Essays

Elevating Problems of Journalistic Power in an Age of Post-Truth

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Abstract
Recent pushes to embrace problems and solutions related to working and teaching in an age of "post-truth" reveal problematic, long-time journalistic cultures and approaches of journalism that educators are challenged to address. This essay provides a critical voice to this special issue on education in "post-truth" to interpret current themes of threats to journalism discussed across journalistic communities. This perspective takes into account forces of neoliberalism and hegemonic ideologies within journalism education that, if addressed, could turn trials of "post-truth" into a redevelopment of journalism education for the common good.

Keywords
Donald Trump, education, "fake news," pedagogy, post-truth, trust

Introduction

The existence of truth—as discussed throughout this special issue on how journalism and professional communication educators are handling issues of a "post-truth" age—has long been debated. Issues of truth seep into public consciousness across time—even in the most banal of ways. In the late 1980s, for instance, concern about the possible banning of *Spycatcher*, a tell-all of the British intelligence community, put questions of "truth" on trial. In government hearings to ban the Australian publication of the book that discussed the possible existence of the Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6, British cabinet secretary Sir Robert Armstrong argued that his sometimes-snide responses about whether MI6 was an actual agency did not mean he had "lied" about the group's existence. Instead, he was being "economical with the truth."

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Armstrong was neither the first—nor the last—to use the phrase of being "economical with the truth." Indeed, it is one that reaches back to the 1700s to reflect a "diplomatic" use of facts and information, a telling of "half-truths" or "not all information" in moments that would or could lead to trouble for the truth-teller. More recently, publics have been faced with a new round of truth economics, in which, as Armstrong described, surround statements that contain a "misleading impression, not a lie" (Canovan, 1990).

Across disciplines, educators have struggled in their lesson plans, learning outcomes, and the very epistemological examinations of content and context of their fields as the potential influences of "post-truth" on journalism and society. From high school Social Studies and university Philosophy and Political Science classrooms to medical and law schools, decades of concerns related to "post-truth" have most recently spoken to the need for new exercises in examining just what the ramifications of this phenomenon are and how to address them (McWilliam, 2017; Meier, Kraus, & Michaeler, 2018; Nygren & Guath, 2019).

World-wide expansion of media via technology and ideologically based news outlets has positioned notions of "truth" and "falsehood" in the center of how journalists are educated, trained, and practice. These changes have emerged as influences of politics on professional communication have also increased. Global challenges of "fake news" in recent political elections have resulted in injections of digital innovation—from robot journalism to fact-checking and facial recognition—while also rekindling a call for "media literacy" and hard-nosed reporting. Strategic communicators, too, are on the line for presenting information via social media and traditional means in ways that not only meet professional standards but that must compete with "false information," particularly in political arenas.

Ironically, these concerns come after the acceptance by legacy press of satire journalism and introductions of "truthiness" via massive popularity globally to comedic journalism of the past decade (Berkowitz & Gutsche, 2012; Borden & Tew, 2007). At the risk of rehashing old news—and without making claims of causation—this note to a global special issue on journalism education in an age of post-truth opens with a brief landscape of how journalism, led largely by the efforts and responses by news media in the United States and the United Kingdom, came to face its most recent bout of misinformation and disinformation, "fake news," and cries for solutions to both (re)legitimize and empower journalism. Central to this essay, however, is a critical voice to interpret current themes of threats to journalism discussed across journalistic communities. My perspective takes into account forces of neoliberalism and hegemonic ideologies within journalism education that, if addressed, could turn trials of "post-truth" into a redevelopment of journalism education for the common good.

