Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:

http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/131992

How to cite:

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information.
If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

When fiction trumps truth: What "post-truth" and "alternative facts" mean for management studies

Eric Knight & Haridimos Tsoukas

Abstract

In this essay, focusing on acts of communication by President Trump and his aides, we explore the notions of "post-truth" and "alternative facts". Adopting a pragmatist perspective, we argue that there is no intrinsically accurate language in terms of which to refer to reality. Language, rather, is a tool that enables agents to grab hold of causal forces and intervene in the world. "Alternative facts" can be created by multi-modal communication to highlight different aspects of the world for the purpose of political mobilization and legitimacy. "Post-truth" politics reveals the fragmentation of the language game in which mainstream politics has been hitherto conducted. We explore the implications that "alternative facts" and "post-truth" have for today's management scholarship. We argue that management scholars should unpack how managers navigate strategic action and communication, and how the creation of alternative realities is accomplished in conditions of informational abundance and multi-modal communication.

Ever since the referendum in the UK on exiting the European Union in June 2016 and the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States in November 2016, there has been an emerging discourse on "alternative facts" and "post-truth" (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017). Further, President Trump's systematic use of Twitter to provide political commentary has highlighted the importance of social media and multi-modal communication at large in shaping what people regard as facts and truth. The very terms "alternative facts" and "post-truth" highlight the increasing recognition that, in a mediated society, what we take to be a fact or truth is malleable.

Although there is no shortage of examples to illustrate "alternative facts" drawn from the Trump administration, none is clearer in its simplicity than the controversy that surrounded the size of President Trump's inauguration ceremony in January 2017. It may be recalled that, at the time, the then White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, famously claimed at a televised press conference that "[the inauguration ceremony] was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period—both in person and around the globe" (S. Spicer, 2017). Press reporters were quick to respond by citing attendance statistics and tweeting photos of empty arenas compared to Obama's inauguration. Trump countered on Twitter, calling the photos "fake news" and "phony". Trump's senior adviser Kellyanne Conway went further and told NBC's 'Meet the Press' that Spicer's comments were not "falsehoods" but merely "alternative facts" (Todd, 2017).

Seen against a broader perspective, the inauguration size controversy reflected Trump's "running war" (Trump, 2017b) with the established media, which he repeatedly called "dishonest" during and after his election campaign (Trump, 2017c). Trump's contempt has

been replicated by several of his staff. For example, Reince Priebus, the then White House Chief of Staff, said on "Fox News Sunday," that the administration is going to "fight back tooth and nail every day" with the press (Wallace, 2017). "There is an obsession by the media to delegitimize this President. We are not going to sit around and let it happen", he said (Wallace, 2017).

The size of the inauguration ceremony as such is a trivial matter. That it turned out to be so controversial crystallized early on not only the Trump administration's perspective on the malleability of "facts" and "truth" but illustrated a broader phenomenon: how, on the one hand, political polarization weakens common frameworks of understanding and communication, and, on the other hand, the role of social media and multi-modal communication in creating and sustaining alternative realities.

The questions of what are "facts" and "truth" are not the exclusive interest of those in politics. In recent years, the gap between appearance and reality has become increasingly center stage for organizations and managers as well (Davis, 2017). Volkswagen received negative publicity in 2015 when the US Environment Protection Agency revealed that the company had deliberately tampered with vehicles during emissions testing (for example Rhodes, 2016; Siano, Vollero, Conte, & Amabile, 2017). BP came under pressure when it was found responsible for the largest accidental oil spill in the petroleum industry's history at Deepwater Horizon, despite its claimed environmental credentials (Kassinis & Panayiotou, 2018; Matejek & Gössling, 2014). CEOs feel they are under increased scrutiny because of the proliferation of social media and the 24/7 news cycle that has emerged (Per-Ola Karlsson, 2017).

The purpose of this essay is to understand how the emerging discourse around "alternative facts" and "post-truth" relates to strategic action and communication in organizations. Prior studies have prefigured the rise of a "de-materialized" economy in late modernity, in which the ability of an organization to control the means of meaning production is beginning to matter

more than controlling the means of material production (Tsoukas 1999). Moreover, studies have recently begun to usefully explore the role of "bullshitting" (A. Spicer, 2013) in organizations. Drawing on philosopher Frankfurt (2009), Spicer suggests that in bullshiting, the speaker is unconcerned with the truth and fundamentally preoccupied with pursuing his/her own purposes and interests. Bullshitting is "prompted by organizations that are dominated by immaterial roles that provide their occupants with little sense of broader social purpose and value" (Spicer, 2013:659). However, while clearly engaging in bullshiting (Griffin, 2017), Trump goes beyond it, insofar as he uses his high (and anything but immaterial) office to carve new meanings through multi-modal communication. The Trump presidency visibly illuminates how social media, with its recent technological capabilities and affordances, has significantly amplified actors' ability to engage in meaning production and, thus, in making knowledge claims about "reality" more contestable. Our core argument will be that the use of social media has the capacity to elicit new forms of meaning-making for both negative and positive outcomes. In this respect, we argue, our current "post-truth" moment represents both an empirical instance of a strategic attack against liberal establishment interests in politics, but also a conceptual lens through which to understand multi-modal meaning making for strategic effect in organization studies more broadly.

