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Truth and Truthophobia;  
The Poverty of Journalistic Theory in the Age of Fake News.

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
to the Centre for Journalism at the University of Kent in 2019

By

Graham Majin

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For

Harry, George & Annabelle.

Mum, dad, Cyril, Gerald and all the old gang.

## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work, except where otherwise stated by reference or acknowledgement. It has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree.

Signed:

Graham Majin

Date of original submission: 27<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

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There are some scholars with whom I disagree. In these cases I wish to stress that my quarrel is only with their ideas, and should not be seen as an attack on the individuals. In each case I have sought to refute their hypotheses with reasoned argument. It is for the reader to judge where truth lies.

I would like to thank the poet, novelist and my friend, Dr. Chris Greenhalgh for permission to quote from *The Cool End of Red*. I would also like to thank my friend Douglas Falconer for his enduring support. To Sarah Dawe I owe more than I can express here, but especial thanks for the long hours of intelligent discussion in coffee shops, and while rambling around the shire.

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## **Abstract.**

This paper attempts to identify the dominant theoretical paradigm (TDP) of Journalism Studies. The paradigm is then critically examined, and it is argued that it is inadequate for the challenges of the 21st century. The present age is one of fake news, hate speech, and increasing social, political and media polarization. It is a time when governments outsource censorship to social media corporations. It is a turbulent age in which citizens face complex challenges - so called "wicked problems" which require accurate, reliable information. However TDP asserts, either (weakly), that is doubtful whether there is any such thing as journalistic truth; or, (strongly) that there are no objective facts, reality or truth; merely a series of competing narratives.

The absence of a theoretical framework within which to discuss the concept of journalistic truth, and the consequent reluctance of the academy to do so, is referred to as truthphobia. It is argued that truthphobia hinders the scholarly assessment of current social and political issues. TDP is also incompatible with the Folk Theory of journalism, and with traditional Fourth Estate/watchdog approaches.

This paper identifies the foundational, canonical texts of TDP and scrutinises them. It is argued that they rest on a series of rarely examined, and intellectually invalid assumptions. It is noted that TDP is a sociological perspective which is insensitive to psychological and philosophical considerations, and in particular to epistemology. As a result, TDP is fundamentally a discourse of irrationality whose intellectual origins lie in the Counter Enlightenment and irrealism of 19<sup>th</sup> century European, and especially German, thought. It is a discourse which proposes a quasi-religious way of knowing, which offers the promise of epistemic certitude without the need for factual evidence. This way of knowing enjoyed great popularity during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for socio-economic, political

and demographic reasons. The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a partial retreat from these ideas, thus the current landscape may be described as one of doubt, theoretical poverty and paradigm crisis.

A new framework is proposed which locates journalism studies within a landscape of contemporary cognitive psychology and philosophy. This framework, Journalistic Truth Theory (TT) restores the concept of journalistic truth as a legitimate object of scholarly research. TT prepares the ground for an epistemology of journalism. It is envisaged that such an epistemology would see the problems of journalism as, first and foremost, problems of the communication of information. Thus key scholarly issues become those relating to trust, how to distinguish between reliable and unreliable testimony, and how to recognise deception, manipulation and error. TT thus unites academic journalism with journalistic praxis, and brings into sharp focus concepts such as journalistic truth, objectivity, accuracy and impartiality.

## Journalistic Preface. Plain Language Abstract.

I could picture the reviewer's eyebrows dancing in disbelief. How could anyone commit such a basic *faux pas*! I had submitted a paper to an academic conference. Although it was accepted, the reviewers were not enthusiastic. Their written feedback observed that I had made an obvious and embarrassing error. My paper, on the subject of journalistic impartiality, had referred to the notion of journalistic truth. One of the reviewers felt obliged to point out,

“It will always be debatable whether there is such a thing as “whole truth” that can be discovered and presented in a journalistic fashion.”

The reviewer did not present any evidence to support his view, nor did he feel it was necessary to do so. What he was saying seemed uncontroversial, unobjectionable and obvious. In this sense the reviewer can be regarded as a spokesman for the age; faithfully reflecting current mainstream opinion in academic journalism. The reviewer's aversion to the concept of journalistic truth I will refer to as truthphobia. The orthodoxy it reflects I will refer to as the dominant paradigm of journalism studies (TDP).

Had the reviewer been writing a hundred years ago, there would have been no such doubt and no truthphobia. A hundred years ago it was widely accepted that truth did indeed exist and that it could be approached, if imperfectly, by impartial investigation, and by carefully weighing the best available evidence. Fifty years ago there would also have been certainty, but of a radically different kind. During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century it was widely accepted that there was no such thing as truth. Had the reviewer been writing fifty years ago he might have confidently stated that there are only a series of equally valid narratives. “Truth” was merely the dominant narrative; the hegemonic discourse which should be contested, subverted and resisted in the interest of undermining capitalism and establishing social justice. This hostility to the concept of journalistic truth I will refer to as *strong* truthphobia.

What the reviewer was expressing then, may be described as *weak* truthphobia. It is a retreat from the confident certainty and strong relativism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a symptom of crisis within TDP, and arguably indicates a *de facto* rejection of it. But as confidence in TDP wanes, what we witness is *absence* of a theoretical paradigm, and a disconcerting intellectual vacuum. Hostility to truth is replaced with shoulder-shrugging bewilderment. A helpless doubt. In the Post-Truth Age, academic journalism finds itself ill-equipped, and unable, to help people understand the burning questions of the day, contested questions to which millions urgently seek answers. For example, what is the correct answer, or how might one go about finding the correct answer, to the following controversial, questions;

- Is Donald Trump the worst president of the United States, or the best?
- Is Brexit a disaster for the UK, or an opportunity?
- Is the EU an enlightened and progressive federation, or a sinister empire?
- Does mass immigration benefit and enrich the host population, or replace it for the benefit of wealthy elites?
- Are human beings responsible for catastrophic climate change which threatens our civilization, or is this a globalist hoax to benefit the powerful?
- Does the mainstream media tell the truth fearlessly, or conceal it to protect the vested interests of certain social groups?
- Should difficult and uncomfortable questions be asked, or silenced in the interest of social cohesion and silencing 'hate'? If so, who will decide who silences whom? Where are the boundaries of free speech?
- What is true? What is a lie? Who can we trust? Are we being deceived and

manipulated? What should we do? To whom should we turn?

- And, amidst the tumult; What is the role of journalism? What is news? What is fake news? What is journalism? What is fake journalism? What criteria can we use to judge?

Having banished the concept of journalistic truth in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, we are beginning to realise, to our dismay, that we lack the conceptual apparatus to address these, and other pressing questions. In the 1930s the Western democracies reduced their armaments and found themselves unprepared to face the military threat of the Nazis. In the 21st century we find ourselves epistemically disarmed. Writing in the *Guardian*, the English political and sociological theorist William Davies (Davies 2018), warns that democracy is dying in epistemic darkness, poisoned by a collapse of trust,

"As the past decade has made clear, nothing turns voters against liberalism more rapidly than the appearance of corruption: the suspicion, valid or otherwise, that politicians are exploiting their power for their own private interest. This isn't just about politics. In fact, much of what we believe to be true about the world is actually taken on trust, via newspapers, experts, officials and broadcasters... What nobody foresaw was that, when trust sinks beneath a certain point, many people may come to view the entire spectacle of politics and public life as a sham."

What caused us to lay down our intellectual weapons? The belief that there is no such thing as truth is a recent one. TDP has been dominant only for the last sixty years or so. Prior to that most of the greatest intellects agreed with the common man that some things were true, some things less true, and some things false. Journalists considered it normal to sell their wares by claiming they offered true accounts, and claiming that their rivals did not. For example in February 1643 (Hudson 1945) the *London Intelligencer* assured its readers that it contained,

"Truth impartially related to the whole Kingdome, to prevent misinformation."

Such claims were of course routinely greeted with scepticism regarding whether or

not they were true, but never with scepticism about whether there was such a thing as truth. It is important to understand that the belief that there is no such thing as truth, or, in its weaker, contemporary form, that truth *might* not exist, is a modern conceit. It is, I shall argue in what follows, a mistaken belief. For example, if a news organisation were to describe Donald Trump as the President of the USA, would they not be reporting something that was true? If they were to claim that Jimmy Carter, or Richard Nixon were President, would that not be untrue? What about the very statement “There is no such thing as truth”. Is that true? If there is no such thing as truth, then why should we believe such a self-defeating, statement?

What is perhaps most striking about the truthphobia of TDP is that many who claim to believe it are unable to explain why they do so. They are unable to produce any coherent account, or convincing reason, to defend their truthphobia. They simply assume that the pieties of TDP are correct and that dissenters are ignorant. Just as, during the middle ages, anyone arguing that the earth orbited the sun might have been regarded as uninformed, foolish, or wilfully heretical.

And yet the concept of truth is as well established in other disciplines, as it is unwelcome in the field of academic journalism. Developmental psychology for example tells us that children, in all cultures, by the age of four years have a clear and sophisticated understanding of truth. They know when they are telling the truth and when they are not. Furthermore they realise they can manipulate the behaviour and opinions of others by deceiving them, and they trust others selectively.

Outside of the academy, the folk understanding of truth is the everyday currency of every human being on the planet. It is also the everyday currency of professional, working journalists. In summary I will argue that the truthphobia of TDP is an irrational and indefensible denial of reality which became fashionable for a variety of political, socio-economic and demographic reasons during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. I contend that future ages will view with puzzlement how large numbers of highly intelligent people could have claimed to believe something which is patently

absurd, and for which no evidence could possibly exist. The stakes are high. We live in an age of political polarisation and partiality. As the British Marxist intellectual Terry Eagleton (2018, p x) puts it,

“Not since the 1930s have we seen such a mass loss of faith in the liberal middle-class consensus. There have been outbreaks of class warfare and talk of violent revolution, all of it fired by a fury, hatred and despair very far from the sedate, civilised climate of Westminster or Capitol Hill.”

I will argue that without the concept of journalistic truth, there can be no means of settling a dispute between two rival pieties. Failure to recognise the concept of truth thus leads, ultimately and inevitably, to conflict and to violence. This was the painful lesson learned after the inferno of civil and religious warfare in Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. What arose from the ashes of that blood soaked century was a desire to find an alternative to dogma and fanaticism. That alternative was the Enlightenment, and the privileging of the concepts of objectivity, impartiality and truth. The English philosopher Bertrand Russell (1947, p 864) rightly describes the concept of truth as an imperfect miracle,

“In the welter of conflicting fanaticisms, one of the few unifying forces is scientific truthfulness, by which I mean the habit of basing our beliefs upon observations and inferences as impersonal, and as much divested of local and temperamental bias, as is possible for human beings... [It produces] a lessening of fanaticism with an increasing capacity for sympathy and mutual understanding.”

This paper began life as an attempt to sketch a new paradigm (Truth Theory) for journalism studies. However, conscious of the need to first explain what was wrong with the old paradigm the paper changed direction. It became principally a critique of TDP and an examination of the flawed assumptions of its canonical texts. Having fired my intellectual torpedoes at TDP, it then became necessary to reintroduce something about Truth Theory in order to avoid a purely negative paper. This I have done towards the end – in a condensed and incomplete way. In summary this project can be thought of as part of a longer work not yet written. What is missing is a detailed justification of Truth Theory, in other words a



systematic and psychologically plausible epistemology of journalism. I envisage this will draw upon modern research in cognitive psychology and social psychology. Disciplines which, in turn, draw upon contemporary research in cognitive neuroscience. My ambition is that this might become the foundational, theoretical framework anticipated by Walter Lippmann (1920, p 5) when he wrote,

“No doubt an organon of news reporting must wait upon the development of psychology and political science”.

As we begin our journey, I ask only that those who are not used to discussing truth in an academic context, will do so with an open mind.

## A Note on the Arboreal Methodology

The methodology used in the present project involves repeatedly asking the question, "Why does scholar X believe proposition Y?" or "What is the intellectual authority cited as evidence for this view?" Asking these questions uncovers a chain of assumptions and ideas which leads back in time. Following the chain one approaches the foundational texts and underlying assumptions which support the paradigm.

The methodology is analogously like checking the health of a tree of knowledge. We start with a flower in the outer canopy and note that it has grown from a twig. Following the twig we see it stems from a branch. This in turn has developed from the main bole of the tree. The bole can be thought of as the dominant paradigm of Journalism Studies, or as the canonical texts of the TDP. Looking back up the tree we can observe that TDP has spawned innumerable, incremental sub theories and theorists, all of which are nourished by it.

But why stop there? We can also ask, "Why did the canonical theorists of TDP believe what they believed?" Now we find ourselves leaving the discipline of journalism studies altogether and entering a hidden, subterranean world where the underlying philosophical assumptions and beliefs reside. These philosophical ideas can be examined, questioned and scrutinised. Are they valid? Are they well founded? Are the roots strong and deep, or frail and brittle? If it is the latter, then we will have just cause for concern for the health of the entire tree. To preserve the metaphor I will refer to this as an arboreal methodology.

As a practical example, let us take a 2017 paper by the German journalism academics Thomas Hanitzsch and Tim Vos. The paper, entitled *Journalistic Roles and the Struggle Over Institutional Identity: The Discursive Constitution of Journalism*, was published in the journal *Communication Theory*. The authors state that they aim to "bring clarity to our theoretical understanding of journalists' roles." They approach the subject (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, p 116) by arguing that,

"Journalistic roles are conceptualized as discursive constructions of journalism's institutional identity, and as a struggle over discursive authority in conversations about the locus of journalism in society."

