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Affective and Effective Truths: Rhetoric, Normativity and Critical Management Studies

SIMON PARKER

Nottingham University Business School

simon.parker@nottingham.ac.uk

MARTON RACZ

Cass Business School, City, University of London

International Business School, Budapest

mracz@ibs-b.hu

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Abstract

In an era of Brexit, Trump and the detritus of post-truth politics, this paper calls upon critical management scholars to reflect upon the efficacy of their critique. We examine the post-truth critiques of PR firms working for tobacco corporations in the 1960s, before discussing contemporary examples of the Flat Earth Society and the growing community of climate change deniers. In doing so, we note similarities to the intellectual tactics and strategies of the critical management community in terms of problematizing truth(s), broader aims to counter mainstream discourses of science and the various attempts to provide alternative perspectives on the world. In learning from these post-truth communities, we argue that the critical community should be wary of falling back onto a rational, logical and potentially elitist platform of *Socratic critique* and conversely should not refuse dialogue as in *cynical critique*. Instead, we argue for more *agonistic* forms of critique that use salient exemplars to develop affective relationships within communities alongside the discussion of facts, ethics and politics.

Keywords

Post-truth, affect, rhetoric, critical management studies, agonism

Introduction

The buzz of Brexit and Trump brought with it a new *Oxford English Dictionary* word of the year: 'post-truth'. Defined as 'denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2018), the notion of post-truth has ridden the wave of anti-expert discourse in Europe and the USA. As expected, the academic community, the metropolitan intelligentsia, those holding onto technocratic ideas of politics—and yes, some critical management scholars too, were up in arms against alternative facts within their own social media and journalistic bubbles. In this paper, we take the opportunity to raise a note of caution to our critical kin and provocatively ask: Is not the goal of critical management studies (CMS) to contest the idea that we live in a world of hard facts? If this is the case, our motivation for 'speaking out' stems from our concerns as to how to respond to a manager, student, Brexit-backer, or Trump-supporter if they confront us as CMS academics with what is their own peek behind the power dynamics of science, economics and management.

To better position CMS within the debates on post-truth and politics, we first present some fairly successful attempts to contest 'truth' and create communities that promulgate alternative

ideas. After this, we tentatively sketch out three ways CMS scholars have made certain truth claims and consider their viability when truth is problematized. Finally, we make the case for a form of agonistic critique that places a stronger emphasis on new forms of affect and the role this has in regard to truth(s).

Presenting Alternative Facts: Climate Change Deniers, Flat Earthers, and Critters

During the 1960s, the tobacco industry was in crisis as emerging medical literature started to prove a direct relationship between smoking and cancer (Harford, 2017; Oreskes and Conway, 2010). Public relations firms, employed by tobacco corporations, focused on sowing seeds of doubt rather than challenging medical claims head on. Keeping controversy alive was one of their main achievements. There was 'no medical evidence', the debate was 'unresolved' as nothing had been 'statistically proven' or 'scientifically established' and science was never 'finished', anyway. Their language was clinical and their attitude cynical, which led such companies into direct conflict with the scientific community. Today, Monsanto is reportedly using very similar tactics (Rose et al., 2018).

In a comparable, albeit magnified fashion, climate change denial follows a similar logic. However, unlike tobacco firms, the climate change 'denial machine' has more weapons in its arsenal. Alongside PR companies, various think tanks¹ are funded by conservative foundations and fossil fuel companies (Wittneben et al., 2012). In addition to these is an active echo chamber of amateur climate change bloggers, diverse conservative media outlets, politicians and contrarian scientists who are all keen to discredit and debunk the 'climate change myth'. For instance, during 'Climategate' (Fang, 2009) emails from the University of East Anglia were hacked and heralded as proof (e.g. Delingpole, 2009) that climate change is a scientific conspiracy. Following swiftly afterwards, errors were then spotted in the 2007 IPCC Fourth Assessment Report (Tollefson, 2010), further fanning the flames. As explored by Dunlap and McCright (2011: 144), motivations for climate change denial can stem from economic reasons (e.g. the fossil fuel industry) and personal gain (the minor celebrity status enjoyed by some prominent deniers). Still, what unites most deniers, is a political opposition to 'governmental regulatory efforts to ameliorate climate change' (ibid., see also Oreskes and Conway, 2010). In other words, climate change deniers are held together by financial incentives, issues of individual esteem and a normative intent to challenge their notion of the status quo in favour of less governmental involvement in markets.