The essay is organized as follows. In the next section, we define and explore the terms "post-truth" and "alternative facts" in the context of speech acts and language games. The next section focusses on alternative facts and the fragmentation of language games, especially in conditions of multi-modal communication. We then analyze the process of meaning making through Trump's strategic use of social media technology and multi-modality. Finally, we tie this back to management scholarship to show the implications for strategic action and communication, particularly for firms operating in low economic resource environments, and for managers who faced entrenched economic and hierarchical interests within organizations.

Facts, Speech Acts and Language Games

Post-truth is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (OED, June 2017). The term is relatively new, and was identified by the Oxford English Dictionary as the 'Word of 2016' based on its increasing use. However, there is more to "post-truth" than what dictionaries convey.

Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts provides a sound starting point. Austin defined speech acts as utterances that have a performative function. His interest was on how language gets used to 'do' certain things and influence particular outcomes. Austin differentiated between three types of speech acts: *locutionary* acts are the actual utterances themselves and their ostensible meaning; *illocutionary* acts are the intentions or pragmatic forces motivating the utterances; and *pre-locutionary* acts are the consequences of these acts, such as in realizing action.

In his collection of essays *Expression and Meaning* (1979), Searle (one of Austin's students) applied speech act theory to ask the question: how do individuals know when they are reading fiction or non-fiction? For Searle fact and fiction were two classes of illocutionary acts. For a naïve reader picking up a page of "facts" about a murder, it would be impossible to discern anything from the words themselves indicating that they were reading a crime report as opposed to a Sherlock Holmes story. However, Searle argued that this *would* be revealed through illocutionary acts—such as the way the text is presented, narrative tropes, and so forth—that allowed the reader to appreciate the rules governing meaning making for that particular text. Searle argued that fiction was guided by a "set of extra-linguistic, non-semantic conventions that break the connection between words and the world established by the rules [of non-fiction]" (Searle, 1979, p. 66).

In arbitrating these distinctions, Searle acknowledged that some utterances have the effect of being "brute facts" (1995, p. 27). Brute facts exist independently of human institutions, including language. Although brute facts require the institution of language to enable us to state the facts, nonetheless their very existence does not depend on language. "Thus", notes Searle, "the *statement* that the sun is ninety-three million miles from the earth requires an institution of language and an institution of measuring distances in miles, but the *fact stated*—the fact that there is a certain distance between the earth and the sun—exists independently of any institution" (1995, p. 27, italics in the original). Similarly, the statement that X number of people gathered on the National Mall on 20 January 2017, at around 11.00 am, is an objective (or brute) fact. Even if we did not have a language to express such a brute fact, it would still be objectively true. Such a claim is based on the correspondence theory of truth (Blackburn, 2017; Haack, 1995): statements are true to the extent they "correspond" to reality.

Pragmatist and hermeneutical philosophers go beyond the correspondence theory of truth to make a distinction between the causal force of the world and the facts that may be generated for interpretation. Caputo asks playfully: "how many facts are there right now in your kitchen?" (2013, p. 216), only to acknowledge that this is not a serious question to answer. "That is because we have not specified the frame of reference. Facts are a function of the frame of reference that picks them out, which means that there are no un-interpreted facts of the matter. But if we reframe the question to ask, "how many knives are found in your kitchen?", we can come up with an answer, hopefully the right answer, the one determined by how many knives there really are" (Caputo, 2013, p. 216). Similarly, remarks Rorty:

> "The way in which a blank takes on the form of the die which stamps it has no analogy to the relation between the truth of a sentence and the event which the sentence is about. When the die hits the blank something causal happens, but as many *facts* are brought into the world as there are languages for describing that causal transaction. As Donald Davidson says, causation is not under a description, but explanation is. Facts are hybrid entities; that is, the causes for the assertibility of

sentences include both physical stimuli and our antecedent choice of response to such stimuli" (1991, p. 81, italics in the original).

Thus, the object in the world that causes us to have beliefs, be it a cat, a murder case, or an inauguration, is never context-free (Caputo, 2013). Upon entering human consciousness, it is turned into a "fact" under a description created in the context of a practice world (Spinosa, Flores, & Dreyfus, 1997). A hammer exists as a tool for driving nails into wood, by virtue of being part of the practice world of, say, carpentry. For something to *be*, it needs to show up *as* something, in the context of a practice world (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, p. 343; Dreyfus, 2017). Objects come with descriptions already attached.

When, therefore, Rorty (1991) describes facts as hybrid entities, what he means is that our "antecedent choice of response" (p.81) to the stimuli we are exposed to comes from the particular language we have equipped ourselves to cope with the causally impactful object. The latter *already* has a place in a language game. It is not stripped bare of human concerns. The point here is not that there is no independent reality out there that causes us to have beliefs, but that the beliefs we are caused to have do not "correspond" to or "represent" a determinate (extralinguistic) reality, as it allegedly is (Rorty, 1989, pp. 4-5). There is no language-independent test of the accuracy of correspondence of a statement with a chunk of the world. As Putnam (1996, pp. 113-116) has argued, relationships of reference—how statements refer to chunks of reality—are *internal* to our overall view of the world (Rorty, 1991, p. 6). One cannot exit language games to view the world from nowhere (Nagel, 1986). We would not know what such a vantage point would be like.