Using the arboreal methodology, we begin by asking, "Why do Hanitzsch and Vos believe this is a fruitful and valid way to conceptualize the role of journalism in 2017?" We then seek, within their paper, the intellectual authority for their beliefs. We are searching, among the many leaves and branches, for the older, thicker wood which supports their ideas. On page 120 (op cit) we find this,

"As Hall (1992, p.291) notes, "since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do - our conduct - all practices have a discursive aspect." Thus, discourse defines and produces the objects of our knowledge (Foucault, 1980). It allows social actors to (re)produce meanings, to bring objects and actions in to our social understandings, and to translate a belief system into a system of practice (Hall, 1997)."

The intellectual arborist recognises that, in Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault, we have found the tree trunk. We can see that the intellectual assumptions being used by Hanitzsch and Vos in 2017 find support from, the work of these late 20th century theorists. And from there we can continue our arboreal journey.

For example if we scrutinise the writings of Stuart Hall it is possible to identify his key influences as; Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci (major political influences), Ferdinand de Saussure (philosophical/linguistic influence), and Berger and Luckmann (philosophical and sociological influences). In Althusser we can, in turn, trace the influences of Lacan, Freud, Marx and (again) de Saussure. In Lacan we can find the influences (again) of de Saussure and Freud. Since de Saussure seems to be a recurring influence, let us examine him next.

As we continue our journey down into the conceptual tree roots, we can identify, in the influential semiotic linguistics of de Saussure, a strong thread of German idealist, phenomenological philosophy. This may have reached de Saussure partly via the fashionable, late 19th century writings of Eduard von Hartmann. Von

Hartman in turn drew heavily on the ideas of the German idealists Friedrich Schelling and Johann Fichte. And it is with Fichte, for reasons that will be explained later, that we might judge to have reached a convenient terminus at which to stop. If we were to pick another branch to follow, that of Berger and Luckmann, we would find it also led, via Alfred Schütz and Edmund Husserl, back to 19th century German idealism and to Fichte. Thus we would discover common roots.

Pausing to reflect, we have succeeded in demonstrating that the views of Hanitzsch and Vos in 2017 are founded upon the subjectivism and irrationalism of the Counter Enlightenment of the late 18th century, or – more accurately – in the work of later theorists whose systems were adopted from those who came before.

In many cases, contemporary academics will not be aware of the intellectual heritage they are drawing upon. They may, for example, believe that, in citing a 21st century source, the ideas contained in it are equally recent. To these academics, the threads of intellectual thought which wind their way to them from the past are invisible. For example the American academics Brett G. Johnson & Kimberly Kelling, writing in 2018 about Facebook, cite the above passage from Hanitzsch and Vos as a framework for their own research. However their bibliography refers neither to Stuart Hall, nor to Berger and Luckmann, from whom Hanitzsch and Vos have derive authority. Johnson and Kelling (Kelling 2018) simply explain,

"Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, 116) urge scholars to study journalism as a discursive institution, whereby journalism is perpetually in a state of "struggle over discursive authority in conversations about the meaning and role of journalism in society."

Hanitzsch, on the other hand, is an example of a scholar who *is* conscious of the branches and roots to which he is joined. As he explains (2018),

"As far as epistemology is concerned I would say that I was mostly influenced by social constructionist views (e.g., Berger and Luckmann) and constructivist perspectives that emerged out of German sociology at the time (notably, Luhmann).

Luhmann makes extensive reference to Hegel, who himself was partly influenced by Kant, Fichte and Schelling. The latter two thinkers could indeed be seen as forerunners of a modern constructionist/constructivist epistemology."

As this example indicates, one contemporary academic may cite another in complete ignorance of the provenance of the ideas on which they are relying. This process, a form of academic hearsay, is widespread. While there is nothing objectionable about it, the practice arguably engenders a false sense of epistemic security. In other words a theory gains credibility and respectability merely from being repeated. If it is a bad theory it is effectively "laundered" as it passes through the academy. Thus a hypothesis can spread, become fashionable and popular, even if it is unsound or invalid, in part because its origins are obscured.

For example if someone were to express a belief in the existence of witches, one might ask them, "Why do you believe that?" The reply might be, "Because X told me, and X is very knowledgeable". X, when questioned, might explain that his belief arose from reading a book by Y. And Y might explain that he was influenced by the scholarly arguments of Z, and so on. In each case the person is explaining why they feel justified in believing in witchcraft. This is however not the same thing as offering evidence that witches actually exist. There is an ever-present danger of confusing the testimony of academic citation for evidence that a proposition is actually true. It is this danger that the arboreal methodology is intended to repel.

To the arboreal methodology it might be objected that ideas are not tangible things which can be picked up, put in a box, or conveyed intact from one mind to another. They are rather intangible, shifting things which blend, evolve, mix and become emulsified so that the original disappears or is transformed entirely. This point is readily conceded, but I do not think it is an objection. I am not suggesting that a fresh blossom at the top of the canopy is the same thing as an ancient root deep in the soil below. That is precisely the point of the arboreal metaphor. For example a theorist who considers himself a Marxist is not saying that he is Karl Marx, or that every one of his ideas is identical to every idea of Marx. What he is trying to convey is that he has found inspiration in certain important ideas formulated and

expressed by Marx. It is to acknowledge an intellectual debt. What else indeed is the purpose of an academic citation if not to demonstrate the origin and influence of an idea? Ideas are constantly being blended, shaken and stirred, which can make it difficult to identify their component DNA. But the DNA is there nonetheless. The blending process does not destroy it, merely disguise it and dress it in new clothes. The American and French linguists and intellectual historians John Goldsmith and Bernard Laks, point out that ideas, like moles, do most of their work out of sight. They correctly observe (Goldsmith and Laks 2019 (in press), p10) how old ideas leak from one discipline to another, and in so doing appear as novelties,

"It is simply impossible to understand any of the mind fields - linguistics, philosophy, psychology, logic - over the past 100 years in isolation... We will frequently see an idea appear in one discipline as if it were new, when it migrated from another discipline, like a mole that had dug under a fence and popped up on the other side."

Goldsmith and Laks note that it is to be expected that old ideas will regularly be "rediscovered" by new generations, repackaged, and then heralded as radical and exciting developments. Paraphrasing Bourdieu, they explain (op cit, p 12) that yesterday's tired orthodoxies are tomorrow's bright new discoveries,

"It is not so much the heir that inherits the inheritance; in the world of ideas it is the inheritance that inherits the heir! We should not be too shocked to discover that systems of positions and dispositions are reborn in each individual in each new generation of scholars.."

The arboreal methodology is not merely scholarly detective work. It does not aim simply to trace for the sake of tracing. It aspires to trace for the sake of checking. It is a journalistic methodology which seeks to ascertain how reliable a given source actually is. Borrowing from the motto of the Fleet Air Arm, it aims to find, fix and strike. Once the underlying argument has been identified it aims to examine whether it is sound and valid, or ill-founded and specious. If it is the latter, then the consequences for the health of the conceptual tree would be grave. Fragile,

diseased roots would indicate a fragile, diseased tree. If the underlying assumptions are revealed to be false, then it would be unwise to rely on any conclusions drawn from them.

This is the methodology adopted in what follows. It is an attempt to find the tree roots and expose them to scrutiny. I will argue that the results reveal cause for concern.

## **List of Research Questions Addressed in this Thesis.**

### Part One:

- What is the folk-theoretical understanding of journalism?
- How does this differ from the academic view?

### Part Two:

- What is meant by the assertion that Journalism Studies has many theories, but no theory?
- What is the evidence to suggest paradigm crisis in Journalism Studies?

### Part Three:

- What are the most relevant and urgent issues for scholars of journalism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- What is fake news?
- What is hate speech?
- Should fake news and hate speech be censored? Why?/Why not?

### Part Four:

- What is TDP? What are its characteristics?
- Who are the canonical theorists of TDP?
- How intellectually valid are their hypotheses?



Part Five:

- What are the philosophical assumptions of TDP?
- How valid are they?

Part Six:

- What are the cognitive-psychological assumptions of TDP?
- How valid are they?

Part Seven:

- What is social constructivism?
- How valid is the hypothesis of Berger and Luckmann?
- Should TDP be seen as an historically situated construct of the Baby Boomer Generation?

Part Eight:

- What is Truth Theory?
- What is journalistic truth?
- What is journalistic impartiality?

- What are news narratives?

Part Nine:

- How does Truth Theory understand the concept of power?
- How does this compare with the Foucauldian account?

Part Ten:

- What might a future epistemology of journalism look like?
- What are the benefits of a truth-theoretical approach to Journalism Studies, and to wider society?

## **Part One. Journalism Studies; a Tale of Two Paradigms.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What is the folk-theoretical understanding of journalism?
- How does this differ from the academic view?

*"The first demand made by the reader of a journal is, that he should find an accurate account of foreign transactions and domestic incidents. This is always expected, but this is very rarely performed".*

Samuel Johnson.

*"We are like sailors who must rebuild their raft on the open sea, but are never able to start afresh from the bottom".*

Otto Neurath.

*"It is very difficult to see one's own most cherished ideas in perspective; as parts of a changing and, perhaps, absurd tradition".*

Paul Feyerabend.

### **01.00.00 A Folk-Conceptual Theory of Journalism**

Everyday billions of people access online news, or buy newspapers, or listen to news on the radio, watch news on TV, or consume news via their phones, or mobile devices. If asked to explain what they were doing and why they were doing it, these people would say that they wanted to know what was going on, or that they felt it was important to be informed. If pressed further about their natural, human curiosity; they might say they expect their source of news to provide them with a reasonable approximation of what was going on in the world. If pressed further still, many might say they felt it important to know the truth about what was going on so as to make the best possible decisions, and have the best informed opinions.

Similarly the many thousands of journalists around the world, if asked what they were doing and why; would probably say they were trying to provide their audiences with up-to-date, accurate accounts of interesting events and human behaviour. None of them would say they were inventing an arbitrary set of fictions. On the contrary, news organisations go to great lengths to stress how trustworthy and accurate their news is. There is therefore an understanding, or contract, between journalists and those who actively seek and consume journalism. This contract is roughly that audiences will delegate the job of gathering information about the world to professional journalists; and professional journalists will attempt to deliver a true picture of the world to their audiences. In other words audiences want to know the truth about the real world and they look to journalists to provide it. This understanding is at the heart of journalism. We will refer to it as the Folk Theory of journalism.

The Folk Theory of journalism is a rich tapestry of understanding, deeply embedded in human psychology. There is nothing naïve about the Folk Theory of journalism. On the contrary I will argue it is a highly sophisticated, evolved approach to making sense of the testimony of journalists and of the real world.

For example the fact that there exists a contract between journalists and audiences does not mean that the contract is always honoured. It does not follow that every news story always tells the truth, or that consumers of news always believe what they read. Indeed we are frequently told we live in the “Post Truth Age”; an era in which “Fake News” and “Hate Speech” are spread to ensnare and manipulate the unwary, the credulous and the gullible. The Post Truth age is a complex era of tribalism and polarised views in which audiences are increasingly sceptical of journalism, but generally only of journalism with which they disagree. As a recent study (Nielsen and Graves 2017) put it,

"Most people identify individual news media that they consider consistently reliable sources and would turn to for verified information, but they disagree as to which and very few sources are seen as reliable by all".

But the fact that not all news is equally true, and that the world is full of error, deception and manipulation poses no conceptual problem for the Folk Theory of journalism as we shall see.

### **01.01.00 Journalism as Testimony. The Perils of Error, Deception and Manipulation.**

Drawing on other people's experiences and observations gives us, effectively, more eyes to see with, and more information to feed our decision-making processes. This ability to learn from the experiences of others is often referred to as "vicarious experience". It enables us to learn without paying the price imposed by experience. As the American psychologist Jonathan Baron memorably explained, (2000, p 185) when faced with certain questions; it is prudent to learn from the reported experience of other people,

"We do not experiment, for example, in order to find out whether strong acids are really dangerous to drink. (Those who do, at any rate, are probably not around to argue with me)".

Information received from other people we shall refer to as testimony. Thus the testimony of others is a precious and valuable form of information which we can use to supplement our own direct experience. As the American philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine puts it (1970, p 33) ,

"Observation is a vital ingredient in all such prediction, and our chances of prediction are much increased by increased observation. So in its yield of vicarious observation, through the testimony of others, language confers a major benefit".

The Folk Theory sees journalism as a form of testimony. News exists, first and foremost, to supply useful, relevant information to audiences. This information is extrinsic of the audience's own experience. This distinction between testimony, and our own personal observation and experience, is of far reaching importance for scholars of journalism because there is a world of difference between the two

types of knowledge. We are vastly more confident about knowledge gained from our own direct experience, compared with things we're told by other people. As Quine (op cit, p 34) puts it,

“Observation sentences, taken narrowly, are comparatively fool-proof. That is what makes them the tribunal of science. It is when we move to other sentences that the danger of mistaken testimony soars”.

There are two epistemic perils associated with testimony. The first is that it is prone to error - people are often unintentionally unreliable. But a graver danger is that testimony is not knave-proof. People sometimes deliberately lie. Children, regardless of culture, by the age of four recognise the distinction between people who tell the truth, people who are mistaken, and people who are lying. From this age children realise they can manipulate the behaviour and opinions of others by telling them some things, and not telling them certain other things. And they realise that other people possess similar powers. As the American legal academic, Angela Evans and the Chinese cognitive neuroscientist Fen Xu explain (Evans, Xu and Lee 2011), young children have the ability to lie strategically, and this ability becomes increasingly sophisticated with age.<sup>1</sup>

“Whereas few 3-year-olds were capable of telling a strategic lie to be consistent with the physical evidence, about half the 4-year-olds and the majority of the 5-year-olds did so. Thus, consistent with our original hypothesis, young children were able to tell a strategic lie by making a false statement consistent with the physical evidence of their transgression.”