In recent years, another scientific community has emerged that takes on mainstream science in various ways. The Flat Earth Society, 'a place for free thinkers and the intellectual exchange of ideas' (TFES, n.d.-a), aims to prove that the earth is in fact a disc framed by the cold rim of Antarctica accelerating upwards through space. Their ideas have become increasingly topical (e.g. Goenka, 2016) and on their website,² you will find multiple scientific articles and a wiki dealing with topics like celestial gravitation and electromagnetic acceleration. However, in addition to this, they are also backed by the rapper B.O.B and ex-basketball star Dr Shaquille O'Neal. Such endorsements are slightly tongue-in-cheek, but not to be sniffed at, especially when you consider the role Gwyneth Paltrow and Robert De Niro played in convincing thousands of wealthy, educated and insured US Americans to not vaccinate their children (Seither et al., 2014; Suddaby et al., 2017). When pushed to breaking point, the Flat Earth Society's last resort is 'the conspiracy', a blanket term used to describe NASA and the various other "space agencies" and those who are informed by them (including government)' (TFES, n.d.-b). The climate change denier community regularly utilizes similar rhetoric pointing not only to overzealous hippies getting carried away, but also to regulatory bodies within government (Dunlap and McCright, 2011). However, Flat Earthers differ from their

¹ The American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, Heartland Institute amongst others (see Dunlap and McCright, 2011: 147).

² <https://www.tfes.org>

climate change denying cousins and tobacco industry grandparents as they use a mix of humour and scientific logic to refute mainstream science, develop alternative theory, and problematize a variety of different phenomena (from tides to chemtrails). All these activities are tied together under a broad tent of being suspicious of corporations, the establishment, and mainstream science, who they believe dupe the population.

Common to all these tactics of questioning scientific truth is that they *add* complexity and refocus attention. For the PR companies of the 1960s and more worryingly the climate change deniers of the 2000s, science is shown to be a process that never reaches a final answer; it is fundamentally human and therefore flawed. On the other hand, climate change deniers and the Flat Earth Society use their own version of science to contest the facts. However, it is a sufficiently non-mainstream form of a science that deploys rather different starting assumptions. The Flat Earth Society also enlists a variety of aesthetic methods to increase the possibility for certain ideas to 'go viral'. In all cases, when all else fails, the message is to question everything, contest the establishment, and continually suggest that individuals have been tricked by some powerful other. Such questioning includes but goes beyond what might be considered the normal scientific doubt of a Cartesian (Descartes, 1999) or Popperian (1959) kind. 'Doubt' here invokes personal scepticism to overrule what the majority of people and scientists consider 'objective facts' as it actively foregrounds the affective element of 'truth effects'. The objectivity of 'truth' has always had its own affective appeal too, but this was to be repressed in the name of science.

Our contention is that the strategies of questioning and problematization we have described thus far are almost identical to the ones employed by many, although not all, CMS academics over the past 25 years. Whether or not CMS academics are motivated by debunking science, like a flat earther, or hoping to maintain individual status, prestige and to protect financial interests and future prosperity, like some climate change sceptics, is up for debate (cf. Billig, 2013; Wray-Bliss, 2003, 2004). What CMS undoubtedly shares with both climate change deniers and flat earthers is a normative intent and a political challenge to the status quo and mainstream academia. The CMS community has always been encouraged to deconstruct the 'reality' of organizational life and organizational knowledge and expose their status as truth-effects maintained by a particular 'regime of truth' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Foucault, 1977). CMS scholars should reflexively examine matters of ontology and epistemology (Fournier and Grey, 2000), be wary of evidence-based management (Learmonth, 2008; Morrell and Learmonth, 2015) and refuse any 'discursive closure' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Long before Michael Gove declared that Britain had 'had enough of experts' (Mance, 2016), Barbara Townley was calling on critical scholars to fight against the 'paradigm of the expert' (1994: 26). The Flat Earth Society's contention that science is a political process involving fallible human beings, paradigms and power dynamics, if accompanied by references to Foucault (1977, 1979, 2008) regarding regimes of truth, could be marked highly in a critical undergraduate assignment. It might even be published in a critical journal... Of course, and quite rightly, much of this critique sits atop a broader critical attitude towards capitalism and the establishment, which is regularly the last bastion in any argument for all of us in the CMS community.