When, therefore, we agree that "the cat is on the mat" or that "the litmus paper has turned blue", we do not take these statements as "representing" the chunks of reality they refer to, but as agreements within a particular language game—agreements that enable us to say that we are justified in being caused to believe that the sentence is true (Rorty, 1989, p. 5; 1991, pp. 80-83). To say "that we must have respect for facts is just to say that we must, if we are to play a

certain language game, play by the rules" (Rorty, 1991, p. 81). In that sense, there is no ideal or intrinsically accurate language in terms of which to refer to reality. Language, on this pragmatist view, is a tool that gives us "a way of grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering ourselves and our environment to suit our aspirations" (Rorty, 1991, p. 81). The critical question is not 'are you representing reality adequately?' but 'what are you trying to do with the language you are using?'

Multi-modal communication and the fragmentation of language games

With the above in mind, let us turn our attention to the notion of "alternative facts". Although the term is relatively new, we suggest that the illocutionary force it signifies is as old as language - the generation of competing perspectives induced by political rivalry for strategic effect. In a democracy, typically, every opposition counters the government's claims by pointing at "alternative facts". For example, when the government highlights the higher growth rate achieved, the opposition usually focuses on what the government conveniently passes by: wage stagnation and the distribution of income. If the government proudly points at the low unemployment rate, the opposition will likely insist on the quality of jobs created and the pockets of high unemployment in the country; and so on. In short, in a competitive political system, such as a liberal democracy, "facts" claimed by one side will likely be responded to by "alternative facts" of the other side (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017).

Trump is a master of using multiple language games. He reframes "facts" by cultivating contexts in which "alternative facts" have meaning for their audiences. The distinctiveness of the communication context Trump draws on is its disintermediation: the enormous proliferation of mediated communication in a 24/7 media landscape and the increasing fragmentation of language games through the use of social media signify a new environment for "alternative facts" and "post-truth" meaning-making, in which established power relations (e.g. press editors as control filters) are being subverted by direct communications that enable

broader reach, whilst simultaneously allowing recipients to interpret what they see in their own ways based on their contexts (d'Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017). Moreover, these technologies are never used exclusively by Trump's media strategy team, but are deployed interdependently or multi-modally so as to shift audience attention from one format to the other to "win" in modes where he does well, and leverage their affordances to maximal effect. It is possible to make sense of this through an updated understanding of Austin and Searle's speech act theory (for example Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016).

Let us revisit the size of Trump's inauguration incident, which is but one example of "post-truth" meaning making amongst many others on display in the Trump presidency. One might argue, as NBC's Chuck Todd did, that certain claims are utterly false and that certain "alterative facts are just falsehoods". The gathering of thousands of people on the National Mall has the causal status of the die-hitting-the-blank: we are caused by the state of the world to see something. When, however, this nonlinguistic causality is stated in sentences or pictures, several facts are created, depending on the language used. The seemingly innocent question 'how many people watched on the National Mall President-elect Trump's inauguration?' presupposes some "antecedent choice of response" (Rorty, 1991, p. 81), namely a language game. It could be the language game of everyday life, as when two friends converse leisurely in a café; or it could be the language game of the National Park Service, which routinely collects daily statistics of such matters; or it could be the language game of competitive politics, in which case the question is loaded with political significance, since the number of people gathered connotes popular support (or not) and confers political legitimacy (or not).

When, therefore, political interlocutors do not agree on the size of the Trump inauguration and engage in acrimonious debates about such a seemingly "brute fact", it reveals that the language game of politics has taken perhaps a new turn to become divisively opportunistic and self-serving. Interlocutors' disagreement about the political equivalent of "the cat is on the mat"

indicates that the hitherto agreed rules of the language game of politics have broken down and are no longer respected.

Indeed, few statements are simpler than stating the number of people gathered in a particular place at a particular date and time. However, there are alternative ways in which this statement can be true, and different modes of communication that can bring meaning to bear with varying illocutionary force. One interlocutor who wishes to break faith in the large size of the inauguration may use visual images (for example an empty National Mall) to debunk verbal statements to the contrary. An interlocutor who wishes to bolster faith in the opposite argument may drive attention to television where Trump's charisma (e.g. speech making at a well-attended supporter's party) can cast doubt on the "truth" that he is unpopular or illegitimate. Moving between these multiple modes of communication does not change the possibility for language games: it simply makes the *gaming* more possible, more immediate, and more ubiquitous by bringing the illocutionary force of each modality to bear on the argument at hand.

To paraphrase Rorty (1991, p. 80), then, the malleability of the "fact" in question signifies the fragility of the previous political agreements about the consequences of the fact. The causal independence of the inauguration from commentators does not mean that the inauguration can be seen 'as it is' and *then* interpreted. Rather, the very question of 'how many people watched the inauguration' arises in the context of a political language game. It is not a bare number, stripped of human interests and concerns, but is embedded in a particular context or game. In that sense, contra Searle, all facts are really "institutional facts", insofar as they presuppose an institution and the definitional work institutions carry out (Searle, 1995, pp. 27-28; 2010, pp. 10-11).