Children, like adults, intuitively use a set of psychological tools to help them distinguish between reliable and unreliable information. Human beings are hard-wired to attempt to distinguish between truth and untruth. This tool set is referred to by psychologists as epistemic vigilance. We will have more to say about epistemic vigilance in due course. Unfortunately, in the real world, epistemic vigilance is neither fool-proof nor knave-proof. Sometimes the most painstaking

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There is a rich literature attesting to the sophisticated infant understanding of truth, trust, deception and “other minds”. For example see (Kovács, Téglás and Endress 2010)

efforts are made to investigate the truth, but the results will always be provisional - forever tantalisingly out of reach, like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. For example the Saville Inquiry took twelve years, and heard from more than 900 witnesses, in an attempt to try to discover the truth about the events of Bloody Sunday, the 1972 shooting of 14 civilians by British soldiers in Northern Ireland. However, according to the journalist and author Douglas Murray (2012, p 1), the very thoroughness of the investigation became, ironically, part of the problem,

"The sheer quantity of this information is itself off-putting. Lord Saville's final magnum opus alone is ten volumes long. A monumental piece of legal investigation, its length however means that very few people, if any, have read or will read his findings".

Delving into the labyrinthine complexity of the of events which took place in a few frantic and traumatic minutes is daunting. The truth reveals itself as innumerable sub truths each of which is unclear. Even the truth of a single, tiny detail is frustratingly elusive and fuzzy. For example many witnesses described the gruesome discovery of a human eyelid stuck to a brick wall after the shooting. But each of the descriptions was different (ibid), and many were contradictory,

"Were any of these people wrong? Certainly. Possibly all of them. But were they lying? Almost certainly not... In the intervening years some people embellished or invented small parts of what they did on that day. Some consciously. Some entirely unconsciously... If the truth of what happened on Bloody Sunday was already messy, over the course of decades it became far messier".

The Folk Theory is accepting of the concept that, in many cases, asking "what happened?" is to lift the lid on a complex web of events, behaviours, intentions, misunderstandings and confusions, many of them connected and interdependent. There is therefore ambiguity in the very question, "What is the truth about Bloody Sunday?" - not because facts are unobtainable, but because the question itself is impossibly vague.



### **01.02.00 A Folk-Conceptual Approach to Journalistic Truth.**

It is not surprising therefore that audiences appear to have little trouble understanding the folk concept of journalistic truth. Surveys are regularly carried out to determine how much audiences trust news and questions such as, "do you trust the media?" necessarily imply an understanding of the concept of truth. Such questions are intuitively understood as "do you trust the media to tell the truth?"

For example a *Trust in News* survey carried out in 2017 by Kantar (2017), spoke to eight thousand people in the UK, USA, France and Brazil, and found that, "Only 56% trust that what they read is true and not fake "most of the time." The exact question which respondents were asked was whether or not they agreed that, "Most of the time, I trust that the news I'm seeing is true and not fake news". The survey question made perfect sense to the eight thousand people surveyed who understood the concept of journalistic truth effortlessly and intuitively.

The Folk Theory acknowledges that there is an objective reality, but discovering what that reality is, is a complex, perhaps impossible task; especially when audiences have to rely on the testimony of others. This basic distinction is of profound importance. Failure to recognise it lies at the heart of the conceptual confusion of TDP. In other words, acceptance of the *concept* of truth does not imply that we can in practice know what is true. Nor does it follow that because our knowledge will always be uncertain, that nothing can ever be known. Journalistic knowledge should not be confused with absolute certainty. Journalism, like those who produce it, is fallible. The consolation of certitude is not to be found in journalism.

For the Folk Theory therefore, investigating the truth is much like solving a puzzle, or untangling a historical mystery. For example in June 1816 one hundred and forty seven men and one woman were herded aboard a makeshift raft when the French frigate the *Medusa* ran aground off the west coast of Africa. Abandoned by their captain; murder, depravity and cannibalism ensued and the story of the *Medusa* became a national scandal. But, as the historian Jonathan Miles writes

(2007, p 241), establishing the facts with certainty is not possible,

“Our inability to discover the truth behind the terrible events that have been variously recounted according to the interests of differing writers remains problematic. What comes down to us is, inevitably, a distortion of the truth – a mosaic of probabilities”.

It is important to understand that this does not mean that nothing happened on the raft of the Medusa, or that there is no truth, or that all the survivors' accounts are equally true. They are not. As with witness accounts of Bloody Sunday, different interests and motives drove different survivors to tell different stories. Some lied. Quine (op cit, p 3-4) describes how human beings constantly update, adjust and fine-tune their beliefs based on new information,

"One's repertoire of beliefs changes in nearly every waking moment. The merest chirp of a bird or chug of a passing motor, when recognized as such, adds a belief to our fluctuating store. These are trivial beliefs, quickly acquired and as quickly dropped, crowded out, forgotten. Other beliefs endure... Some, like our belief in the dependability of our neighbourhood cobbler, we may abandon tomorrow in the face of adverse evidence”.

Elsewhere Quine likened human knowledge to a raft which we are constantly rebuilding while adrift on a sea of uncertainty. He borrowed the analogy from the German philosopher Otto Neurath (1921a, p 198-9) who wrote,

"Every statement about any happening is saturated with hypotheses of all sorts and that these in the end are derived from our whole world-view. We are like sailors who must reconstruct their raft on the open sea, but who are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the raft is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the raft can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> I have altered the translation from ship to raft so as to preserve the continuity of metaphor. I hope no objection will be raised to this minor infidelity.

In other words, according to the Folk Theory, audiences are constantly adjusting and fine-tuning their world view in the light of new, updated information. Some of this information comes to them in the form of journalism.

The Folk Theory understands that humans spend considerable time and effort analysing one other and making judgements about them. In this respect we are all amateur psychologists and mind-readers. We are endlessly curious about what others say and do and what their real motives might be for saying or doing it. Thus the Folk Theory of journalism can be considered to be simply an extension of folk human psychology. An extension of the deeply-embedded, ubiquitous, human conceptual framework of mind and behaviour. In short, of human nature.

### **01.03.00 The Dominant Paradigm of Journalism Studies**

The academic study of journalism, and its close cousins Media Studies, Cultural Studies and Communication Studies, share a common set of theoretical beliefs. Thus, although there are many subtle shades of emphasis and differences among family members, all share a core, underlying network of basic ideas. This underlying network of ideas, which we will refer to as The Dominant Paradigm, holds that the Folk Theory of news is naïve and mistaken.

As the American sociologists and media scholars Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester write (Molotch and Lester 1974, p 111), there is no “truth”, there is no objective “reality” and there is no “knowledge”; except that which is invented for us by others, or subjectively by ourselves,

"We see media as reflecting not a world out there, but the practices of those having the power to determine the experience of others".

Or, as the Australian cultural studies academic Ien Ang writes (Ang 1999, p 382),

"It should be clear, finally, that the unstable multiplicity of this 'essentially deconstructive world' (Marcus, 1992; 327) no longer makes it possible, as modern

discourse would have it, to tell a single, total story about the world 'today'".

Or, in the words of the cultural theorist Jon Stratton (Stratton 1990, p 287),

"There is no fixed site of truth, no absolute presence; there are just multiple representations, an infinite number of rewritings".

Similarly, and more recently, the Swedish journalism scholar Leon Barkho argues (2013, p 29),

"There are no uninterpreted or brute facts that are simply 'out there' unaffected by our theoretical and conceptual schemes (Bernstein 1979; 20). Saying that we can report facts and nothing but facts borders on 'hyperfactualism'<sup>3</sup> ... What journalists see as 'facts' are in fact 'viewpoints' and not universal truths".

In cases where audiences are able to respond to survey questions about journalistic truth with apparent ease, scholars of journalism would argue they are mistaken. For example the German journalism scholars Matthias Kohring and Jörg Matthes argue (Kohring and Matthes/Jörg 2007, p 239) that news does not have a relationship with truth, rather it fulfils the audience's "need for orientation to their social environment". Thus survey questions about trust should be interpreted non-epistemically as really asking, "Do you trust the news to select stories to enable you to orient yourself to your social environment"? Audiences mistake 'truth' for an interesting, entertaining and useful mix of stories,

"Because journalists cannot provide all information about any possible issue, news media always selectively inform the public about issues... The theoretical basis for an analysis of trust in news media is the term 'selectivity'. Trust in news media means trust in their specific selectivity rather than in objectivity or truth".

For TDP, the choice is between certain knowledge (which is impossible), and no knowledge at all. Whereas for the Folk Theory, the choice is between uncertainty

<sup>3</sup> Hyperfactualism describes an approach which is only concerned with dry fact gathering and which eschews any theoretical dimension or analysis. It "suffers from a theoretical malnutrition and surfeit of facts". See; (Landau 1968). Its opposite is theorrhoea, a sterile theoretical scholasticism divorced from reality, and unsupported by empirical evidence or observation.

and less uncertainty. Thus the doctrine of The Dominant Paradigm of Journalism Studies, in its rejection of the concept of truth, is at variance with the Folk Theory of Journalism.

#### **01.04.00 If Fake News is News that is Fake; Then What is News?**

For the Folk Theory, news is a relatively straight forward affair. It is a form of information about current affairs which warrants itself to be true. Thus, for the Folk Theory, the idea of fake news is also relatively straight forward. It is counterfeit news; it warrants itself true, but is not. It's aim is not truth, but persuasion and manipulation. It is propaganda. In other words, to recognise what is fake, one must first be able to recognise what is authentic. Indeed the fake can only exist in relation to the authentic. For example there could be no counterfeit money if there were no real money, no fake art if there were no real art. The concept would be nonsensical.

However for The Dominant Paradigm, the concept of fake news is highly problematic. If news is merely one of "an infinite number of rewritings", then what can fake news be? Logically it can only be one more rewriting, no more fake or legitimate than any other. If journalistic "facts" are merely "opinions", then fake news is simply another "opinion". It is meaningless to talk of a "fake opinion" because opinions, by their very nature, are tentative hypotheses about cause and effect, or forecasts about complex, nested possibilities. Similarly, if news is merely "the practices of those having the power to determine the experience of others" (in the words of Molotch and Lester), then what is fake news?

In summary, shorn of its connection to journalistic truth, the concept of fake news dissolves into incomprehensibility. For The Dominant Paradigm all news is essentially fake, nothing is any more or less true or fake than anything else. A major criticism of The Dominant Paradigm is therefore that it lacks any means of distinguishing between fact and fiction. Because of this I will argue that The Dominant Paradigm restricts scholars of journalism to the periphery of contemporary public discourse. At a time when increasingly heated public debate

is clamouring for intellectual leadership and guidance about how to tell truth from untruth, academic journalism, through its adherence to The Dominant Paradigm, risks unintentionally condemning itself to mute irrelevance.

## **Part Two. Paradigm Crisis at the Academy.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What is meant by the assertion that Journalism Studies has many theories, but no theory?
- What is the evidence to suggest paradigm crisis in Journalism Studies?

## 02.00.00 Journalism Studies; Many Theories, but no Theory.

*"O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?"*

Yeats.

Journalism Studies is a discipline with many theories, but no theory. I suggest that the proper study of journalism should be an attempt to answer the following ten interconnected questions.

- What is news?
- How does it work?
- Why do humans need it; Why is it important to us?
- How does news affect us? How does it influence our decisions and opinions?
- What is the relation between news, reality and truth?
- What is truth in the journalistic sense? i.e. what is journalistic truth?
- How can we know if the news is true or not? How can we distinguish between fake news and news, and between good journalism and bad journalism?
- Why should we trust journalism? How can we judge if journalism is trustworthy or not?
- Why do some people only trust some news and distrust others?
- What is the social value of journalism? Should journalists be permitted to report controversial views? What is the relationship between journalism, free speech and democracy?

My requirement for a theory of Journalism is therefore is that it must answer, or establish a framework to help us understand, these questions. What is noteworthy is that these questions are predominantly epistemological. That is they address issues relating to how audiences and journalists can have knowledge of events in the real world. Before attempting to answer these questions, it will be fruitful to first ask a preliminary question; "Why does Journalism Studies traditionally an answer entirely different set of questions"?



### **02.01.00 A Kaleidoscope of Perspectives.**

Instead of drawing on a scholarly tradition of its own, one which has risen organically from journalistic praxis, Journalism Studies has borrowed freely from diverse disciplines including; Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Communication Studies, Politics, Sociology, Linguistics, Literary Theory, Peace Studies, Gender Studies and Postcolonial Studies. It is common to speak of these theoretical perspectives as 'lenses' through which scholars may view their subject matter. But a 'lens' or a 'perspective' is not the same thing as a theory.

Many of these perspectives are linked. They can be further combined to create new perspectives with different emphases. Innumerable new perspectives may thus be engineered. Because of this creative process we might consider that, instead of the analogy of a 'lens'; it might be more accurate to refer to a 'kaleidoscope'; a rotating combination of lenses, mirrors and prisms. This kaleidoscopic process is capable of creating fascinating and intriguing patterns and reflections. The process can make the familiar seem strange and distorted; in turn delightful or grotesque.