We do not think that such a comparison is just aimed at the *radically* social constructionist sects of CMS. On the 'realist' end of the CMS spectrum (see Scherer, 2009), Critical Realist approaches to truth and reality similarly acknowledge the distortion of language and perception that blocks direct access to truth and causality (Contu and Willmott, 2005; Fairclough, 2005; Laclau and Bhaskar, 1998; Reed, 2005). Though Critical Realists assume the possibility of garnering a clearer picture of a single objective reality (a realist ontology) over time, the fundamental structures that define social reality are neither readily accessible, nor clear-cut (a constructivist epistemology). Similarly, CMS scholars working within a Habermasian tradition (e.g. Willmott, 2003) will accept the socially constructed nature of the explanandum and the consensus driven nature of the subsequent

explanans. Such a 'critical modernist' would not 'claim that truth is a grail that can be reached' (Parker, 1995: 554). For instance, taking a broadly Habermasian position, Marti and Scherer (2016) argue that the performative effects of social scientific descriptions of the world conserve our current social reality rather than act for social welfare. Therefore, if we wanted a different world, they argue, we should construct more normative theories of it. This is not a view of reality and truth as unique, rather, theories and truths are to be used to affect change in reality.

We agree with Marti and Scherer (2016) that the CMS community should construct more normative theories. However, doing so, situates CMS far closer to the Flat Earth Society, with its scientific language, community of subjugated scholars, and normative theories, than to NASA. Again, this is not a problem; CMS has never been a place for 'scientists' and perhaps the current climate even presents an opportunity to shine. But for this to work, we have to acknowledge that denying our elitism, recently reinforced in the eyes of 'the people' (Grey, 2018), would be 'delusional' (Stookey, 2008: 923). As Grey (2018) argues, CMS scholars have been denounced as part of the elite because they predominantly voted for Britain to remain in the EU and because they were considered 'experts'. Grey (2018: 8) concludes that this means the end of CMS as we know it (at least in Britain) unless we imagine 'new and creative ways to articulate CMS'. In the spirit of Stookey (2008), we would like to invite our readers to do just that. It is impossible to change how we (would have) voted but we might be able to surrender our status as 'the experts' by broadening our 'populist' engagement with the non-elite.

Now that we are on the same page...

Arguably, critical research should always adopt a questioning and power-conscious attitude, but this is not a position on which to rebuke notions of fake news and anti-expert discourses. In many respects, CMS prophets provide a glimpse at post-truth's antecedents and, at the very least, point to the issue that an abstract, 'scientific' truth may well be a dangerous thing to claim to have found as this would imply a lack of reflexivity. But if we simply encourage more reflexivity on how individuals interact with dominant social structures, we might easily end up with people cynical of science and all too keen to act in self-interested, confused or navel-gazing ways. We want to suggest that it is not our scientificity, endeavours to unmask deeper truths, or distrust of positivist methods that sets CMS apart from other presenters of 'alternative facts'—but our ethico-political stance (see Parker, 1995). Thus, to avoid falling back onto an empiricist/positivist understanding of knowledge and truth but still be able to create openness to dialogue, as we explain below, we need to first form affective engagements. As Parker argues, 'Rather than attempting to prove either the validity of our empirical observations or the epistemological coherence of our arguments', we should 'simply begin with ethics [...] If you can persuade me that a particular description articulates an ethical problem, then it becomes important' (1999: 41, 42; also see Seidman, 1992).