The Battle for "Truth": A Trajectory

This most recent "fake news" crisis has been years in the making. Satire journalism, in the introductory efforts of this decade's "post-truth problems," operated amid a fragmenting of media and a polarization of normative politics. The genre which has

emerged throughout history, returned to journalism in a time of global War on Terror during which the humor sometimes seemed as ridiculous as the rationales for the war itself. Amid economic struggles, establishment media battled with moments of lost legitimacy and trust, and the War on Terror became a war for media authority—and financial profit. It was a battle over truths that led to the increased use of military in the Middle East after the 9/11 attacks, and journalists went right along with these efforts, both in rhetoric and in-person (Gutsche, 2014; Lule, 2004; Palmer, 2018) as their legitimacy and profitability grew.

Cable comedies, such as *The Daily Show*, emerged to fill a need of audiences to understand the violence, truths, and lies surrounding them. It almost seems a world away to talk about the War on Terror, satire journalism, and Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's news-entertainment status; indeed, much of this discussion may seem foreign or "old school" to current journalism and communication students and as having "been done" to some scholars. But what we saw in stretching the truth in comedic terms—particularly when fueled by popular political positions and discourse—was a profitable attempt to make news relevant. And even when the press itself was attacked for its lackadaisical efforts or mistakes, the industry took the "there's no such thing as bad publicity" approach and embraced into its ranks satire. Establishment journalism presented itself as the test of "truthiness," a word presented on Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report*. Now, journalism had to be held accountable in a very public way, and it was best for journalism to pay attention to satire TV—and to what and how audiences determined what was "true."

President Barack Obama's two terms in the White House calmed the nation after tumultuous years of the Bush administration. Yet, war continued to rage in the Middle East, the United States found itself increasing its deportations of immigrants, drone strikes across the globe became the norm, and leftist voices presented the president as a forward-thinking, intellectual, and diplomatic representative of democracy. Meanwhile, conservatives stewed, unsettled that a faith-based domestic agenda was hijacked by the War on Terror (although it, too, is driven by religious dogma) and that racial politics were challenged by the first African American president. Yet, the media took a soft-handed approach to politics (for more, see Scheurich, 2017), and issues of truth became less funny with a rise of satire journalism—and less important—as the nation rode economic revival. Journalism still struggled economically, despite its bettering, but found a new life in big, public data and in social media. It was a calm before the storm.

It was not until the presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump where through his rhetoric the press was cast as an "enemy of the people"—a concept shared by at least one third of the citizenry at the time (White, 2017)—that battle lines were drawn by the establishment press that there was indeed a problem with news that was not quite true or "fake" (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). In turn, educators and journalists alike have posed solutions to deciphering facts, including processes of crowdsourcing, using social media, and creating critical thinking and digital literacy skills (Bhaskaran, Mishra, & Nair, 2017; Graves, 2016; Stearns, 2015). Conservatives, finally able to speak loudly in a new and widespread media environment they had not enjoyed since

the founding of Drudge Report and that they had built in the wake of Obama's success, charged directly at establishment press that they consider liberal and not interested in their issues or ideas.

Yet, the opportunities to assess issues of power associated with this latest phase of "post-truth" have been slighted by scholars and practitioners. Today's "post-truth" is defined not only as a means by which society has moved beyond (or "post") truth. Rather, the term represents the introduction of purposefully false information by a source (Horsthemke, 2017). In turn, voices in the debate have created a binary of what is true and false without understanding those issues of facts. What is needed is a different type of discussion about trust and truth than debate over immigration, race, and culture.

In other words, the same voices that have influenced popular perceptions of how to address news truthiness have made it harder for critical scholars and educators to address issues of power in media and to present where powerful ideologies inform news (Alémán, 2014). Journalism in post-truth is not about complicating the notion of truth but simplifying it. Truth becomes judged based on the evidence, the believability of the evidence, and the source of the evidence. That process sounds fair enough, but in terms of power and how journalism actually works, there is far too much room in interpretation of evidence, believability, and sources involved than a binary can address (Ripley, 2018). On-the-street assessments of communities, particularly in urban areas of the United States, have a long-standing distrust of media—and rightfully so, given the role the press has played in telling stories of race, hatred, and justifying oppression (i.e., Berger, 2011; Parisi, 1998).