For example, journalism is frequently examined by scholars from the perspective of sociology. Sociology, with its own rich and diverse theoretical traditions, is itself a ready made kaleidoscope and a complex one at that. The sociological kaleidoscope can create a variety of patterns which, as the British media and cultural academic Paul Hodkinson explains (2017, p 3), are capable of revealing,

“The detail of everyday interactions and the operation of broader social groupings and categories of social differentiation, such as those based on class, ethnicity and gender. Patterns of wealth, power and inequality are a further core element of societies, as are social institutions, including the apparatus of government and law, education systems, religious organisations, commercial corporations and smaller-scale organisational units such as the family”.

A more recent entrant into the field is anthropology which offers a kaleidoscope of its own through which students are invited to view journalism. The American anthropologist Brian Larkin and his colleagues adopt an apologetic tone explaining that anthropology has arrived late at the party because, “for many years mass

media were seen as almost a taboo topic for anthropology". However, now anthropology has arrived (Larkin, Abu-Lughod and Ginsburg 2002, p6) it is able to offer a kaleidoscope with optics which will reflect,

"Media production, circulation and reception in broad and intersecting social and cultural fields: local, regional, national and transnational... Through grounded analyses of the practices, cultural worlds, and even fantasies of social actors as they interact with media in a variety of social spaces, we have begun to unbundle assumptions regarding political economy and social relations".

One scholar picking up the anthropological kaleidoscope and rotating it so as to bring into play additional prisms of hegemony theory and sociology, is the British media academic Nick Couldry. Drawing partly on the work of the influential American theorist Gaye Tuchman, Couldry (2003, p 144) views journalism as a pattern of ritual. Looking at things through this kaleidoscope Couldry argues allows us to "cut beneath the apparently chaotic surface of everyday media practice" and see journalism as a strange, ritualistic process,

"In analysing current media rituals, we have been dealing with the mystified outcome of that politics of absence... In making contemporary media's ritualised categories and boundaries seem strange, we are paving the way, I hope for other, less unequal, spaces of media representation to become familiar".

### **02.01.01 Putting Perspectives into Perspective.**

Let us imagine a particle physicist who sets out to answer the question, 'Why does a radioactive element transmute into another element'? He might hypothesise that certain unstable, radioactive elements randomly eject helium nuclei which causes the element to decay. Other physicists might accept this explanation, or suggest alternative explanations that better answer the research question.

In addition to attempts to answer the research question, some people might wish to offer a point of view, opinion, or perspective. For example a religious perspective might argue that research into particle physics is wrong because human beings should not break the natural laws set by God. Or an environmental perspective

might argue that disposing of nuclear waste is the biggest threat to the environment posed by nuclear power, and thus nuclear plants should be closed in favour of renewable sources of power such as wind and solar. Or a gendered perspective might observe that women are more likely than men to oppose the building of new nuclear power plants. Such a perspective might then examine gender stereotypes and how gender encodes inequality. Or a postcolonial perspective might note that an unequal global order forces vulnerable nations to pursue nuclear power due to oppressive power relationships.

All of these perspectives will offer valuable insights. However none of them address the research question under consideration. None of them explain why one radioactive element decays into another. They are therefore irrelevant. We might say therefore that the difference between a theory and a perspective is that the former offers an explanation of some observable phenomena in the natural world, whereas the latter does not. Journalism Studies boasts an impressive range of kaleidoscopes, but it is theoretically a pauper. As the American academic, and former journalist, Barbie Zelizer has pertinently observed (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2009, p 30),

“Over the years academics have invoked a variety of prisms through which to consider journalism—among them its craft, its effect, its performance and its technology—they have not yet produced a scholarly picture of journalism that combines all of these prisms into a coherent reflection of all that journalism is and could be. Instead, the study of journalism remains incomplete, partial and divided, leaving its practitioners uncertain about what it means to think about journalism, writ broadly.”

What Zelizer is describing is a family of theoretical approaches all of which are peripheral to the main business of journalism. These approaches are peripheral because they exclude epistemic considerations. None of them address the sort of questions I have outlined in my desiderata. In other words, few of the questions which concern audiences or working journalists can be seen by gazing into the scholarly kaleidoscopes. For many academics this is simply not a problem. The rejection of epistemology is considered perfectly right and proper, and wholly unremarkable. For example Hanitzsch (2018 b) argues that discussions about the

role of journalism should not involve any discussion about journalistic truth.

"It's just that I don't think that "reporting the truth" is a journalistic role. In my view, the extent to which journalists should, can, and do report the truth is an epistemological matter, which I believe is conceptually distinct from the notion of "journalistic role."

The unfortunate consequence of this profound difference in approaches is a discipline "at war with itself" as noted by the Norwegian scholar Steen Steensen and the Finnish academic Laura Ahva (Steensen and Ahva 2015, p 2-3),

"Journalism studies is not marked by a specific and shared academic culture... Inquiries into journalism have drawn from a wide range of disciplines, predominantly political science, sociology, history, language and cultural studies. The result, according to Zelizer (2009, 34), "Has been a terrain of journalism study at war with itself, with... a slew of independent academic efforts taking place in a variety of disciplines without the shared knowledge crucial to academic inquiry".

The eminent British scholar of journalism John Hartley (Hartley 1996, p 39) made a similar observation twenty years earlier bemoaning Journalism Studies' lack of organic theory and accusing opportunistic academics of colonising it,

"It is not commonly studied as a textual system in its own right, rather it is colonized and plundered by other disciplines like politics, government, history, etc... [it is] deemed by anyone who wanders by to be an uninhabited territory of knowledge, fit to be colonized by anyone who's interested".

It may be argued therefore that there is something undesirably chaotic about the theoretical landscape in which Journalism Studies sits. It is a kaleidoscope containing colourful theoretical fragments, but one from which the most relevant and important epistemic prisms are entirely absent. It is however possible to understand this fragmented state as a necessary evolutionary stage.

## **02.02.00 Journalism Studies; A Discipline in Search of a Paradigm.**

In his influential 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the American philosopher of Science Thomas Kuhn introduced the term 'paradigm' to refer to the body of accepted theory and ideas which informs the research tradition of any given discipline. Kuhn described a “disciplinary matrix” in which every belief or idea is supported by other underlying assumptions. Analysing each set of assumptions reveals whole clusters of ideas resting upon more fundamental ones. An academic paradigm is thus the entire constellation of beliefs and assumptions shared by the research community. Kuhn’s paradigm is therefore, metaphorically, a tree of knowledge.

Kuhn observed that new disciplines lack such a paradigm and instead produce a “morass” of “intertwined theoretical and methodological belief” supported with current theories borrowed, or “externally supplied”, from other disciplines. Kuhn noted (1970, p 15) that in immature disciplines, researchers often focus on different phenomena and “describe and interpret them in different ways”,

“In the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for a paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. As a result, early fact-gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequently scientific development makes familiar”.

The canon of Journalism Studies, I argue, lacks a theory largely because it lacks agreement about what its core research questions are. This vacuum makes journalism studies an attractive for paradigm for intellectual squatters and colonisers. Kuhn argued that the lack of agreed research questions is a classic symptom of a discipline in search of a paradigm. Kuhn (p 106) noted that disagreement about what constitute legitimate problems and legitimate solutions creates confusion because different paradigms answer different questions,

“Changes in the standards governing permissible problems, concepts, and explanations can transform a science”.

Thus in the Kuhnian sense, journalism studies is a chaotic discipline because it has not yet properly identified its problems.

### **02.02.01 Paradigm Theory.**

Kuhn observes (p 136) that one can determine if a paradigm is dominant by examining current pedagogy. Textbooks he says are the obvious pedagogic vehicles for the perpetuation of the paradigm,

“They address themselves to an already articulated body of problems, data, and theory, most often to the particular set of paradigms to which the scientific community is committed at the time they are written. Textbooks themselves aim to communicate the vocabulary and syntax of a contemporary scientific language”.

Kuhn also notes, tellingly, that once a paradigm becomes dominant its truths are seldom if ever examined. These underlying ideas assume an almost religious quality as articles of faith on which further conclusions may be built. The matrix is rarely, if ever, questioned by the community. Thus subsequent researchers (p 137),

“Need not provide authentic information about the way in which those bases were first recognised and then embraced by the profession. In the case of textbooks, at least, there are even good reasons why, in these matters, they should be systematically misleading”.

So, even though a dominant paradigm may be false and its text books misleading, pedagogy always ignores this and proceeds by instructing students and awarding qualifications based on how well the students have learned their lessons. The job of pedagogy is to teach, not to question what is taught. As Kuhn (p 80) explains,

“Students accept theories on the authority of the teacher and text, not because of evidence. What alternatives have they, or what competence? The applications given in texts are not there as evidence but because learning them is part of learning the paradigm”.

Kuhn suggests that the underlying psychological process comes to resemble a

religious, or theological, system of belief. Thus the intellectual ideas and the theorists responsible for them, are added to a canon, or list, of recognised authorities whom the faithful are encouraged to revere and cite in their own work. Social, or professional, penalties may be imposed for heresy. The Danish media theorist Henrik Bødker agrees, observing (2016, p 409) that the dominant paradigm of Journalism Studies has its own canon of venerated texts and authors among whom he identifies the influential British academic Stuart Hall,

"Behrenshausen (2015) recently wrote that, "[for] decades, critical media studies' dominant theoretical approach to understanding the ways signs and things connect to form meanings has been some version of Stuart Hall's Marxist-inspired 'encoding/decoding' model, now atop the syllabi of communication studies everywhere" (p. 319). Gurevitch and Scannell (2003) argued ten years before that the "canonization" of this text meant that it often is "ritually invoked" rather than "something to be thought with or about, engaged with and argued over, contended and challenged" (p. 232)".

Kuhn argues that although the dominant paradigm may remain secure within the academic community, this is generally only because the community exists in seclusion from the wider world. According to Kuhn it is seclusion which protects the matrix from scrutiny. However when the paradigm is exposed to the wider world outside, its privileged, protected status vanishes and it may be held in disrepute. The emperor will only be exposed as being naked if he reveals himself to strangers. When this problem becomes acute, a crisis state occurs and it becomes increasingly difficult for the community to ignore it. Kuhn quotes Copernicus who described the 16<sup>th</sup> century astronomical paradigm as so muddled and unable to explain real world phenomena, that it was "rather monster than man" patched together from fragments "like someone taking from various places hands, feet, a head, and other pieces". Let us consider what happens when TDP is removed from its protective environment and exposed to the world outside.

### **02.03.00 Truthophobia vs Naive Realism; A Discourse of Derision**

As we have observed TDP is fundamentally incompatible with the Folk Theory of journalism. In other words a paradigm gap exists between working journalists and

their academic cousins. Many academics are wont to criticise the “naive realism” of practitioners and audiences; while working journalists tend to regard theoreticians as being guilty of a bewildering “truthphobia”. As a recent reviewer put it (European Journal of Communications, 2014), there is “mutual incomprehension” between what journalists and academics think about concepts such as journalistic truth, reality, accuracy and impartiality,

“There is somewhat of a divide between scholars and practitioners when it comes to impartiality. The social constructionist, and ultimately relativist, approach that emphasises the impossibility of impartiality contrasts with the dominant self-perception of professional journalists who base their sense of self on being impartial and tend to be dismissive of academic approaches to the study of journalism”.

This gap, the rejection of TDP by practitioners and audiences, is, it may be argued, evidence of Kuhn's crisis state; i.e. evidence that TDP can only exist within the academic community. This paradigm gap has led, not merely to “mutual incomprehension”, but, on occasion, to hostility. Those who adhere to the Folk Theory either ignore TDP, or, when forced to confront it, view it as a collection of absurd and baffling beliefs – as a discourse of derision. For example, in 2017 the British journalism academics Lucy Bennett and Jenny Kidd (Bennett and Kidd 2017, p 168) analysed popular media coverage of 'media studies' and concluded that,

“The frame that permeated and dominated most coverage was a negative perspective towards Media Studies, with it being positioned as a ‘soft’ or ‘Mickey Mouse’ subject devoid of worth and value”.

Bennett and Kidd (p 174) concluded that outside of the academic community, TDP is an object of ridicule,

“We began this article by asking if the representation of Media Studies within the British Press was as bleak as depicted by the scholars we spoke to in the HEA study... it is bleak indeed. This is amply captured by Ed Cumming who wrote in The Daily Telegraph (2011): ‘the only glittering is the sun bouncing off the tear-stained cheeks of people who thought Media Studies was a good choice of course’. This



discipline, and those who speak out on its behalf, has a mountain to climb in order to reconfigure the debate within which Media Studies continues to be framed.”

The British media theorist Dan Laughey (2011, p 57) carried out research to discover how often newspapers mentioned “Media Studies” and “soft subject” in the same article. He noted the same pattern across the political spectrum and was dismayed to find,

“Media Studies, as if anyone needed proof, is the archetypal Mickey Mouse degree.”

### **02.03.01 Pedagogic Evidence for the Crisis State. Resistance in the Classroom.**

The teacher and academic David Buckingham notes that working-class students in British schools instinctively resist TDP which they perceive as psychologically implausible and absurd. Buckingham sees, in this resistance, the tough, shrewd, rebelliousness of the common people when faced with elitist, bourgeois, cultural “propaganda”. In writing which echoes Kuhn, Buckingham says (1992, p 9-10) students who are taught radical media theory at school, either pretend to understand it to get good marks (or out of fear of disciplinary sanctions), or they find ways to resist,

“For the majority or working-class students, it [radical media theory] represents simply another attempt by middle-class teachers to impose their attitudes and beliefs, often backed up by the disciplinary apparatus of the school.”

