliance, and confidence in the information, often with little attention paid to the credibility of those making the statements' (Paul and Matthews 2016: 3). In other words, 'quantity does indeed have a quality on its own' (Paul and Matthews 2016: 3). Flooding the channels with repetitive information 'leads to familiarity, and familiarity leads to acceptance' (Paul and Matthews 2016: 4). Saturating the airwaves has always been a common advertising tactic. Here, appropriated by a foreign government and transposed onto a presidential campaign, it blindsided the American

public. Facebook estimates that at least 150 million people viewed the ads on their platform (Frenkel and Benner 2018). However, the campaign, made possible not by 'paid advertising' but by 'organic reach', succeeded in creating propaganda that was shared at least 'hundreds of millions of times' (Timberg 2017). Even a minuscule fraction of these numbers, converted into motivated voters, is sufficient to have swayed the election. Upon using these 'organic posts to identify voters and sort them into buckets based on the issues they responded to', the campaign shifted to utilizing paid political ads 'shaped to their interests, with the intention […] of affecting voting behavior' (Timberg 2017). The effect on turnout was not intended to be homogenous; although much of the campaign sought to encourage voters to vote Trump, other 'posts had the intent to get people not to vote' (Timberg 2017). Thus, the campaign simultaneously used PR to stimulate division and spur action in Trump's favour, while in other cases to stoke apathy and disengagement. This precision encouragement of voter apathy complemented the existing corporate media forces of 'depoliticization and dispossession' that continually 'reduce and corrupt the public sphere where individuals become citizens' (McChesney 1997: 15). The Russians merely took advantage of seeds already sown with a more narrow, focused and technologically sophisticated campaign.

Russia's social media infiltration is also particularly successful and instructive in the wake of the campaign because the current lack of oversight and laws regulating online advertising and PR campaigns allows no legal recourse. If the purchased ads were not 'overtly political […] [with] no mention of a candidate, they would not meet the FEC's definition of an independent expenditure' and thus would not be illegal (Gold 2017). Further, according to FEC regulations set in 2006, 'content posted online for free is off limits from regulation' (Gold 2017). In other words, embedded content made to look like regular social media posts on Facebook and Twitter, increasingly the norm in advertising, is not subject to regulation in the United States. Political campaigns and disinformation campaigns that model themselves after these types of advertising patterns further blur the lines between real content, truth, advertising and propaganda. Twitter botnets under Russian control can propagate disinformation with impunity; unpaid posts are protected, and Twitter, relying on the inflated user numbers to which bots contribute for profit, refuses to address the problem. Just as newspapers in the 1990s 'became increasingly dependent on advertising revenues for support' and thus 'became anti-democratic forces', Twitter's and Facebook's sole obligation to the financial bottom-line compromises any corporate initiated commitment to truth (McChesney 1997: 23). Without media literacy education and effective legal restrictions on online politicking, there is no check to foreign or domestic disinformation campaigns. Russia exploited these legal loopholes, social media platforms' dedicated framework for advertising dissemination and American citizens' general inability to distinguish factual information from falsities or propaganda. Media literacy among its citizens is the cornerstone of a functioning democracy, and Trump's election, as aided by foreign powers, is demonstrative of its lack in the United States.