Yet, the anti-post-truth movement has positioned journalists as the authorities on truth and the sole source of "correct" information (Gutsche, 2018a), and debate has left the field in disarray about what truth is, how it is found, and who to believe. And, if we are honest, journalists and scholars are not trying to change the minds of non-White, non-voting, and non-media-subscribing citizens. The battle for authority is as much a battle for capital as it is for engaging all audiences in civicness. Widespread interest in combating "post-truth" and "fake news" over the past year or two largely dismisses critical/cultural scholarship (Mejia, Beckermann, & Sullivan, 2018; Wardle, 2017) that can unpack and complicate journalistic pasts that hold well-established records of harmful—and racist—moments of misinformation and disinformation.

Even scholarship that presents problems from a critical/cultural perspective, particularly related to how media shape today's policies of unfair urban housing, policing, and drug policies, race, gender and sex, and inequalities, is presented in our journalism syllabi alongside activities of best practice. Indeed, our classroom examples from the nightly news that we use to train journalists represent a commitment to explain "dangerous" and "deviant" culture through issues and explanations of race and gender. Perceived street crime and social disorder, students are shown, are to be explained only through official representations of institutions, not individuals. Alternative facts—that gangs might be the result of economic inequality, not explanations of culture—are disregarded.

These ideological moves of news are not only domestic, of course. In coverage and commentary about Trump's discussions to meet with North Korea's Kim Jong-un in June 2018, for instance, CNN's media reporter Brian Stelter questioned on-air whether it was "appropriate" of U.S. press to be critical of Trump's efforts. "American journalists," he said, "still have a sense of patriotism" and that cable news outlets were (and assumingly should be) "rooting for this to go well" (McLaughlin, 2018).

The argument that guides my interpretation of articles in this special issue is that journalism operates within a set of truths and interpretations of the world and everyday events bound up in power and in processes that are set to maintain journalism and fellow power institutions of governance and business as authorities for society's dominant interpretations (Gutsche, 2018a; Gutsche, 2019). Challenges to journalism education, then, should include reconsidering the field's own legitimacy as an autonomous agent in creating a "Fourth Estate" and as being a repository of and for singular "truths." It is from perspective in which this essay is positioned. Indeed, my discussion is not to become caught in a loop on what constitutes "fake news." Neither is my perspective rooted only in postmodernism. Rather, I wish to examine the realities of daily journalism and journalism education that perpetuate news practices and coverage that are chipping away at audience media trust while benefiting dominant ideology and the powerful.

Challenges for (and to) Journalism Educators

Digital communication—particularly in journalism—has presented complications for journalism educators beyond simply providing necessary technologies and training. Some of the field's problems operate outside digitization. Media corporations and journalism foundations repeatedly fund named colleges of journalism and communication, for example, many with deep endowments of their own, leaving the rural and lower ranking programs high and dry. Our faculties continue to lack diverse staff who are represented among our students and elsewhere in society. Internal politics of tenure, funding, research, and engagement have placed less focus on student learning and have added a burden to educators to do more while also trying to put their students first.

And especially concerning is the forced role of journalism education, if it wishes to survive, to take on the costs of training workers for media corporations that are still profitable in this new media age. Workers are bred in institutions of higher learning to operate, many in debt, for billion-dollar, multinational media organizations without benefits of family leave, fair salaries, and work–life balance. More concrete to what happens in the classroom, the rise of social media presents challenges beyond training and the use and promotion of particular profitable platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, in delivering media content and connecting with audiences. Our students become testers (and audiences) for these corporations and are asked to increase their time spent online and in virtual societies while continually searching for the promise of the Internet and ignoring its consumeristic and spectacle elements.