Of course, both sides of the debate refer their statements concerning inauguration size *to* some state in the world. However, their reference is *internal* to each side's perspective on the world (Putnam, 1996). This is why the question "how many people attended the Trump

inauguration?" can be answered in several ways, depending on how interlocutors use the relevant words and pictures. As, Putnam (1996) remarks, "truth does not transcend use. Different statements […] can be true in the same situation because the words—in some cases, the logical words themselves—are used differently" (pp. 115-116). In sum, pragmatist philosophy recognizes how this misunderstanding can come about, but it is late modernity that makes the possibilities for verbal/visual contradiction more acute.

Post-truth and meaning making in multi-modal communication

Two things stand out in how Trump's post-inauguration communication was managed, which illuminate a modern method to meaning production. First, Trump's post-inauguration communication strategy is not really about the inauguration. It extends to at least two additional games he is playing with audiences based on "truths" that resonate with them: (a) the elitism and aloofness of the liberal establishment media, and (b) his legitimacy as their elected representative.

For example, when Trump and his aides talk about "deliberately false reporting" and the "dishonesty of the media" (S. Spicer, 2017; Trump, 2017), he is engaging in a conversation with a large, conservative base who feel left behind by the preoccupations of liberal elites. When Trump activates this emotion by calling for a "running war with the media", he is turning the traditional language game of political competition into a war-like language game, in which, like in all wars, propaganda, or at least the self-serving use of whatever evidence one can get hold of, is a defensible tactic. Misquoting statistics is but one tactic of war (for example, Spicer later admitted his use of DC Metro public transit statistics was wrong, but only after the battle had been fought and won - see Gajanan, 2017; Hunt, 2017). This is a similar "truth" pervading through other language games, such as climate change denialism and anti-immigration policies (Knight 2013). Trump is mobilizing these liberal issues to activate his base and play the language game of 'war' and anti-establishmentarianism.

Similarly, when Trump and his aides reframe the conversation to claim "this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration", he is framing a conversation about legitimacy. Notice how quickly Trump shifted the terms of the debate from the crowd size on the National Mall to unverified views "around the globe" watching online and on television (S. Spicer, 2017) (Talev & Jacobs, 2017). Like Putnam's objects in the room, "inauguration audience" is a linguistic object whose use is not fixed by the world itself but by the *use* that is made of it (Putnam, 1996, p. 114). Different uses of "inauguration audience" generate different statements (say those of the *New York Times* versus those by Spicer), which can, potentially, all be true (Putnam, 1996, p. 115).

Trump's goal overall, then, is to provide an alternative reality to what the "media" projects about him, and one that resonates for constituencies he needs for strategic, political ends. Trump-ism is a recycling of 'post-modernist' or 'relativist' modes of thinking and communicating by conservative power brokers (Anderson, 2017). They shape and produce alternative facts by tapping into and playing language games that operate outside the norms of liberal establishment media but have meaning to their constituents and their local context.

A second crucial point in Trump's post-inauguration communication strategy is how he is able to control *the means* of meaning production. As much as possible, Trump seeks to communicate in his own words without the filtering effect of editors, interviews, or journalists interpreting his message. This is why Twitter is so useful for Trump. It allows him to control the message received by his base so he can influence the timing, phraseology, and context for their interpretive benefit with minimal interference or interpretation by editors who can misapply the language game.

Like television, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media technologies activate what Thompson has called 'responsive action in distant contexts' (Thompson 1995: 109). Unlike a face-to-face conversation where producer and recipient can co-construct meaning

interpretations in real time (Knight, Paroutis, & Heracleous, 2018), recipients respond indirectly to Trump (the producer) based on media messages they receive on social media. Thus, these messages 'are elaborated, refined, criticized, praised and commented on by recipients who take the messages received as the subject matter of discussions with one another and with others' (Thompson 1995: 110).

The discussions with one another and with others is central to how Trump's post-truth meaning making is amplified. Trump relies on his tweets spreading, either by re-tweets, but more significantly through coverage across other media technologies such as on Facebook, chat forums, blogs, You Tube channels, press, and ultimately broadcast television. Trump has also focused on changing the instrumentation undergirding these means of meaning production. For example, Trump has re-engineered the layout of the traditional press conference since becoming President. Usually conducted in the 49-seat James S. Brady Press Briefing Room in the White House as a verbal exercise in which journalists ask the President questions and report responses in the papers, Trump has shifted the format of conferences to fewer and shorter questions and amplified the visual spectacle (Marantz, 2017). He has installed "Skype seats" in the auditorium to field questions from around the country, and broadcast responses direct to television. He has also invited "floaters" (freelance journalists with loose journalist accreditation) into the Briefing Room to tweet messages via photos, videos, and tweets directly to the public through blogging sites and social media so as to amplify their multi-modal effect.

Trump's multi-modal social media strategy allows him to get to the front-line of political constituencies directly to play his language games. But his strategy is also geared toward a tactical goal of driving traffic to cable news television broadcast on a daily basis where he can sell his message in a more elaborated, televisual form. Ross Douthat (2018) at the *New York Times* has convincingly illuminated this point, arguing that television rather than social media is the making of Trump as President. Television is where Trump developed his original persona

(on The Apprentice); it is how his tweets are re-broadcast and commentated upon, and it is the basis upon which he builds a relationship with news anchors who invite him on their show to further elaborate his news commentary. It is well reported that television is the first place Trump goes in the morning, and the last place he tunes out.