To be sure, analysts have disagreed regarding which group's efforts held more sway over election results: Trump's own campaign or the parallel Russian campaign. A study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that automated tweets on behalf of Russia could have swayed as much as 3.23 per cent of the vote for Trump (Smialek 2018). Elsewhere, research has shown 'the entirely routine use of Facebook by Trump's campaign and others […] is likely to have had far greater reach than Russian bots' (Kreiss and Mcgregor 2017). These quantitative studies examine raw data but cannot adequately measure the mental processes that occur from the time that a voter consumes propagandistic information and when he or she enters the voting booth. The point is that long-term exposure to data-driven targeted propaganda has a cumulative effect on voters. 'The methods of propaganda can be effective only with the voter who makes up his own mind on the basis of his group prejudices and desires', and both Trump's and the Russians' online efforts accomplished exactly this (Bernays 1928: 104). The campaigns were tailored to appeal to a voter's specific demographic or personality, and because of their organic nature they created the illusion that consumers of the ads were not alone in their beliefs. Thanks to the frequency and intensity of ad targeting at critical junctures in the campaign, voters in swing states would observe in their online media bubbles posts and accounts designed to confirm their biases. The voter's 'mind retains the patterns which have been stamped on it by the group influences', thereby moving the voter to a desired decision (Bernays 1928: 49). Both the Trump campaign and the Russians were effective through the same processes and methodology: using sophisticated PR made possible by online advertising platform tools to sell a candidate. The electorate is largely susceptible to the methodology, irrespective of who is applying it.

Recent developments

The natural evolution of the Trump administration's campaign can be seen in post-inauguration developments involving 'alternative facts'. After all, 'a post-truth campaign inevitably leads to a post-truth presidency' (Cillizza 2016). Trump spokesperson Kellyanne Conway made two assertions in defence of the Trump administration's comments on inauguration crowd size and the travel and immigration ban. Conway defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's comments inflating crowd size on the National Mall by stating that Spicer was 'offering alternative facts'. If one can lie about something as obvious and easily verifiable as crowd sizes, it is only a matter of time before even larger lies are attempted. When discussing the necessity of Trump's executive order banning refugees, Conway referred to the 'Bowling Green Massacre' on three separate occasions before amending her statement due to public outcry (Blake 2017). The repetition of a sound bite such as the 'Bowling Green Massacre' has already had an effect on Trump supporters. 93% of Trump supporters polled support the executive order banning refugees, and the majority of these, 51%, agree with the

statement, 'The Bowling Green massacre shows why we need Donald Trump's executive order on immigration', with only 23% disagreeing, despite its nonexistence (Jensen 2016). The Trump administration is thus using fabrications to discredit the press and gain support for his policies. In a speech addressed to military commanders, Trump continued his attack on the press by accusing them of deliberately not reporting acts of terrorism: 'The very, very dishonest press doesn't want to report it. They have their reasons, and you understand that' (Thompson 2017). Wanton finger-pointing and degradation of language are part and parcel of Trump's systematic attempt at discrediting any sources of dissent, especially the mainstream media. 'Donald Trump is proving that if you connect with America's anger and paranoia, you can get by quite easily without facts' (Taibbi 2017). What better way to reinforce untruths than by stoking that very anger and paranoia? In January 2017, Trump's then chief strategist Steve Bannon told the *New York Times* in an interview that 'the media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut', going so far as to call the media the 'opposition party', a statement that Trump agreed with (McCaskill 2017). Trump later reinforced this belief when he told CIA staffers that he 'has a running war with the media', calling them 'the most dishonest human beings on earth' (McCaskill 2017). His repeated use of adversarial language delegitimizes non-right-leaning news outlets among his angry base. By further divorcing mainstream reporting from the truth, Trump creates a feedback loop wherein he can deliver a lie, have the media fact-check his lie, then use that as an example of a 'dishonest and untrustworthy liberal media'. This in turn reinforces his original lie and helps build his brand among his base, driving a wedge further between his supporters and those publicly voicing any sort of dissent. Creating further divisions intensifies paranoia, to which he will then pander with more lies. Trump is not waging a war on the media; he is waging a war on truth.