The normalization of social media use that journalism educators tap into and present as means by which to grow media brands, engage with users, and find and report news has made room for a continued "amusement" of and by celebrity politics. Using Postman's position on how television had "reinvented" public discourse in quick snippets of the medium, Hannan (2018) writes that issues of trolling and harassment have become a norm in social and political life that are rooted in the "hyperemotional environment of visceral reactions and paranoid instincts" (p. 222). Yet, although journalism education has moved into these platforms with their own rules and standards of practice, we must ask the degree to which we as educators and media producers are culpable for the cultural and social outcomes of interactions on these platforms. The answer cannot be, simply, that we have little responsibility for users' behaviors; decades of our own research suggest otherwise.

But educators alone are not fully responsible for our ills, even though we have joined ranks with professional journalists to say we can provide the end to "fake news," only if users subscribe to our feeds and fund our programs. Education in the United States—and in the United Kingdom, I am learning—has become riddled with assessments and neoliberal accountability standards damaging to student learning and achievement, threatening to the educator who wishes to challenge or critique but beneficial to the administrator, bureaucrat, and business partner. Creating learning environments in which there are "right" and "wrong"—or "true" and "false"—answers via a standardized test diminishes threats to the power system as members of society are to position themselves within a moral dimension of "good" and "bad" where institutions almost always present themselves as "good."

These binaries in journalism are limited to agreed-upon examples in media memory that are rarely challenged. In journalism education in the United States and abroad, Watergate is a standard of investigative and of "Fourth Estate" journalism with little room for deep ethical discussions of source harassment and of journalistic self-branding that embellishes movements of prize journalism (Gutsche, 2018b). Journalistic knowledge is based on quantifiable proof of facts, what I refer to as "journalistic evidence" (Gutsche, 2017), numbers, data, or information that comes from an already recognized authority of fellow collaborators within the journalistic community, including local business owners, police officials, military leaders, and the like. This is an old argument, one easily passed aside by scholars who do not believe in "the power elite" and "propaganda models," which only have room in journalism education to discuss outlier perspectives on media power.

Yet, sourcing research still tells us that the same politicians, bankers, and law enforcement officials who we know hold a shared and consistent history of manufacturing information are used consistently, which has an influence not only on the news that is told but also in the interpretations of news that is shared (Usher, Holcomb, & Littman, 2018). The citizen is treated with skepticism, their evidence anecdotal, their views subjective, their claims to facts buried in an amateur assessment, misinterpreted in their times of turmoil, or are to be understood amid limitations of the "eyewitness" and "bystander."

Rhetorical tactics that dismiss such critical commentary and radical approaches to how we educate and train journalists deflate the ability of pedagogy to serve the public

good by challenging conventional thought and practice. Pedagogy, as Giroux (2018) reminds us, is

> not a method [of assessment or instruction] but a moral and political practice, one that recognizes the relationships between knowledge and power, and at the same time emphasizes that central to all pedagogical practice is a struggle over agency, power, politics, and the institutional spheres that make a radical democracy possible. (p. 192)

If we carry that perspective in mind while designing and delivering journalism education, one should then consider and overtly address how journalists (and our students) lead to social consequences through what we produce. We must identify that social relations are legitimized and ignored in our coverage and what ideologies and identities are presented to our students in seeking sources, telling stories, and explaining everyday life. If we think we are doing this already, we should ask ourselves again. More directly, educators should seek the role of critical scholarship in journalism not to bemuse or abuse, but to make things better. Recently, my own students asked me, "If we are learning that media is bad, why should we do it?" A very smart question that revealed the continued binary of "good" and "bad," as though journalism is one or the other, just as though news is "true" or "fake."

Certainly, the challenges facing journalism education are widely known, but perhaps not recognized in ways I have addressed here.[1] My hope is that this commentary positions the articles of this special issue in a particular light—one in which the problems of journalism are more than they seem.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. For more on critique and solutions in journalism education, view my commentary as part of my fellowship as a Tow-Knight Disruptive Educator at www.robertgutschejr.com/disrupt.

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