Ethico-political stances assume particular importance within the emerging discussion of engagement and performativity within CMS (Cabantous et al., 2016; King and Learmonth, 2014; Learmonth et al., 2016; Spicer et al., 2009, 2016; Spoelstra and Svensson, 2016; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). Whether called 'impact' or being a public intellectual, in the next section, we discuss three ways in which CMS can engage within the realm of post-truth. We see the role of the CMS community as furnishing sympathetic actors-of-struggle with the instruments to analyse how truths are created, while remembering that such ethico-political and intellectual commitments are, and should be, provisional (Barratt, 2004, 2008). This is arguably a useful skill for critical scholars and activists but it makes caring for (our) truth an important, yet complex, practice.

In the next section we introduce three critical forms of engagement: Socratic, Cynical and Agonistic. In doing so, we propose a more affective foundation to critique. We contend that affective links created through logic, reason, ethics and emotions do not make certain claims true but can

make them very powerful (Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Collins and Wray-Bliss (2005: 819) contemplate that critique is '*self-legitimizing* rather than *self-evident*' and thus we have 'to make explicit the (constructed) morality upon which our critique is based and to hope that the reader finds this more compelling than that constructed by [someone else]'. For example, think of the enlisting of beloved celebs by climate change deniers or Flat Earth advocates to reinforce certain truths and thus a certain morality. Or consider the affective connections in the moral discourse of smoking, as we see health regulation, the political economy of productivity, and governance of individuals join together to condemn the 'smoker' as a totalized identity category (Brewis and Grey, 2008). Or think about how new affective subject positions (Dean, 2008) and collective affects (Anderson, 2016; Stavrakakis, 2008; Žizek, 1989) are created during the neoliberal extension of markets to every sphere of life (Davies, 2014; Foucault, 2008), which would include climate change deniers' challenge of government regulation. Affect appears to be a fundamental part of the success of these movements, and its importance is apparent in the realm of post-truth where neither can we speak about a singular truth, nor do so in a disengaged way.³

E/Affective critique

We believe that not all forms of critique are equally effective in a post-truth and largely populist environment. In this section, we will briefly discuss two widespread forms of critical practice in the CMS community that we call 'Socratic' and 'cynical' critique. Then we will make the case for a more 'agonistic' CMS (see Parker and Parker, 2017), which uses rhetoric to build affective relationships with constituents as a necessary precursor to engaging in discussions about any form of shared truth (Laclau, 2005).

Socratic critique. Practiced by Socrates and the Stoics during debates in the *agora*, Socratic critique describes the frank everyday warnings of a philosopher to Athenians at risk of neglecting their own autonomy (Foucault, 2001). Translated into our domain, a Socratic CMS scholar, for example, would aim to convince the wider public that certain practices of the corporate and political elite foster forms of inequality. Busting elite balls should eventually lead to managers and directors engaging with the criticism and, hopefully, considerations for acting differently in the future due to public pressure. Such an approach often starts with a fact checking exercise to then build a case that could then be featured in popular media. For instance, the *oeuvre* of Prem Sikka in the field of public interest accounting largely falls into this category. His brilliant research on auditors' malpractices shortly after the financial crisis, has been published as an academic journal article (Sikka, 2009a), as opinion pieces (Sikka, 2008, 2009b, 2010) and has led to his engagement with policy makers.

While immensely important on its own terms, if you are not a policy adviser or don't follow the news, you are unlikely to encounter these messages. Subsequently, it will prove difficult to build a broad base of support and potent critique can be easily lost in the sensation-hungry media. Moreover, in terms of argumentative form, the Socratic critic claiming that 'that's simply not how things are' strides very close to intellectual elitism. Educating our audience about why they should look behind seemingly objective realities is an important practice. However, issues of cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias and the catchy nature of untruth (Harford, 2017; Mercier and Sperber, 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018) mean that using facts to tell someone they are wrong can only take you so far.