Trump relies on the same strategies that he used on the campaign trail: conflating truth with the opposite to muddy the waters (the 'Good people on both sides' remark after Charlottesville), deflection (constant references to Hillary Clinton a year after the campaign has ended) and outright lies (Mexico funding the border wall, consistently denying involvement with Russians and even various members of his own campaign). He makes vague references and innuendos for his supporters to read into and draw conclusions, the oft-mentioned 'dog whistle' that plays to his supporters' biases while maintaining plausible deniability. Just as he discovered in the campaign that projecting the illusion of an outsider and of a politician would work just as well against a traditional political campaign, Trump projects the illusion of authority as president, despite spending most of his time golfing, vacationing, watching television and tweeting. In a more functional democracy, much of Trump's rhetoric and behaviour would be grounds for impeachment. However, Trump is consistently enabled by Republicans in Congress, who cover for his unpresidential conduct and downplay, hinder or otherwise refuse to vocally acknowledge or support the investigation into his ties with Russia. As such, Trump's brand of rhetoric continues to succeed among his base, and post-truth continues to

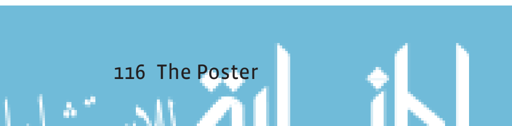
fester. Notably, the Russian disinformation campaigns have not ceased since Trump's election. But because Trump continues to deny any wrongdoing, nor enforce sanctions, their efforts remain unhampered.

Conclusion and implications

A continuous deluge of public relations rhetoric in all facets of media over the past decades has culminated in widespread public inability and unwillingness to distinguish truth from fiction in media. The effects of advertising crept into news journalism, creating a sea of competitors all racing for attention-grabbing headlines and clickbait, blending news with entertainment. In the absence of robust journalistic principles and policies for guidance, news media sources have become increasingly fractured, and more citizens have migrated to online social media resources for news. But social media platforms are structured to facilitate advertisers, not to encourage meaningful political discussion, and the bubbles that they create were weaponized. This has resulted in a post-truth paradigm of public discourse.

Donald Trump's political triumph is direct evidence of this post-truth paradigm. His campaign defied traditional political strategies and instead opted for a new form of PR consisting of bombastic, politically incorrect and incoherent rants devoid of policy proposals or substantive debate but effective in drawing media attention and promoting a rapid spread of Trump's reactionary ideology. His team took advantage of systems tech companies traditionally offered to advertisers and used them to systematically target and exploit vulnerable segments of the population. These efforts were augmented by Russian operatives who, similarly, sowed division and chaos in key states. This sophisticated Russian online propaganda campaign paralleled Trump's rhetoric, took advantage of the fractured media landscape and effectively weaponized social media platforms to spread targeted disinformation and political ads to influence the electorate. Since he has taken office, President Trump and his administration have continued to leverage many of the tactics that he used in the campaign, replacing governing and leadership with PR, bombast and presidential façade that appeal to his base. Time and time again his supporters are shown on nightly news programmes praising his presidency and dismissing the work of Russians in the campaign. Trump and the ongoing Russian propaganda efforts online continue to degrade public discourse. Post-truth is in full bloom.

Trump's election has been a wakeup call for journalists, educators, state lawmakers and citizens; the day after the election saw an uptick in many newspaper subscriptions and donations across the country (Lichterman 2016). Further, many states have begun introducing legislation that requires school curricula to implement media literacy classes. A Stanford-pioneered 'Civil Online Reasoning' initiative is being tested in California schools; through classroom exercises, the initiative aims to help students identify 'native advertising, […] [verify] authenticity of alarming images, […] and



investigate sources and seek corroboration of controversial claims' (Berdik 2016). Within the past two years, states such as Washington and Connecticut have passed media literacy bill with unanimous, bipartisan support that 'require schools to teach students about safe, ethical, and responsible use of social media' ('Connecticut', 'Washington'). All of these are signs of a renewed public fervour for critical journalism and robust digital citizenship in response to continued foreign attacks and the alarming success of a post-newspaper, post-truth president.