Buckingham (2014, p 4) offers the prognosis that teaching students something that is absurd will inevitably lead the discipline of media and journalism studies into disrepute, and academic irrelevance,

“It is unlikely that media education will become the basic core curriculum entitlement that some of us imagined it would and should become. On the contrary, it may well remain a low-status, marginal specialism on the fringes of the education system”.

Evidence of Kuhnian crisis within higher education is supplied by the British scholar of journalism and former journalist, Kate Wright. Wright has witnessed how university students react with frustration to the incoherence between real-life journalistic praxis, and the truthophobic theory of TDP. In a memorable passage, Wright (2011 p 156) explains how this “schizophrenia” between the Folk Theory and TDP gives rise among undergraduates to,

“Feelings of de-motivation, anger and disillusionment. As one wrote: 'I was told I was naïve for talking about reality without using scare quotes in my essay but I got given marks [sic] ... for checking what really happened in my [practical assignment]. It's as if I'm studying two totally different subjects ... I mean, what do you guys want from us????!!!!'”

The Australian journalist and academic Keith Windschuttle (1998, p 6) has argued perceptively that TDP is fundamentally incompatible with journalism studies because it is truthophobic and rejects epistemic considerations,

“Journalism has an empirical methodology and has a realist view of the world, whereas cultural studies is a form of linguistic idealism whose principal methodology is textual analysis”.

Windschuttle (op cit, p 28) concludes that a change of academic paradigm is overdue and essential,

“One thing that all reasonable people should agree on is that, if you are engaging in professional and vocational education, you should not have a body of theory commenting on that profession that contradicts it in both content and in method”.

### **02.03.02 Evidence of Crisis State. Conflict in an Age of Social and Media Polarization**

In response to these assaults, a number of academics have defended TDP and attacked the Folk Theory which they label naïve and unsophisticated. It is a battle in which theorist is pitted against practitioner, and when the intellectual shooting

starts, the sense of tribalism and hostility is palpable. For example the media academic Martin Barker writes enthusiastically (Barker and Petley 2001, p 204) of the intellectual missiles he is preparing to fire at the enemy,

"My tactic is to turn on our attackers those exact tools which they have frequently derided: by conducting a textual analysis of their attacks I will attempt to uncover the motivating ideological position(s) that lurk, largely undeclared, behind their innocent-seeming masks".

Barker appears genuinely puzzled why people outside the academy should find TDP absurd, asking uncomprehendingly (op cit, p 202),

"What is it with this hostility to our tradition? I ask this question in all seriousness. If we cannot answer the question, how will we know how to defend our subject area and its achievements effectively?"

The crisis is a crisis of intellectual faith. Hence for Barker (ibid), those who reject TDP are heretics whose principal fault is ignorance, and whose principal need is re-education.

### **02.03.03 Social Polarization as the Catalyst of Paradigm Crisis. Tambini's Turn.**

This intellectual cold war has smouldered for the last sixty years in stalemate. However it may be argued that recent socio-economic, demographic and political change is forcing the crisis to a head. As society becomes more fractured into self-interest groups, and as the potential for conflict grows, so too does the need to distinguish between what is true and what is untrue. Thus, in times of social fragmentation, being able to distinguish between claim and counterclaim, truth and lies becomes increasingly important and a premium is placed on journalism's truth-telling role. In terms of the present project, this means that social polarization can be seen as the catalyst which triggers the crisis state within academic journalism. In Kuhnian terms (Kuhn op cit, p 68) this is the moment of extreme crisis, the,

“Failure of existing rules is the prelude to a search for new ones”.

There is evidence to suggest that a search for “new rules” within journalism is already underway. The authors of a 2017 Reuters Institute report (Newman et al. 2017, p 26-27) put it this way,

"Journalism is being hit by forces that have been building for some time but the past year has seen this story break out from its media bubble to attract the attention of policy makers, politicians, and even the wider public... The crisis over fake news could be the best thing that has happened to journalism – or the worst".

Using similar logic it may be argued that the crisis over fake news may also be the best thing that has happened to *academic* journalism. There is growing evidence to suggest that a retreat from TDP has already begun. For example a 2017 paper about fake news, written by the British media scholar Damian Tambini, pays only brief lip-service to TDP. Tambini (2017, p 6) refers to it as a theoretical “approach” some variants of which he says,

"Particularly in continental philosophy, have stressed the political nature of the process of agreeing truth, stressing the role of power in establishing “regimes of truth”.

Tambini (ibid) then takes an abrupt turn towards the Folk Theory saying unequivocally that,

“Part of ‘news’ consists in factual claims that are capable of empirical verification”.

The significance of this simple, common sense remark, which signals a rejection of sixty years of theoretical orthodoxy, cannot be overstated. If we consider Tambini as a representative spokesman for the academy, Tambini's turn might be considered one small step for a theorist, one giant leap for theory.

#### **02.04.00 Anxiety in the Academy #1 – Paradigm Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

Let us consider further evidence of retreat from TDP and paradigm crisis within Journalism Studies. For example, Brian McNair, in his 2017 book *Fake News*, suggests something has gone badly wrong with TDP. McNair, whose academic career stretches back to the 1970s, confesses, with a palpable sense of horror, that the intellectual party of the 1960s and 1970s, has reaped a bitter harvest. "I'll begin", writes McNair uneasily (2017, p 43),

"By acknowledging a degree of irony in the fact that, as a media scholar who has spent much of his professional life critiquing and deconstructing the notion of truth in journalism, I and others like me are now concerned to restore its meaning and influence in the face of a global assault on liberal news media."

McNair continues (p 43-44), in confessional tones, that,

"The Glasgow University Media Group, with whom I worked as a PhD student in the 1980s, pioneered that critique with their *Bad News* books, as did Stuart Hall and the Birmingham group, John Hartley and John Fiske and many others from the 1970s onward. These scholars demystified and deconstructed hallowed notions of objectivity, impartiality and journalistic detachment of the type fetishised by the BBC and other public service broadcasters, replacing them with concepts of journalistic discourse as value-laden texts, ideologically loaded constructs built around what Roland Barthes called *Mythologies* (1973)."

McNair (*ibid*) recalls how members of the academy were strongly motivated by a desire to prove their credentials as class warriors, and demonstrate how journalism served as propaganda for reactionary bourgeois forces seeking "class domination". However, what began as a cheeky, iconoclastic tilt at academic orthodoxy, hardened into an iron orthodoxy of its own. McNair ends (p 97) with the sober realisation that the theoretical paradigm which he and his colleagues created, has poisoned public trust in journalism and helped produce the current epidemic of fake, partisan news. McNair closes with an agonised plea to restore "argument and reason". The stakes, he argues, are immense,

"It is no exaggeration to say that this is a contest not just for the freedom and independence of news media... but for the survival of liberal democracy itself."

Michael Schudson is another eminent scholar who has recanted, and in whose mature writing the dogmas of TDP are today largely disavowed. "In the past", Schudson confesses (Curran and Gurevitch 2005, p 173),

"I joined nearly all other social scientists who study the news in speaking of how journalists 'construct the news', 'make news', or 'socially construct reality'.

However this approach, Schudson now concedes (ibid), was overly simplistic and inadequate. It is, he writes,

"An assumption I now reject. It is simply not true that social, cultural, political and economic factors separately or together can explain why news is the way it is... they do not produce news out of nothing. They act on 'something' in the world. The 'something' they work on are events, happenings, occurrences in the world that impress journalists and their audiences with their importance."

Schudson's insight that theorists have taken a wrong turn, leads him inevitably (ibid) to the conclusion that TDP must be reconsidered.

It is the social and political turbulence of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century which is driving the need for paradigm change in the academy, and which demands the reinstatement of epistemic considerations. In an age of fake news and deepening social polarization how do scholars of journalism explain to audiences the burning issues which confront them? The old approach of TDP, to seek refuge in unreality, illusion and fantasy, has lost whatever power it once commanded. For example, whereas in 1989 John Hartley (1989, p 227) could confidently write,

"It follows that audiences are not just constructs; they are invisible fictions that are produced institutionally in order for various institutions to take charge of their own survival... In no case is the audience 'real' or external to its discursive construction."

By 2019 this sort of writing sounds at best like an unsatisfactorily evasive non-answer, and at worst like sophistry and nonsense. Contemporary audiences who wants to know what is true and what is a lie, are no longer content to be told they do not exist; that they are “invisible fictions” created by their own “discursive construction”. Hartley’s writing has not aged well. The party is over.

Many academics are increasingly aware of the paradigm crisis that confronts Journalism Studies, but seem unable to offer any solution. For example, the Argentinian-American journalism academic Silvio Waisbord, writing in 2018, accepts that TDP is creaking and collapsing around him, but he cannot see any way to leave the sinking intellectual ship on which he is trapped. Waisbord (2018) recognises the “collapse of the old news order” and acknowledges the inadequacy of the more extreme, postmodern variants of TDP,

"It is foolish to suggest that “post-truth” is also the defining condition of public communication. The notion we live in a world of absolute relativism is a postmodern folly."

However Waisbord's instinct is to attempt to rescue TDP rather than abandon ship altogether. He therefore insists that, despite the paradigm crisis which he is witnessing, that,

"One should take issue with the way journalism remains anchored in simplistic, realist notions of truth-telling."

But why does Waisbord say this? Why should we "take issue" with "realist notions of truth-telling"? Waisbord is silent and offers no evidence to support his assertion. Abandoning ship is simply too intellectually traumatic. Too much has been invested in TDP for too many years. For Waisbord then, and doubtless for many journalism academics, the post-truth, fake news era presents itself as an inexplicable, nightmarish landscape. Indeed Waisbord (ibid) describes contemporary journalistic theory and praxis with a horrified desperation,

"Counter-epistemic communities are everywhere. Multiple, contesting forms of knowledge vie for public attention, legitimacy, and power. Knowledge boundaries

are fluid. Scattered communities of belief anchored by common allegiance to politics, ideology, and religion."

It is a bleak, apocalyptic analysis which recalls Yeats,

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity."

Finally, one may point to novel directions being taken by scholars in disciplines outside of academic journalism which denote fatigue with TDP. New Materialism for example, is a rapidly growing approach in the social sciences which rejects the irrationalism and truthphobia of TDP. Although "The Material Turn" should not be seen as a straightforward return to Enlightenment attitudes, it certainly can be seen as a reaction to TDP. The Danish academic Susan Sencindiver (2017) explains that New Materialism has emerged partly out of dissatisfaction with what is felt to be a stale, intellectually exhausted, research tradition,

"The revival of materialist ontologies has been animated by a productive friction with the linguistic turn and social constructionist frameworks in the critical interrogation of their limitations engendered by the prominence given to language, culture, and representation, which has come at the expense of exploring material and somatic realities."

Another contemporary approach with a growing following, is the turn inwards towards feeling and emotion. This is sometimes referred to as the dawning of a new "Age of Empathy", or as an "Affective Turn", or as the study of feeling as "Felt Truth". The Affective Turn is a broad approach which privileges the role of human emotions – especially empathy and compassion. It is, in its focus on subjective feeling, arguably the polar opposite of New Materialism. The Australian social psychologist Margaret Wetherell (2012, p 3) observes that affective approaches represent a "decisive shift", and have emerged partly from the feeling that TDP has run its course,



"The turn to affect becomes a decisive shift away from the current conventions of critical theory, away from research based on discourse and disembodied talk and texts, towards more vitalist, 'post human' and process-based perspectives."

Affective approaches are being applied to Journalism Studies. For example the British and Dutch media scholars Charlie Beckett and Mark Deuze (Beckett and Deuze 2016), explore new journalisms "beyond journalism", in which the role of feelings is given a central place. They offer this focus as an antidote to the "amorphous relativism" of TDP. Noting the emergence and popularity of these new theoretical approaches is not to argue that they should be adopted uncritically by Journalism Studies. It is merely to illustrate growing, restless and widespread discontent with TDP, and theoretical fragmentation.

#### **02.04.01 Anxiety in the Academy #2 – Paradigm Crisis in 2019.**

By 2019 it has become possible to discern, within the academy, a mood of widespread and unmistakable anxiety. Academics are anxious, not because they believe the dogma of TDP, but because they do not. This creates a sense of scholarly powerlessness and insecurity. A sense that something has gone wrong. That a dead end has been reached. But also an unpleasant sense that we no longer have any useful map to guide our journey. This is precisely the mood generated by a paradigm in crisis.

For example in January 2019 the influential journal *Journalism* published its *20th Anniversary Special Issue: The Challenges Facing Journalism Today*. In their editorial the British journalism academic Howard Tumber, and his American colleague Barbie Zelizer, (Tumber and Zelizer 2019) noted how the current socio-political landscape is acting as a catalyst driving scholars to face up to long neglected epistemic issues,

"A number of contributors deal with resonant challenges and threats that figure prominently in our current political climate, such as authoritarianism, populism and fake news, but it is worth remembering that many of these provocations draw from age-old problems now contextualized in a 2019 setting."

What is striking about the collection of essays on display is the unambiguous retreat from TDP, and a new mood among scholars dissatisfied with the existing paradigm. For example the Canadian academic Juliette De Maeyer argues that scholarly journalism is in paradigm crisis because it is unable to explain the difference between evidence based explanations, and wild conspiracy theories. De Maeyer (2019) finds the academy in "epistemological deadlock" and calls for the abandonment of truthphobia,

"If journalists want to escape that deadlock, they need to ask difficult questions: how can they truthfully account for the world? What is a journalistic fact? What is a truth claim and how can they sustain it?"