Trump's command of the televisual allows him to play language games that tap into emotions in ways that traditional text-based language games may not. Returning to the "inauguration audience", Trump uses this object in a particular way that allows him to also substantiate his broader point about "*the enthusiasm* of the inauguration" (Spicer, 2017). After all, the inauguration audience matters insofar as it signifies political appeal or "enthusiasm" for the President. To prosecute this case, Trump's aides direct audiences back to live coverage of his speech at the CIA, soon after the inauguration, thus interweaving the language game about the inauguration proper with the visual depiction of the "raucous overflow crowd" of some 400-plus CIA employees and the "five-minute standing ovation" that Trump receives there (S. Spicer, 2017).

Again, the world does not tell us how words like "enthusiasm" must be used – that depends on the speaker's conceptual choices, in light of his/her view of the world (Putnam, 1996, p. 114). By giving sense to this word through grand hand gestures, distal facial positioning, and confident posture, Trump seeks to tap into the reservoir of 'greatness', of 'winning', of 'self-confidence' in an emotive way. The visuality of television allows his charisma to be manifest, and allows him to literally dominate the stage on which these emotional issues are adjudicated by audiences.

It is therefore too simplistic to say that Trump's communication strategy "masks" reality. He is changing the language game of politics itself by creating a new game, motivated by conservative causes, and enabled by a new technological means of meaning production enhanced by social media networks, direct messaging, and multi-modal techniques. With this

apparatus in place, Trump's post-truth America reminds us that even the hardest of facts are "hard", not so much because they correspond to the world as it is, but because they are "an artifact produced by our choice of language game" (Rorty, 1991, p. 80). It is sustained by deep divisions in our politick and a fragmentation of audiences: a sense of civic community between elites and non-elites that is breaking down; common understandings of concepts that is becoming ever so difficult to be achieved; and power as what matters most, pushing reasonable interpretation to the back seat.

What social media-powered "post-truth" implies for management research

Conceived in these terms, the rise of "post-truth" and "alternative facts" may hold several implications for scholars interested in making sense of modern management challenges. Below we discuss three: alternative facts and organizational truth claims; empowerment, post-truth and discursive battles; and power and multi-modal communication.

1. Alternative facts and organizational truth claims. Post-truth contests permeate organizations. Insofar as organizations are pervaded with ambiguity (March, 2010), it is often nearly impossible to pinpoint with certainty the "truth" behind an organization's success or decline, which is built over many years, and it is difficult to infer reliable lessons from the past to guide future actions. Ambiguity is endemic (March, 2010, p. 3). An appreciation of post-truth helps provide fresh impetus to the dramaturgical perspective on organizations (Mangham & Overington, 1987; March, 2010), namely to viewing organizations as enacting prevalent social myths and organizational members as playing their roles on the organizational stage (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Truth is not so much correspondence with reality as enacting socially acceptable drama that resonates with an audience. Moreover, it helps draw attention more strongly to the way organizations and managers construct narratives and undertake symbolic acts to justify themselves to internal and external audiences (Maguire & Hardy, 2013; Tsoukas, 1999; Gabriel, 2004). Ambiguity enables accounting for outcomes in multiple ways, and, thus,

for all sorts of "alternative facts" to be mobilized for particular purposes. Which ones are highlighted, what justifications are publicly projected, and what narratives are offered, provide fascinating topics to explore.

Yet this post-truth moment in politics illuminates something new for organizations as well: the types and affordances of communication technologies at organizations' disposal that open up opportunities and risks to organizations in a way that subvert classic power differentials. To appreciate the scale of disruption, consider the Shell versus Greenpeace conflict in the North Sea in 1995 over the disposal of Brent Spar, a defunct oil platform. This was a case study *par excellence* in "alterative facts". Whereas Shell emphasized scientific "facts" contained in official reports—claiming that the effect of disposing Brent Spar in the ocean would have had negligible impact on the environment—Greenpeace chose to highlight heterodox scientific accounts that underscored the difficulty of predicting environmental impact. Moreover, while Shell was narrowly concerned with the disposal of Brent Spar, Greenpeace took such disposal to create precedent for how the rest of decommissioned platforms in the North Sea would be disposed of (Tsoukas, 1999). Each actor in the conflict produced different claims, which drew on different 'facts', and generated competing narratives internal to each actor's distinctive worldview (see, Maguire & Hardy, 2013).

Tsoukas (1999) argued at the time that what was so striking about Greenpeace's influence over Shell was the extent to which they dominated *television* coverage, and made knowledge claims about Shell that influenced audience opinions in the international 'agora' – that is, the sphere of public opinion in which individuals form their consumer preferences. This allowed a relatively small, low resource organization (Greenpeace) to outcompete a well-resourced organization (Shell), upending a traditional assumption in strategic management about the importance of controlling critical material resources in competing for strategic advantage. Tsoukas (1999) used this to suggest a "de-materialized" economy was emerging in late

modernity in which controlling symbolic power could be more influential than controlling the capital means of production. By 'owning' the means of symbolic production through influence over televised media coverage, Greenpeace was able to subvert existing power holders and make knowledge claims that had an impact on Shell's license to operate and ability to work with stakeholders and customers.