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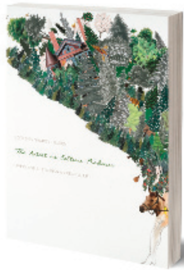

The Artist as Culture Producer

Living and Sustaining a Creative Life

Edited by Sharon Louden

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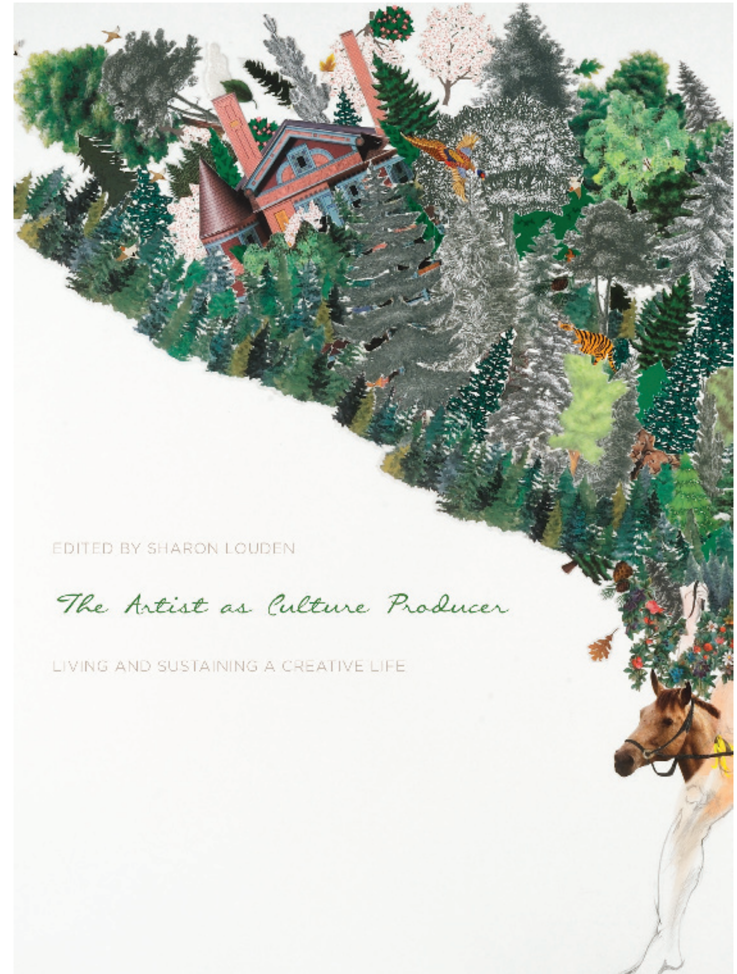
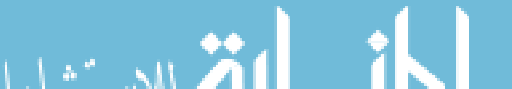


When *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life* was published in 2013, it became an immediate sensation. Edited by **Sharon Louden**, the book brought together 40 essays by working artists, each sharing their own story of how to sustain a creative practice that contributes to the ongoing dialogue in contemporary art. The book struck a nerve – how do artists really make it in the world today? Louden took the book on a 62-stop book tour, selling thousands of copies and building a movement along the way.

Now, Louden returns with a sequel: 40 more essays from artists who have successfully expanded their practice beyond the studio and become change agents in their communities. There is a misconception that artists are invisible and hidden, but the essays here demonstrate the truth – artists make a measurable and innovative economic impact in the non-profit sector, in education and in corporate environments. *The Artist as Culture Producer* illustrates how today's contemporary artists add to creative economies through out-of-the-box thinking while also generously contributing to the well-being of others.

By turns humorous, heart-breaking and instructive, the testimonies of these forty diverse working artists will inspire and encourage every reader – from the art student to the established artist. With a foreword by *Hyperallergic* co-founder and editor-in-chief Hrag Vartanian, *The Artist as Culture Producer* is set to make an indelible mark on the art world – redefining how we see and support contemporary artists.



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