The Finnish academic Kaarle Nordenstreng, in a paper refreshingly entitled *Truth; More Valid Than Ever* (2019) points the finger of blame at TDP,

"The roots of the contemporary version go back to the 1980s and a paradigm shift, when post-modern thinking inspired the social sciences and humanities to relax their traditional grips, including the dominant quantitative and positivistic mass communication research in journalism. An influx of cultural studies diverted the attention of many from information and reality towards fiction and subjectivity."

Nordenstreng correctly notes that academic journalism "drifted away from reality" and that,

"It soon became fashionable to consider truth and objectivity to be unattainable".

Nordenstreng (ibid) issues a rallying call to the academy to abandon truthphobia,

"Now it is high time to emerge from an ontological twilight and to scrutinize the epistemological position of journalism and media studies. It is deplorable how poorly the field has cultivated the basic tenets of its scholarly mandate."

And he closes (ibid) with a rousing call for the return of philosophical criteria to the canon of journalism studies,

"Truth will be included in these framework-building modules as a key element of epistemology – not just as a catchy slogan deluding students to a post-truth world-view".

The Danish academic Steen Steensen (2019) agrees that "Journalism in many cultures is today in an epistemic crisis" and calls for "epistemic reorientation". Steenson admits that the truthphobia of TDP means the academy lacks the tools for analysing what journalism actually does in the real world. Something he argues has to change,

"The ways in which journalism produces knowledge claims need to be more adapt to a world in which knowledge and truth are increasingly understood as constructions, and in which absolute certainty has become an unreachable luxury. Yet, journalism needs to rely on some kind of relationship to truth and facts that separates it from fiction. "

Even the veteran scholar, and erstwhile champion of TDP, Michael Schudson (2019a) is present and, like a prodigal son returned to the fold of reason and reality, argues that journalism should be seen as a profession which first and foremost searches for truth,

"The continuing expectation in both long-standing and newly founded news organizations [is] that a search for truth guides what journalism should be about."

While the American academic Matt Carlson (2019), writing that "journalism fails", suggests there has also been failure within the academy. Carlson warns academics of the dangers of scholasticism – of creating a self-sustaining industry of questionable merit to justify their own existence,

"In stepping back to examine the relationship between the object of inquiry and the inquirers, scholars have to acknowledge our own precariousness as we remain dependent on what we study – and what we criticize... it also provides academic researchers with a mandate that justifies our work and our position in the academy."

What is perhaps most fascinating about this collection of papers is that, although

they claim to be discussing the "crisis in journalism", what they are, largely unconsciously, discussing is the crisis in the *academic study* of journalism. What they are describing is paradigm crisis. The special 20th anniversary issue is a portrait of what psychologists refer to as transference, or projection. It might have been more aptly entitled 'The challenges facing *scholars* of journalism today'. For example, in Juliette De Maeyer's article, it is not "journalists" who need to ask "difficult questions" such as "What is a journalistic fact? What is a truth claim and how can they sustain it?" - it is *academics* who need to ask this.

The tribal polarization of society is real, the challenges facing journalism are real, but so too is the truthphobia of TDP, and the crisis state within the academic paradigm. For example, working journalists, when they walk into their newsrooms, do not agonise, on a daily basis, about "what is a journalistic fact", they just get on with the job of reporting facts as they always have. As we have previously noted, journalists, audiences and all human infants by the age of four, have a sophisticated understanding of the concepts of reality, truth, error and deception. It is the academy which has, because of the mischief caused by sixty years of TDP, lost the conceptual tools to understand the difference between objective truth, subjective belief, intersubjective belief and, crucially, journalistic truth. As Schudson notes, in an angsty paper, aptly entitled, "Where we are and whither we are tending" (2019b),

"It is a terribly difficult time for journalism to assess itself".

Surely he means, "It is a terribly difficult time for *Journalism Studies* to assess itself". The similarity between Schudson's anxiety and Kuhn's description (op cit, p 67) of paradigm crisis is striking,

"Because it demands large scale paradigm destruction and major shifts in the problems and techniques of normal science, the emergence of new theories is generally preceded by a period of pronounced professional insecurity... Failure of existing rules is the prelude to a search for new ones."

Intellectual historians of the future may perhaps see, in this special edition of *Journalism*, evidence of an academic discipline in the process of gestating a new,

mature paradigm. TDP is increasingly regarded as discredited, anachronistic and exhausted, but, as yet, no replacement has been born. We are witnessing paradigm shift and can expect, in Kuhn's words, that the transition to a new "universe of discourse" will be both "inscrutable" and "extraordinarily arduous". But there can be no turning back to the truthphobia, irrationalism and irrealism of TDP. The question is rather, which new paradigm will replace the old?

Kuhn observed that the *timing* of paradigm change depends on factors external to the technical details of the theories themselves. In other words one theoretical framework may replace another at a certain period of history, not simply because it is "better", but because of socio-economic or political pressure. Kuhn wrote that these factors are "immensely important" in determining the timing of paradigm change (p 69). In the case of journalistic theory these external factors are of greater importance than in the case of scientific theory. This is because journalism exists to report the events and human behaviours that drive these very socio-economic and political factors. Journalism is part of the landscape in which it exists. It both shapes and is shaped by it.

Because it is argued here that contemporary events are a catalyst for paradigm change, it will be useful next to briefly sketch the journalistic landscape in order to locate the present project within it. While doing so it should be borne in mind how ill-equipped the truthphobia of TDP is to explain contemporary events. A major, and fatal, consequence of this is that academics wedded to TDP must remain silent with regard to the burning issues of the age. Academic discourse retains the power to speak, but only to itself.

### **Part Three. The Rise of Tribalism and Fake News.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What are the most relevant and urgent issues for scholars of journalism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- What is fake news?
- What is hate speech?
- Should fake news and hate speech be censored? If so, why? If not, why not?

*“Free speech is a dangerous western ideology invented by fascists to spread hate”.*

Seen on Twitter, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2018.

*“Never in the history of our Country has the “press” been more dishonest than it is today.”*

President Trump, Twitter 15<sup>th</sup> December 2018.

*“Your silence creates a vacuum for others to fill”.*

Ronald Heifetz

### **03.00.00 The Journalistic Landscape 2016-2019; Tribalism and the Post Truth Age.**

The contemporary journalistic landscape has been labelled “Post Truth”. It is a world in which people increasingly believe only accounts which support their existing world view, and reject their opponent's “facts” as propaganda. It is an age of increased social polarization and tribalism. Barkho (2013, p 189) has observed,

“Our world today is turning into 'galaxies' of binary and opposing certainties and absolutes based mainly on our own religious, moral, political, ideological and cultural convictions and justifications”.

The American economist Matthew Gentzkow (2016, p 20) observes a similar trend and notes the role of the media in fanning the flames,

“Polarization is a real, and serious phenomenon... We don't just disagree politely... We believe that those on the other side are trying to destroy America, and that we

should spare nothing in trying to stop them. The media almost certainly play an important role in this, with the growth of partisan cable news standing out as likely to have been especially important".

A survey of more than 5,000 US voters by Pew Research in 2017 (Pew 2017) found unmistakable and growing signs of tribal polarization. The report noted that,

"The divisions between Republicans and Democrats on fundamental political values – on government, race, immigration, national security, environmental protection and other areas – reached record levels during Barack Obama's presidency. In Donald Trump's first year as president, these gaps have grown even larger. "

The deepening social divisions have prompted anguished analysis from pundits and commentators. Most believe we are living through turbulent times of historical change. For example in November 2018 a series of bitter anti-government demonstrations began in Paris and rapidly spread across France. Protestors known as the *gilets jaunes*, for their yellow, hi-visibility vests, were drawn from across the political spectrum. Initially triggered by rising fuel prices, the movement expressed general discontent with what it perceived as an out of touch metropolitan political class, presiding over a corrupt, self-serving *ancien régime*. Ross Douthat (2018) in the New York Times, writing about the protests of the *gilets jaunes* describes,

"A governing class that has vaulting self-confidence and dwindling credibility, locked in stalemate with populist movements that are easily gifted upon and offer more grievances than plans."

Andrew Rawnsley (2018), in the *Guardian*, agrees that the establishment is increasingly viewed as self-serving, and indifferent to the voice of the public. Rawnsley predicts serious consequences for democracy,

"Failed by both its major parties, the biggest loser of all is Brexit-broken Britain. Our country is careening towards disaster. All of its political institutions know this. None of them seems capable of arresting it. They continue to play their games of charades as we lurch towards the abyss."



While in the Spectator, Brendan O'Neill (2018), senses in the protests of the *gilets jaunes* obvious echoes of the French Revolution,

"It is a perfect snapshot of the most important divide in 21st-century Europe: that between a blinkered elite and ordinary people who've had as much bossing about, tax rises, paternalism and disdain as they can take... It's little wonder that the graffiti left behind following the latest uprising in Paris at the weekend compared Macron to Louis XVI and demanded that he resign."

More broadly, the American legal scholar Amy Chua (2018) sees the rise of tribalism as the inevitable consequence of the rise of identity politics, observing that, "If you want identity politics, identity politics is what you will get." For Chua (2018) this means a world of competing tribes which reject the universalist, humanist approach based on cooperation within the fold of 'universal humankind'. While the American legal academic and writer Cass Sunstein (2009, p 2) warns that social polarization begets intolerance and fanaticism. Sunstein argues that tribes, sealed in self-reinforcing bubbles of online opinion, digest their own propaganda and become ever more extreme and dogmatic,

"When people find themselves in groups of like-minded types, they are especially likely to move to extremes. And when such groups include authorities who tell group members what to do, or who put them into certain social roles, very bad things can happen."

### **03.01.00 Fake News.**

The polarization of the Post-Truth age has witnessed an explosion of partisan news and a corresponding anxiety about what is true and what is false. Thus public discourse has become fascinated by issues of journalistic epistemology under the soubriquet "Fake News". According to the Daily Telegraph (Carson 2018),

"'Fake news' was not a term many people used 18 months ago, but it is now seen as one of the greatest threats to democracy, free debate and the Western order... it has been named the word of the year, raised tensions between nations, and may

lead to regulation of social media. And yet, nobody can agree on what it is, how much of a problem it is, and what to do about it”.

The phrase 'fake news' is not new. Google Ngram viewer suggests it came into use in America during the First World War when propaganda from Europe was being used to inflame public opinion. The newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer (1915) defined 'fake news' as news purporting to be true, but which was produced by news organisations who “tamper” with it and “publish what they know to be false”. He proudly contrasted European fake news, with American news,

“I will say that line for line the American newspapers actually attain a higher standard of news accuracy than the European newspapers; and I will go further... there are no newspapers in America which are so habitually, so criminally stuffed with fake news as the worst of the European papers”.

Consistent with the adage, 'when war is declared, truth is the first casualty', Ngram (Google) shows use increased during the Second World War and then fell. Since 2000 it has soared. Ngram does not show data since 2008, which is likely to be far higher. Opponents of President Trump blame fake news for his election in 2016. For example under the headline;

“Click and elect: how fake news helped Donald Trump win a real election”.

Hannah Jane Parkinson's op ed in the *Guardian* (Parkinson 2016) argued that,

"The 'alt-right' (aka the far right) ensnared the electorate using false stories on social media".

The outgoing Democrat President Barack Obama agreed that fake news helped Donald Trump. According to the political website *The Hill*, (Fabian 2016) Obama identified the problem as the inability of voters to distinguish fake news from real news. He lamented,

“An age where there is so much active misinformation, and it’s packaged very well, and it looks the same when you see it on a Facebook page or turn on your

television.”

In the UK, opponents of Brexit made similar claims. For example an op ed in the *Independent* headlined, "Fake news handed Brexiteers the referendum" (Grice 2017) argued that appeals to elector's feelings had replaced rational political debate based on factual evidence and informed opinion,

"The parallels between Trump's sensational victory and the vote for Brexit have been well-documented... What the two earthquakes did have in common was the way they were secured in what has been dubbed the era of "post-truth politics" based on appeals to emotion rather than policies and facts".

Some commentators even claim that fake news is destroying democracy itself. For example, under the headline, "The pedlars of fake news are corroding democracy", the *Guardian's* Andrew Smith (Smith 2016) viewed the issue in apocalyptic terms. Smith held fake news responsible for the election of President Trump, but also wondered whether 2016 would be remembered as the year that public trust in the mainstream news media finally collapsed. Would 2016 he wondered,

"Go down as the year democracy revealed itself unworkable in the age of the internet – in which reality, already engaged in a life-or-death struggle with inverted commas, finally gave way to "alt-reality"... If democracy is predicated on reliable information, it's in serious trouble right now".

However accusations of fakery flow in both directions. President Trump frequently accuses the mainstream media of waging a propaganda war against him intended to tarnish his reputation, poison public opinion, and alienate voters. Trump's view is that the election was won in spite of, not because of fake news. For example on 27th November 2017 he tweeted (@realDonaldTrump. 2017a),

"We should have a contest as to which of the Networks, plus CNN and not including Fox, is the most dishonest, corrupt and/or distorted in its political coverage of your favorite President (me). They are all bad. Winner to receive the FAKE NEWS TROPHY!"

Or, after CNN was forced to apologise for running an incorrect and critical story about him (@realDonaldTrump. 2017b),

“Fake News CNN made a vicious and purposeful mistake yesterday. They were caught red handed, just like lonely Brian Ross at ABC News (who should be immediately fired for his “mistake”). Watch to see if @CNN fires those responsible, or was it just gross incompetence?”