³ As a reviewer has rightly pointed out, the positivist regime of truth is always already affective too. Indeed, this has been its appeal. Our concern in this paper, however, is with an audience for whom positivism resonates less affectively, who deride its scientificity, and often deem it part of the problem. Thus, far from implying a dualism between science and affect, we rather want to explore new kinds of affective relationships with some of our audiences.

Cynical critique operates through the closing down of dialogue. Unlike Socrates, the Kynics were more concerned with engaging with the masses, and being critical for them consisted of ‘public, visible and scandalous exemplification of an independent life’ (Barratt, 2008: 529; also Karfakis and Kokkinidis, 2011). The motivating idea here (quite literally in Diogenes’ case) is one of ‘pissing in public’. The aim is to reach notoriety and popularity in particular circles by differentiating ‘us’ and upsetting the powerful ‘them’. Subverting norms, ranting, storming out, protesting and being awkward are all tactics of the cynic. As Gibson Burrell has repeatedly stated, ‘dialogue is a weapon of the powerful’ (2001: 19). Burrell’s work exemplifies the aesthetic (Burrell, 1993) and theoretical (Bresnen and Burrell, 2012; Burrell, 1997) role the cynical transgression of mainstream methods of thought and presentation can play in organization theory.

Critical scholars of organization and management using this approach are not supposed to bastardize their thought to achieve ‘impact’ outside of academia. Nor should they explain themselves to mainstream colleagues, journals, and university managers. The definition of impact would readily imply playing on the tilted turf of the more powerful. However, all too often (think Banksy or the ranting social media fodder of Jonathan Pie), anger and resistance are merely consumed. Such outbursts are deemed important, they gain traction, but are often quickly dismissed as an aesthetic attached to grumbling leftists’ complex modes of cynical distancing by mainstream commentators and even mainstream academics.

Agonistic critique. Let us finally suggest a third form of critique that CMS scholars have not yet been so successful in utilizing. Agonistic critique (see Parker and Parker, 2017) builds on the belief that truth is always a contested social construct; subsequently, it is not enough to combat one set of ‘factual’ beliefs with more (or truer) ‘facts’. Lakoff (1987) argues that most human thinking, from everyday snap decisions to well-thought through ideas, are based on metonymy: ideal cases, representative paragons, unconscious typical examples and publicly debated stereotypes. We think one form of metonymy has become immensely important in our post-truth times: salient exemplars. These are ‘highly rare and very ugly individual examples that have been sensationalized by the media and [taken] as applying to the whole class’ (Lakoff, 2017). Reagan’s ‘welfare queen’, Trump’s ‘rapist Mexican immigrants’, the Leave campaign’s red bus with the message ‘We send the EU £350 million a week, let’s fund our NHS instead’, are all such salient exemplars. These images are simple, and though they mostly constitute the exceptional or extreme case, they are easy to recall as if they were true for the whole group or issue.

Of course, critical academics may choose Socratic critique but we argue that, in this new world of ‘feelings’ (Davies, 2018), to be more engaged and thus normative, new kinds of affective relationships must be crafted beyond those of evidence and facts. We therefore propose that we have to work on our own ‘populist frontier’ (Mouffe and Shahid, 2016) to communicate salient exemplars that might orbit some notion of truth *and* its underlying ethico-politics. This will come across as rather strange in the first instance because it may feel like both selling out and a meek oversimplification of academic work and theory. However, we need to recognize that what has become saliently imperative in a post-truth world is to convince the heart as much as the mind—to reprise: if you make me interested, I will listen (Parker, 1999). Thus, might it be possible to condense some of our arguments to form new affective relationships? Such relationships could be cultivated with workers (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939) as well as activist groups, communities and the broader public. Recall the mobilizing power of the Occupy slogan attributed to David Graeber, ‘We are the 99%’ (Sharlet, 2011). Behind the slogan was a great deal of academic thought—but does *that* matter to the broader public?