The internet and social media has made 'the agora' more populous, more connected, more responsive, and therefore more consequential for strategy making and strategy participants. Insofar as informational abundance, multi-modal communication, and the proliferation of social media, as well as the fracturing of dominant business or political language games (Bauman, 2010; Tsoukas, 2005) are main features of late modernity, it is important to explore how claims to "truth" are projected, contested, and established. Management scholars, particularly from the critical tradition, have pointed out how entrenched corporate power holders can take advantage of this by way of corporate spin, impression management, and greenwash (for example Brown & Jones, 2000; Harvey, Tourky, Knight, & Kitchen, 2017; McDonnell & King, 2013).

2. Empowerment, post-truth and discursive battles. While post-truth and alternative facts tend to be used in a negative way to highlight power holder's sway over a malleable reality, few scholars have yet highlighted the potentially *positive* outcomes from this same post-truth meaning making process, at least in the sense of subverting entrenched power. In 2017, for example, several management controversies emerged, in which the under-powered and disenfranchised mobilized social media to overthrow or undermine corporate hierarchies. Travis Kalanick, the founder and CEO of ride-hailing service Uber, was ousted in June 2017 after a report about the company's aggressive culture and inappropriate treatment of women and employees went viral on social media (Isaac, 2017). Later that year, movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, co-founder of The Weinstein Company, was forced to step down after allegations

of sexual harassment and abuse were revealed and gained pace on social media (Farrow, 2017). This prompted a wider #Metoo social media campaign, in which victims of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace felt empowered to 'out' offenders, leading to resignations across many organizations and sectors (Khonmami, 2017).

In each case, these truth claims were contested by the power holders and/or their supporters. Some commentators and investors, for example, remarked that Uber's culture was not "toxic" but conducive to the creativity needed for disruptive innovation (see Hook & Kuchler, 2017; Thornhill, 2017). Weinstein, also, disputed that claims against him on the basis that his encounters were consensual (BBC, 2018). In other cases, powerful companies lost arguments in the court of public opinion directly impacting their financial performance. For example, the European Union applied fines on materially and symbolically powerful corporations such as Apple and Google (see Waters, Toplensky, & Ram, 2017) based on EU claims about tax avoidance and market dominance respectively. These were contested by the corporations, pointing to "alternative facts" and seeking to project the image of creative wealth creators rather than tax avoiders or market exploiters.

Which account prevails is the outcome of, among other things, discursive battles. Yet social media not only creates a new agora for firms to compete in. It also provides a new way for internal organizational conflicts to emerge beyond an organization's boundaries that can be very consequential. Indeed, several Weinstein accusers later confessed that they felt compelled to suppress 'the truth' whilst acting under the company's oppressive non-disclosure agreements, but felt more able to come forward when their experience was legitimated within the broader discourse around sexual harassment (Farrow, 2017). In the future, management scholars could be more attuned to how this new era of social media openness is changing the context for meaning making, and opening up new forms of power relations that influence the dynamics between firms (e.g. Greenpeace vs Shell) as well as within organizations themselves

(e.g. Uber and The Weinstein Company). What alternatives to accepted "facts" are mobilized, by what agents, for what purposes, with what effects, all become important topics that relate to the management of organizational change, reputational management, institutional entrepreneurship, and innovation.

3. Power and multi-modal communication. A related implication for management scholars is the opportunity to explore in greater detail how executives (CEOs in particular) actually use multi-modal communication to project favourable images of themselves and/or their organizations to build personal and/or corporate reputations (Bloom and Rhodes, 2018; Rindova et al, 2006, 2007). It is increasingly the case that managers not only communicate through talk and written text (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011), but also visually through the adept use of PowerPoint presentations and data visualizations (Knight et al., 2018), as well as body gestures (Wenzel & Koch, 2018). Trump, after all, is both a politician and a businessman. If he is to be believed, his practice (refined over many years) of switching between television coverage, appearances in the newspapers, and in-person negotiations in meetings, helped him to build up an image of success in the commercial agora that led to strategic advantages in his business dealings. Yet how executives construct these competitive dynamics through multi-modal communication is largely un-examined in the literature (Boczkowski and Orlikowski, 2004).

Knight et al's (2018) study of how management consultants influence the strategy process offers some insight into this based on how managers act within organizations. The study found that consultants exerted considerable influence over the direction of the strategy process by deliberately shifting from the PowerPoint slides, to the conversations, to how those emergent ideas were depicted visually, and back again, to shape the direction of strategy meaning making. The study also found that different kinds of visual techniques (e.g. text slides, pictures, graphs, amongst others) afforded opportunities to tackle different kinds of issues – be they

politically and emotionally charged, logically complex, or widely accepted. Their study described strategy making as a visual semiotic process in which the interdependence *between* talk, text, and visuality moved meaning making on. This is somewhat analogous to Trump's use of multimodal modes of communication to sustain political dominance: he has used Twitter (one mode of communication) to drive attention to television broadcast (a second mode of communication), thereby leveraging the affordances of each mode. Twitter is instantaneous and brief, allowing for controversial statements that get broadcast widely with little clarification. Television, on the other hand, is emotionally charged, allowing for the iconography of stadiums and crowds to complement grand hand gestures and provocative rhetoric.