Or the following day (@realDonaldTrump. 2017c),

“Very little discussion of all the purposely false and defamatory stories put out this week by the Fake News Media. They are out of control - correct reporting means nothing to them. Major lies written, then forced to be withdrawn after they are exposed... a stain on America!”

What is noteworthy is that, for both President Trump and his opponents, the concept of fake news is not merely incorrect or mistaken information; it is “vicious and purposeful” i.e. it is a wilful attempt to cause damage. It is politically motivated, malicious falsehood. Fake news is thus propaganda; disinformation spread by the political enemy to undermine morale and justify themselves. Disseminating fake news is consequently something which only the other tribe does. There is therefore a childish, playground aspect to fake news in so far as it reduces to rival gangs angrily shouting at each other, “you’re lying”. To which the other retorts, “no I’m not, you are”! Real news becomes news that supports our tribe, fake news is news that supports yours. Journalism which is useful propaganda is rigorous, trustworthy and its authors honourable. Journalism which benefits the other side is worthless trash, and its authors immoral hirelings.

### **03.01.01 Fake News as Partisan News. Farewell to Trust.**

The media landscape in 2019, it may be argued, is one of rapid retreat from traditional journalistic norms of objectivity and impartiality, towards partisan and politicised news. For example, on 16th August 2018, 300 American newspapers simultaneously published anti-Trump editorials in a coordinated campaign organised by the *Boston Globe*. The *Globe* (Boston 2018) bitterly accused Trump of

being a liar and a charlatan,

"Today in the United States we have a president who has created a mantra that members of the media who do not blatantly support the policies of the current US administration are the "enemy of the people." This is one of the many lies that have been thrown out by this president, much like an old-time charlatan threw out "magic" dust or water on a hopeful crowd".

Conspicuously absent from the *Globe's* analysis was any suggestion that the crisis in audience confidence might be linked to the increasingly partisan stance taken by the media themselves. Is the problem that the media is partisan? Or that President Trump encourages the belief that the media is partisan? As one commentator (@WiredSources. 2018) dryly observed,

"More than 300 news publications will publish anti-Trump editorials on Thursday in coordinated effort to slam President Trump's criticism of the media, essentially proving his criticism right".

President Trump Tweeted his response defiantly (@realDonaldTrump. 2018),

"THE FAKE NEWS MEDIA IS THE OPPOSITION PARTY. It is very bad for our Great Country....BUT WE ARE WINNING!"

It can be argued therefore that we are witnessing a return to the overtly partisan and politicized journalism not seen in the US since the Jacksonian era of the 1830s. This was an era when, according to the media historian Gerald Baldasty (1992 p 29),

"The intent of an editor was to woo and to mobilize the voters, and neutrality or even-handedness (admitting that the opposition might be right, for instance) certainly did not constitute effective campaigning. Even-handedness or objectivity was not so much bad as inappropriate".

This was an age when it was normal for newspaper editors to have contempt for the idea of objectivity and impartiality. What counted was politically motivated journalism. If you were not part of the solution, then you were part of the problem.

Baldasty (p 25) for example quotes one New York editor who, in 1832, came across an impartial paper and scathingly referred to it as,

"Precisely what we most of all things abhor and detest, to wit, a neutral paper... We verily think, they should all, one and all, be thrown out of the pale of the press".

Little wonder then, that opinion polls suggest growing public scepticism about journalism and a withdrawal of trust. For example a recent survey by Kantar (2017) which surveyed 8,000 individuals across Brazil, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America found that,

"Only 56% trust that what they read is true and not fake "most of the time." Just 33% of those who consume news on social media agreed that it 'provides news I can trust'."

The Edelman Trust Barometer, which surveyed 33,000 people in 28 countries in 2018, reported that the US has become the most sceptical society in the world, but that globally trust in public information and journalism is low. Commenting on the survey results, Richard Edelman (2018) describes the loss of trust in public information as "the existential challenge of our times",

"We have a world without common facts and objective truth... There is a desperate search for the *terra firma* of stability and truth. The fourth wave of the trust tsunami, the rise of disinformation, is perhaps the most insidious because it undermines the very essence of rational discourse and decision making."

The BBC's Richard Gray (Gray 2017) has described fake news as one of the "grand challenges" facing the world in the 21st century. He described how a panel of experts,

"Named the breakdown of trusted sources of information as one of the most pressing problems today. In some ways, it's a challenge that trumps all others."

While journalism academics Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Lucas Grave (Nielsen and Graves 2017, p 2) also detect a growing breakdown in trust between audiences

and news media. Nielsen and Graves observe a “crisis” in which large numbers of citizens are,

“Highly sceptical of much of the information they come across in public spaces today, whether heard from politicians, published by news media, or found via social media and online search”.

Others point out that the most urgent need is for a new theoretical framework in which to anchor debate; for a map with which to navigate the rapidly changing media landscape. As the American journalism scholars Emily Bell and Taylor Owen explain (Bell et al. 2017, p 14),

“The unchecked viral spread of untrue, exaggerated, and wildly partisan pieces is forcing a long overdue debate about the rights and responsibilities of both news organizations and social media platforms”.

### **03.01.02 What Exactly is Fake News? Self-Serving Definitions.**

A striking feature of the fake news controversy is how different groups define fake news in different ways. As a recent study by Damian Tambini (2017, p 1) rightly notes,

“The term ‘fake news’ is ill-defined. Policymakers should be aware that the term has been used to serve the purposes of various political actors”.

As journalists are among the most prominent of those who use the term fake news, there is no reason to exempt them from Tambini's analysis. In other words the media are, in this context, “political actors” with potentially self-serving definitions of fake news. For example the BBC defines fake news as online rumour, gossip or hoaxes which do not originate from the BBC. It is also noteworthy that the BBC tends to see fake news as simply inaccurate facts. For example a BBC article, headlined “How fake news plagued 2017”, catalogues a number of online rumours which it claims fooled audiences during 2017 and which subsequently turned out to be untrue. The article (Rannard 2017) for example recalls how, after the London Grenfell Fire disaster,

“A video shared on Facebook by prominent social media personality Majid Freeman was seen 6.6 million times it included claims 42 bodies were found in one room of the building. The claim was never confirmed by authorities”.

The same BBC article specifically defines fake news as inaccurate information which has been fabricated for nefarious purposes, and which is then spread by “online trolls” on social media,

“What is fake news? [it is] Completely false information, photos or videos purposefully created and spread to confuse or misinform”.

Other BBC online articles (BBC Fake News) build a reassuring picture that fake news is unfounded rumour which appears outside the context of professional journalism, and especially on social media,

“Fake news means stories that you see on social media and online, that aren't true”.

The BBC (Rajan 2017) contrasts this with “real” news which it defines as what the BBC supplies. For example a link entitled, “Why you can trust BBC News” takes readers to an article which explains,

“The BBC is recognised by audiences in the UK and around the world as a provider of news that you can trust”.

But this simplistic and comforting view, that genuine news is news bearing the stamp of the BBC, obscures a more nuanced picture. For example President Trump's view is that fake news is not simply about inaccurate facts; it is also about lack of impartiality and fairness. Trump takes a strikingly different view of fake news to that taken by the BBC. For Trump (@realDonaldTrump. 2017a) the mainstream media is the problem, and social media is the solution,

“I use Social Media not because I like to, but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair “press,” now often referred to as Fake News Media. Phony and non-existent “sources” are being used more often than ever. Many stories & reports a pure fiction!”



It is thus the partisan *motive* of the mainstream media that President Trump sees as part of what makes fake news, not just factual inaccuracy. Trump often defines fake news in terms of biased intent. For example (@realDonaldTrump. 2017b) accusing the mainstream media of smearing him with politically-motivated, scurrilous innuendo,

“Despite thousands of hours wasted and many millions of dollars spent, the Democrats have been unable to show any collusion with Russia - so now they are moving on to the false accusations and fabricated stories of women who I don’t know and/or have never met. FAKE NEWS!”

And he has hit out at the lack of impartiality he perceives to be endemic within journalism. For example he offered advice to the new owner of the *New York Times*, A.G. Sulzberger (@realDonaldTrump. 2018), to hire,

"Impartial journalists of a much higher standard, lose all of your phony and non-existent “sources,” and treat the President of the United States FAIRLY, so that the next time I (and the people) win, you won’t have to write an apology to your readers for a job poorly done!”

Fake news then, does not simply refer to inaccurate facts. As the media commentator, and former BBC producer Robin Aitken (2018), correctly points out, accurate facts can be assembled so as to create a false, misleading picture,

“Trump wasn’t saying that the press and the TV networks were getting the facts wrong, rather, they were telling the wrong stories. And Trump had a good point: it’s a question of fairness, not facts. A report can be accurate and yet deeply unfair whether by selection or omission. ‘Fake news’ is not so much about factual inaccuracy as about ideological bias.”

This viewpoint, that the established media is tribal and partisan and promotes a narrow “politically correct”, narrative is not confined to the US. The UK the Labour MP Kate Hoey (Hoey 2018) laments what she perceives as the dominance of a cartel of establishment media voices,

"It is easy to be downhearted amid the Westminster-establishment bubble, steeped as it is in metropolitan liberal journalism. Most of my Labour colleagues seem to take their opinions only from The Guardian, the Today programme and Newsnight... However in the wider UK it is very different".

The *Biased BBC* website (Biased BBC 2018) regularly accuses the BBC of this species of fake news. This online community takes it for granted that the mainstream media is partisan and untrustworthy. It gives examples of what it considers to be both factual inaccuracies and lack of impartiality, and encourages contributors to add their own,

"I'm sure you can spot plenty more BBC nonsense as they revise the past in order to write the future... list it all here".

Robin Aitken (2018) similarly accuses the BBC of weaving "an elaborately constructed pretence" of neutrality, while in reality supporting a metropolitan, liberal-left, cultural and political orthodoxy,

"The BBC has wholeheartedly thrown its lot in with the liberal reformers; there has been no 'impartiality' on any of the big moral issues of the past half-century. In every instance, the socially conservative argument has been depicted as callous, reactionary and dogmatic."

Perhaps what the fake news controversy really reflects then, is a social landscape in which increasingly tribal groups view the world from increasingly tribal perspectives. As Tambini (op cit, p 5) observes,

"Any political community in any political epoch is characterised by a zeitgeist or shared orthodoxy, a set of rules or civic codes, or even 'hegemony'. Attempts to present facts and events from the perspective that is not based on the shared set of assumptions would likely be dismissed as fake".

It is therefore unsurprising that an increasingly tribal and partisan world has spawned increasingly tribal and partisan journalism. This is the world frequently referred to as "Post-Truth". Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford 2016) named "Post-Truth"

as their word of the year in 2016 and defined it as,

“Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

The Australian psychologist Stephan Lewandowsky and his colleagues (Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook 2017, p 354) describe Post-Truth as a chaotic "dystopian future" in which entire communities defy conventional standards of reason and evidence and where, in the midst of this epistemic anarchy, the loudest voices are those which prevail,

"In this world, power lies with those most vocal and influential on social media: from celebrities and big corporations to botnet puppeteers who can mobilize millions of tweetbots or sock puppets — that is, fake online personas through which a small group of operatives can create an illusion of a widespread opinion".

The contemporary landscape is therefore one which recalls that of ages past. The journalism scholar Martin Conboy (2004, p 33) has written of a time when news was always assumed to be a “partisan idiom” by which,

“Readers were exposed to attempts at opinion formation through satire, scurrilous innuendo about public figures and overt political propaganda”.

While Ian Atherton (2008, p 48) has similarly written about an era when news assumed to be “a problematic form of knowledge” and of the difficult relationship,

“Between fact and fiction... the breaking down of the epistemological barrier between knowledge and opinion”.

Both authors were writing about journalism during the sectarian turmoil and fanaticism of the English Civil War. However their words, alarmingly, snugly fit the contemporary media landscape equally well.

### 03.01.03 Is Fake News, Fake News?

Although fake news is blamed for many evils, there is, ironically, evidence to suggest that much of the hysteria surrounding fake news may itself be fake news. For example a recent study by American economists Matthew Gentzkow and Hunt Allcott (Hunt and Matthew 2017) suggests that fake news had an insignificant impact on the election of President Trump and that factually incorrect stories,

"Would have changed vote shares by an amount on the order of hundredths of a percentage point. This is much smaller than Trump's margin of victory in the pivotal states on which the outcome depended".

One implication of the research being the suggestion that it is a convenient myth for opponents of President Trump to attribute his success to fake news, rather than to the more uncomfortable possibility that informed voters judged his policies to be more attractive than those of his Democrat opponent.

A global survey of more than 70,000 people for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism also indicates a more nuanced picture and suggests that fake news may be a convenient scapegoat; the symptom not the disease. The Reuters' researchers note that in a world where factional interests are rapidly diverging; one should not be surprised to observe a simultaneous divergence in group narratives. In other words the Reuters' study asks, does fake news cause social fragmentation and conflict; or does social fragmentation and conflict cause fake news? The research (Newman et al. 2017, p 15) suggests that for mutually antagonistic groups with irreconcilable viewpoints, the mainstream media may come to be seen as supporting the status quo; propagandists for the *ancien regime* and hence untrustworthy. As one respondent put it,

"There are different viewpoints and some things that the main media suppress in terms of political correctness."