And what might be on the side of the CMS Brexit-inspired ‘red bus’? Salient exemplars need not always be ugly as Lakoff (2017) notes. Perhaps something about redistributing a large percentage of capital from the 1% through inheritance taxes could resonate, if articulated in a

snappy way. For our students, a message about youth unemployment rates or the real value of their future salaries might be compelling. Alternatively, we could try, especially if we believe to have the biggest impact on society in our classrooms, to imagine futures based on certain values (Harney and Oswick, 2006) or surrounding certain organizational forms (Parker et al., 2014). This might involve discussing case studies of alternative organizations (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009), developing a shared vocabulary for imagining alternate futures (Fournier, 2006), or sending students out into socially aware organizations to learn from first-hand experience (Parker et al., 2018). Importantly, such efforts need to engage individuals affectively, not simply look good on paper.

Affect inscribes the operation of the political (Kenny et al., 2011; Stavrakakis, 2008; Žizek, 1989). Subsequently, it is important to outline political positions in a particular form, but it is also integral that such positions have an affective force (Laclau, 2005). Affect can derive from beatific fantasies or horrific nightmare scenarios (Cederström and Spicer, 2014; Stavrakakis, 2010) that are held together by a powerful concept or exemplar but are nonetheless evocative and passionate. CMS already specializes in horrific nightmare scenarios, so in addition to terrible corporate practices, we should find instances of hope, subversion of dominant norms via blending and contortion, where change has actually happened (e.g. Contu, 2018; Parker and Parker, 2017). It is only by the prior establishment of an affective connection to a plurality of different truths that we would become able to discuss the details and engage in some sort of reasoned debate.

Concluding thoughts

Once we forgo the idea of a single truth, it does not make sense anymore to say that CMS should speak *the* truth to power. Fact-checking Socratic critique invests heavily into rational dialogue; however, this can easily be discredited as being politically motivated and biased—exemplified by the infamous Trumpism: ‘fake news’. Affective communities and relationships are derived from those who already agree or who have already been harmed. You can present all the facts in the world (on auditing scandals, governmental misdeeds, climate change), but it won’t matter because of individual’s always present cognitive bias and eventual cognitive dissonance (Campbell et al., 1980). On the other hand, cynical critique with its principle of no dialogue, disdains the rationality of Socratic critique, or at least leaves it uncommunicated through intentional refusal or isolation. Unlike Socratic critique, it abounds in affect, alluding to ‘their’ descriptively dire ethical standing contrasted with ‘our’ honoured normative ethical standards, and helps bed in with those *who already agree*. The problem when trying to engage with a neutral or negative audience is the form of persuasion used rests on an already sympathetic ear. Although cynical critique may discuss an issue that is familiar to a general audience, the starting point is often too far removed for many to follow or care about. Subsequently, it often gets dismissed as ‘a rant’, pointless or simply funny.

Although we may not share the same views as a flat earther or climate change denier, we can learn from the ways in which they seek to weaken mainstream ideas, foster new affective communities, and construct salient exemplars of their own. Through such agonistic critique, we could connect with good, if temporary, causes. Doing so follows on from the new wave of critical approaches that aim to take an affirmative position to organizations (Parker et al., 2007; Parker and Parker, 2017) and even ‘progressive forms of management’ under the guise of critical performativity (Spicer et al., 2016). Taking an affirmative position requires a conscious attempt at building affective alliances with ongoing projects and new ideas through engaging ethico-political values and affect whilst seeking to change sedimented ideas and forms of logic. However, this break with the antagonistic criticality of the past also means that we have to be careful walking the tightrope between criticality and hypocrisy. We do believe it is still possible to create and champion knowledge that does not fuel the performative intent machines of business (Fournier and Grey, 2000). However, we must be wary of maintaining our critical edge but, at the same time, must also know when to soften this approach and move away from the elitist claims of an expert (Grey, 2018)

who knows all the answers. By creating affective communities, a discussion of truth and ethics can take place which will allow the possibilities for collaboration on alternative futures, based around alternative truths. CMS has always been sceptical of truth claims, maybe in the current climate, it is time to take this position seriously. To do so, it must shed some of the intellectual elitism in favour of crafting affective relationships and salient exemplars for 'the people'.

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