Future studies could go further by examining the affordances of new kinds of communication technologies, the effects of new combinations of semiotic practices, or exploring extreme cases of success or failure in the public agora. In 2009, members of the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia became the subjects of international attention when climate sceptics hacked into their email servers and published confidential email dialogues between scientific researchers, including reference to a methodological "trick" used in the presentation of data for publication (Revkin, 2009). Although no wrong-doing was found, the research unit in question attracted negative attention, illustrating how hackers could take language out of context to marginalize actors and de-legitimate reputations (Henig, 2009). Interestingly, this problem arose partly because the very purpose behind the data – to *show* that climate change was real – poorly achieved that task because the affordance of scientific figures lacked the immediacy through which a 'brute fact' (i.e. climate change) could be visually appraised and made 'real' to non-expert audiences (Knight, 2013). Management issues that face similar visualization challenges – such as diversity and social inclusion in the workplace,

climate change accountability, data privacy, amongst others – are useful contexts in which battles over what is "truth" and what are "alternative facts" might be played out.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the discourse on "post-truth" and "alternative facts" reminds us, sometimes painfully, that what we take to be facts and truth are heavily dependent on the language games we take part in. If we happen not to wonder about facts, it is because we have faith in the rules of the relevant language games, and vice versa. Fixing a language game that does not command our allegiance requires generating more trust not better facts. This is as important in politics as in business. The more business organizations are seen to be self-serving and unaccountable, the less trust they will elicit and the less credible their statements will be. Moreover, since any claims made are made within particular contexts of communication, it is important to turn management scholars' attention to the multi-modal communication within which contemporary discursive battles are increasingly carried out. Exploring how different modes activate and empower (or not) new audiences to unseat (or bolster) established power relations within and around organizations provides new opportunities for management research.

References

Anderson, K. (2017). How America went haywire, *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ball, J. (2017). *Post-Truth: How bullshit conquered the world*. London: Biteback Publishing.

Bauman, Z. (2010). *44 letters from the liquid modern world*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

BBC. (2018). Harvey Weinstein timeline: How the scandal unfolded, *BBC*. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41594672

Blackburn, S. (2017). *Truth: Ideas in profile*. London: Profile Books.

Bloom, P. & Rhodes, C. (2018) *CEO Society: The Corporate Takeover of Everyday Life*, ZEd Books

Boczkowski, P.J. & Orlikowski, W.J. (2004). Organizational discoruse and the new media: A practice perspective. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick, & L. Putnam (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London, Sage: 359-378

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2017). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*: John Wiley & Sons.

Brown, A. D., & Jones, M. (2000). Honourable members and dishonourable deeds: Sensemaking, impression management and legitimation in the 'Arms to Iraq Affair'. *Human Relations, 53*(5), 655-689.

Caputo, J. D. (2013). *Truth: Philosophy in transit*. London: Penguin.

d'Ancona, M. (2017). *Post-Truth: The new war on truth and how to fight back*: Random House.

Davis, E. (2017). *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It*: Little, Brown Book Group.

Dreyfus, H. L. 2017. *Background practices. Essays on the understanding of being* (edited by M. A. Wrathall). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Farrow, R. (2017). Harvey Weinstein's accusers tell their story, *New Yorker*. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories

Frankfurt, H. G. (2009). *On bullshit*: Princeton University Press.

Gabriel, Y. (2004). Narratives, stories and texts. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick, & L. Putnam (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London, Sage: 61-79.

Gajanan, M. (2017, 24 January). Sean Spicer Stands by False Claim Over Inauguration Crowd Size, *TIME*. Retrieved from http://time.com/4643927/sean-spicer-white-house-donald-trump-inauguration-press-briefing/

Gond, J. P., Cabantous, L., Harding, N., & Learmonth, M. (2016). What do we mean by performativity in organizational and management theory? The uses and abuses of performativity. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 18*(4), 440-463.

Griffin, L. (2017). Trump isn't lying, he's bullshitting - and it's far more dangerous. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/trump-isnt-lying-hes-bullshitting-and-its-far-more-dangerous-71932

Haack, S. (1995). *Evidence and inquiry: Towards reconstruction in epistemology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Harvey, W. S., Tourky, M., Knight, E., & Kitchen, P. (2017). Lens or prism? How organisations sustain multiple and competing reputations. *European Journal of Marketing, 51*(4), 821-844.

Henig, J. (2009). Climategate, *factcheck.org*. Retrieved from https://www.factcheck.org/2009/12/climategate/

Hook, L., & Kuchler, H. (2017, 13 June). Uber chief Travis Kalanick to take indefinite leave, *Financial Times*. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/47561796-5053-11e7-bfb8-997009366969

Hunt, E. (2017, 22 January). Trump's inauguration crowd: Sean Spicer's claims versus the evidence, *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/22/trump-inauguration-crowd-sean-spicers-claims-versus-the-evidence

Isaac, M. (2017). Inside Uber's aggressive, unrestrained workplace culture. *New York Times*.

Kassinis, G., & Panayiotou, A. (2018). Visuality as greenwashing. *Organization & Environment*, 31(1), 1-23.

Khonmami, N. (2017). #MeToo: how a hashtag became a rallying cry against sexual harassment. *The Guardian*.

Knight, E. (2013). *Why we argue about climate change*. Melbourne: Black Inc.

Knight, E., Paroutis, S., & Heracleous, L. (2018). The power of Powerpoint: A visual perspective on meaning making in strategy. *Strategic Management Journal, 39*(3), 894-921.

Maguire, S., & Hardy, C. (2013). Organizing processes and the construction of risk: A discursive approach. *Academy of Management Journal, 56*(1), 231-255.

Mangham, I. L., & Overington, M. A. (1987). *Organizations as theatre: A social psychology of dramatic appearances*: John Wiley & Sons.

Marantz, A. (2017, 20 March). Is Trump trolling the White House Press Corps?, *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/20/is-trump-trolling-the-white-house-press-corps

March, J. G. (2010). *The ambiguities of experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Matejek, S., & Gössling, T. (2014). Beyond legitimacy: A case study in BP's 'green lashing'. *Journal of Business Ethics, 120*(4), 571-584.

McDonnell, M.-H., & King, B. (2013). Keeping up appearances: Reputational threat and impression management after social movement boycotts. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 58*(3), 387-419.

Nagel, T. (1986). *The view from nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

OED. (Ed.) (June 2017) Oxford English Dictionary (Third ed.). OED Online: Oxford University Press.

Per-Ola Karlsson, D. (2017, 15 May). Are CEOs less ethical than in the past?, *strategy+business*. Retrieved from https://www.strategy-business.com/feature/Are-CEOs-Less-Ethical-Than-in-the-Past?gko=50774

Putnam, H. (1996). *Representation and reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Revkin, A. (2009). Hacked email is new fodder for climate dispute. *New York Times*.

Rhodes, C. (2016). Democratic business ethics: Volkswagen's emissions scandal and the disruption of corporate sovereignty. *Organization Studies, 37*(10), 1501-1518. doi: 10.1177/0170840616641984

Rindova, V., Pollock, T., & Hayward, M. (2006). Celebrity firms: The social construction of market popularity. *Academy of Management Review*, 31(1): 50-71.

Rindova, V., Petkova, A., & Kotha, S. 2007. Standing out: How new firms in emerging markets build reputation. *Strategic Organization*, 5(1): 31-70.

Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, R. (1991). *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: philosophical papers* (Vol. 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sandberg, J., & Tsoukas, H. (2011). Grasping the logic of practice: Theorizing through practical rationality. *Academy of Management Review, 36*(2), 338-360.

Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J. R. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. New York: Free Press.

Searle, J. R. (2010). *Making the social world: The structure of human civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Siano, A., Vollero, A., Conte, F., & Amabile, S. (2017). "More than words": Expanding the taxonomy of greenwashing after the Volkswagen scandal. *Journal of Business Research, 71*(1), 27-37.

Spee, P., & Jarzabkowski, P. (2011). Strategic planning as communicative process. *Organization Studies, 32*(9), 1217-1245.

Spicer, A. (2013). Shooting the shit: the role of bullshit in organisations. *M@ n@ gement, 16*(5), 653-666.

Spicer, S. (2017). Statement by Press Secretary Sean Spicer [Press release]. Retrieved from https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/21/statement-press-secretary-sean-spicer

Spinosa, C., Flores, F., & Dreyfus, H. L. (1997). *Disclosing new worlds: Entrepreneurship, democratic action, and the cultivation of solidarity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Talev, M., & Jacobs, J. (2017, 23 January). Spicer Stands by Inaugural Audience Claim in First Briefing, *Bloomberg*. Retrieved from https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-01-23/spicer-stands-by-inauguration-audience-claim-in-first-briefing

Thornhill, J. (2017, 27 June). Uber has been a positive force for creative disruption, *Financial Times*. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/20cbed1c-5a58-11e7-b553-e2df1b0c3220

Todd, C. (2017, 22 January 2017). Meet The Press, *NBC News*. Retrieved from http://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-01-22-17-n710491

Trump, D. (2017). Remarks by President Trump at the Conservative Political Action Conference. Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center: The White House Office of the Press Secretary.

Tsoukas, H. (1999). David and Goliath in the risk society: Making sense of the conflict between Shell and Greenpeace in the North Sea. *Organization, 6*(3), 499-528.

Tsoukas, H. (2005). *Complex knowledge: Studies in organizational epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wallace, C. (2017, 22 January 2017). Fox News Sunday, *Fox News Channel*. Retrieved from http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2017/01/22/priebus-will-not-let-media-delegitimize-this-president-mcconnell-on.html

Waters, R., Toplensky, R., & Ram, A. (2017, 28 June). Rivals set to challenge Google's search advantage after EU ruling, *Financial Times*. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/2778b97a-5bc9-11e7-9bc8-8055f264aa8b

Wenzel, M., & Koch, J. (2018). Strategy as staged performance: A critical discursive perspective on keynote speeches as a genre of strategic communication. *Strategic Management Journal, 39*(3), 639-663.