The report suggests (ibid) that some audiences distrust the established media and search online for information which they feel it suppresses. For these audiences this taboo information is the "real news" which they regard as falsely labelled "fake

news” by those who fear its propagation, and who desire its elimination from public debate,

“The internet and social media may have exacerbated low trust and ‘fake news’, but we find that in many countries the underlying drivers of mistrust are as much to do with deep-rooted political polarisation and perceived mainstream media bias”.

The report suggests that an increasingly tribal society favours increasingly tribal versions of news. In other words it is not that “fake news” creates tribalism, but rather than tribalism creates fake news. Thus, in the United States, researchers found (op cit, p 20),

“A deeply polarised media landscape, which reflects an equally polarised society”.

And a similar picture in the UK.

“The polarising Brexit debate has increased distrust in the mainstream media generally from those on both ends of the debate, with the BBC particularly under fire”.

While in Germany,

“During the immigration crisis of 2015 and 2016, right-wing groups revived a phrase from the Nazi era, Lügenpresse (lying press), to complain about suppression of debate and perceived left-wing bias”.

It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that the term fake news is, to some extent, a self-serving phrase used by people to refer to news that doesn't fit their political world view. It follows that concern over the impact of fake news may often be a thinly disguised intolerance of alternative opinion. As the American academic Paul Resnick (who researches the news algorithms used by online media) observes pungently (Gray 2017),

“When people say they are worried about people being misled, what they are really worried about is other people being misled,” says Resnick. “Very rarely do they

worry that fundamental things they believe themselves may be wrong.”

In terms of the present project, it should be noted that TDP is unable to offer any helpful insight into the fake news debate from an epistemological point of view. According to TDP, all news is equally fake and equally true. As we have noted, this inability to distinguish between truth and falsity, is one of TDP's major defects.

### **03.02.00 Hate Speech and “Unwanted Content”.**

Another feature of the contemporary journalistic landscape is the widespread use of the phrase “hate speech”. Hate speech is perhaps an even more ambiguous phrase than fake news. Google *Ngram* suggests 'hate speech' is a modern neologism. It probably first appeared in a 1989 paper written by the American academic and activist Mari Matsuda, *Public Response to Racist Speech*. The word 'hate' appears 200 times in her paper which argued for restrictions to freedom of speech and for increased legal penalties for racist hate speech. Matsuda (1989 p 2333) sees hate speech as crude, abusive taunting and incitement to violence or even incitement to murder,

“The hate speech flaring up in our midst includes insulting nouns for racial groups, degrading caricatures, threats of violence, and literature portraying Jews and people of color as animal-like and requiring extermination”.

A noteworthy feature of hate speech is the recent conflation and elision of racist hate speech with *religious* hate speech (blasphemy) and moves to restrict criticism of religious ideology because it is racist.<sup>4</sup> Another noteworthy trend is for references to “hate speech” and “fake news” to increasingly appear in the same sentence; suggesting that what is regarded as hateful is frequently also held to be untrue. Indeed the phrases are sometimes used interchangeably suggesting another move towards conflation. For example the Reuters report (op cit, p 55) notes,

“Austrian legislators have accused Facebook of not doing enough to prevent false profiles, fake news, and the spread of hate speech”.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of religious hate speech, see (Levy 1995) and (Winston 2012).

And (p 70),

“The role of social media in promoting hate speech and so-called ‘fake news’ has become a key issue ahead of federal elections”.

One perceptive and ingenious journalist recently grouped together fake news, hate speech and illegality under the general category of “unwanted content”. Under the headline, “Facebook Targets Fake News, Hate Speech With New Set Of Guidelines”. The writer (Deagon 2017) explains that Facebook's new guidelines are intended to,

“Combat a wide range of unwanted content on its social network, including fake news and sensational clickbait, as well as targeting those engaged in fraud, theft and hate speech”.

The use of the euphemistic phrase “unwanted content” is revealing and begs the question, “unwanted by whom”? It reflects the sense that hate speech (as with fake news) refers to information which is politically or morally undesirable; something which should therefore be suppressed and censored. In similar vein Susan Wojcicki, CEO of YouTube has referred to “problematic content”, “policy violating content”, “flagged content” and “inappropriate content”. These ambiguous categories, she warns (Wojcicki 2017), will not be tolerated,

“We are applying the lessons we’ve learned from our work fighting violent extremism content over the last year in order to tackle other problematic content. Our goal is to stay one step ahead of bad actors, making it harder for policy-violating content to surface or remain on YouTube”.

The vagueness of meaning and plasticity of “unwanted” or “problematic” content, and “fake news” and “hate speech”, hints uncomfortably towards Orwell's concept of “thoughtcrime”, a word he invented to refer to opinions that are ideologically wrong. The vagueness similarly evokes 17<sup>th</sup> century ideas of blasphemy or heresy; an ill-defined “belching out of execrable words” - opinions objectionable to those in religious authority. As with fake news, it may be observed that TDP is unable to offer any epistemic means of distinguishing between hate speech and legitimate

speech. However other actors, theoretically unencumbered, find themselves free to do so.

### **03.03.00 The Voice of the Politician; the Rise of Censorship.**

In September 2015 the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, urged Facebook to do more to silence hate speech. Reuters (Reuters 2015) reported,

“Germany is expecting a record-breaking influx of refugees this year. Politicians and celebrities have voiced concern about a rise of xenophobic comments in German on Facebook and other social media platforms because of the refugee crisis”.

Merkel's motives appeared to be ambiguous. While she presented her argument as a moral crusade against hate, she was also arguing for the suppression of opinion which criticised her government. Three weeks later Merkel spoke to Facebook's Chairman Mark Zuckerberg in New York in an exchange which she was unaware was being recorded. The conversation appeared to show Merkel encouraging Facebook to manipulate public opinion. As the Washington Post (Chasmar 2015) reported,

“After Ms. Merkel asked Mr. Zuckerberg about offensive posts on the refugee crisis, the Facebook CEO said “we need to do some work” on the issue.

“Are you working on this?” Ms. Merkel asked in English, Bloomberg reported.

“Yeah,” Mr. Zuckerberg reportedly responded, before the transmission was disrupted”.

Shortly afterwards, in February 2016, Zuckerberg admitted that his conversations with Merkel had influenced him significantly and persuaded him to put the power of Facebook behind the policies of the Merkel government. As the *Guardian* (Guardian 2016) reported,

“Speaking in Berlin, Facebook boss calls Germany's handling of European refugee crisis ‘inspiring’ and says site must do more to tackle anti-migrant hate speech... The Merkel meeting “really highlighted how much more we needed to do in this country,” he said”.



The successful intervention by the leader of a government to change the sort of information that users of Facebook were permitted to see, did not go unnoticed by commentators such as the American academic Kalev Leetaru. In an article for *Forbes* entitled *When Facebook Censors Journalists* (Leetaru 2017) Leetaru said he detected incipient political censorship, observing that Facebook was a near-monopoly,

“Governments have long placed pressure on news outlets to suppress or water down stories that paint them in an unfavourable light... When there is only one platform and one set of editors that determine the stories that the entire planet is allowed to see, that is a troubling situation”.

The determination of the German government to aggressively suppress hate speech and fake news was also evidenced by the introduction, in October 2017, of a new law (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, or NetzDG for short) which imposes fines of up to fifty million Euros on social network sites if they fail to remove illegal content within twenty four hours. Under the headline “Will Germany's new law kill free speech online?” the BBC (Evans 2017) reported that the new law has, “touched off a huge debate over freedom of expression” and quoted David Kaye, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, as gloomily predicting,

“I think the result is likely to be greater censorship.”

The German law was quickly copied by Russia which proposed a similar piece of legislation, a move viewed with dismay by Reporters Without Borders, a group which campaigns for media freedom (Reporters 2017),

“Our worst fears have been realized,” said Christian Mihr, RSF Germany’s executive director. “The German law on online hate speech is now serving as a model for non-democratic states to limit Internet debate.”

The following year saw further evidence of online censorship. For example on 6th August 2018 Apple de-listed podcast links relating to *Infowars*, the eccentric, right of centre online channel operated by the American Alex Jones. Spotify quickly

followed Apple's lead. Facebook and YouTube also terminated the group's channels, despite the 2.5 million subscribers drawn to *Infowars* blend of conspiracy theories and anti-left views. The *Guardian* (Wong and Solon 2018) was quick to applaud the silencing of Jones, writing on 10th August that he had forfeited his right to free speech because he his views were hateful,

"Jones' toxic brew of lies, hate and product placement" mean that, "These rules don't apply to Jones, whose playbook is to foster distrust and confusion, shout people down and make meaningful public discourse impossible".

However other voices were more cautious. The veteran linguist and activist Noam Chomsky wrote that, although he had little time for the views of *Infowars*, he found the coordinated censorship chilling (Watson 2019),

"I don't think that the right way to deal with "hate speech" and crazed fabrications is to ban them; rather, to confront them, and to seek and confront the reasons why anyone pays a moment's attention to them."

In another, perhaps more considered, *Guardian* piece, Silkie Carlo, the director of the civil liberties organisation Big Brother Watch, described the suppression of *Infowars* as a "watershed moment in the information age" and the beginning of a new age of the censorship of public information. Carlo (Carlo 2018) cautioned those celebrating the suppression of *Infowars* that they were rashly celebrating the release of a genie from its bottle,

"It is easy for people to accept or even congratulate the no-platforming of *Infowars* – but this watershed moment in the information age means it will not be the last group to be summarily unpublished, terminated and effectively thrown down the electronic memory hole without a specified explanation. And next time, people may not be so comfortable with the target".

The end of the year saw the UN approve financial subsidies for journalism, but only for journalism which promoted certain of its own political policies. The move was announced in December when 164 nations signed the UN's *Global Compact For Safe, Orderly And Regular Migration* in a ceremony in Marrakesh. The compact

(United 2018) promised "full respect for the freedom of the media", but it also set out plans to subsidise media outlets which reported sympathetically on migration-related issues, and to withhold funding from those who did not. Objective 17 (section C) stressed the need for,

"Sensitizing and educating media professionals on migration-related issues and terminology, investing in ethical reporting standards and advertising, and stopping allocation of public funding or material support to media outlets that systematically promote intolerance, xenophobia, racism and other forms of discrimination towards migrants."

Jacob Mchangama, the Danish social commentator and human rights campaigner, argues that moves of this sort presage a new era in which the voice of the state will increasingly determine what information is held to be true or false, hateful or benign, banned or permitted. However he notes that "history warns us of the dangers of putting governments and institutions in charge of defining truth and error". The future he predicts (Mchangama 2017) will be a single, homogeneous, official account of truth,

"Kings, emperors, and popes were sincere in their belief that their version of orthodoxy was the truth and that deviations therefrom necessitated suppression of dissent, heresy, and apostasy."

In the interests of brevity a more detailed description of the contemporary media landscape is not possible here. What are necessarily omitted are questions concerning the dominance of powerful social media corporations such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and YouTube, and how these organisations select, algorithmically, what audiences see and do not see. The ambiguous relationship these corporations have with politicians and national governments, inevitably raises questions of censorship and free-speech. Under the headline, "Welcome to new era of global digital censorship" (Scott 2018), the journalist Mark Scott predicts a future in which government censorship will be out-sourced to global social media corporations. Scott argues that this process will be far more insidious and subtle than any form of censorship yet seen,

“These developments offer a glimpse at the future of the internet: one in which more online messages, videos and posts will be deleted because of legislative decrees or, more likely, pre-emptive censorship by tech companies that fear regulatory reprisal”.

Thus does the discussion about social media and search algorithms, lead inevitably to a discussion about freedom of speech.

### **03.04.00 Freedom of Speech.**

According to the United Nations, the right to freedom of speech is one of the most precious of human rights. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United) states prominently,

"The advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people".

There is, among the Western democracies, a long, cherished and hard-fought tradition of tolerance for free speech. This tradition is summarised in the much quoted dictum of the French philosopher Voltaire who said,

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it".<sup>5</sup>

As the British academic, and former Director of the Glasgow Media Group, Brian Winston explains (Winston 2012, p xiii), liberty of expression was the crowning achievement of the Enlightenment,

“Of all the legacies of the eighteenth century European Enlightenment, the concept of a right of free expression is here taken to be central and paramount. Reason is fed by information, freely communicated. To abridge that freedom is to strike at reason”.

In this view, even well intentioned censorship of hate speech and unwanted content is to stumble blindly towards the edge of a cliff. History warns us that the

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<sup>5</sup> The quote was apparently coined by Voltaire's English biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall who paraphrased his point of view in her 1906 book “The Friends of Voltaire”.

most ruthless tyrannies impose their will slyly in the name of social cohesion and the public good. For example the Nazi Editorial Law of October 1933, which established state control of the press in Germany, claimed it did so to shield German society from fake news. The law, signed by Hitler and the Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, (Hitler and Goebbels 1946, section 14) also claimed it was protecting citizens from offensive hate speech,

“Editors are especially bound to keep out of the newspapers anything which:

1. In any manner is misleading to the public, mixes selfish aims with community aims.
2. Tends to weaken the strength of the German Reich, outwardly or inwardly, the common will of the German people, the German defence ability, culture or economy, or offends the religious sentiments of others”.

Thus Nazi control of the press was introduced under the pretexts of fighting fake news and religious hate speech. Censorship may thus be regarded as a sinister dance which takes place in the twilight zone between what society judges to be legitimate, and excessive, freedoms.

### **03.04.01 The Limits of Freedom of Speech.**

In all civilised societies there are limits imposed upon free speech. For the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (Mill 1940, p 75) the limits were reached when one person's freedom encroached upon another's,

"The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it"

The same sentiment, which is often referred to as the 'harm principle', was expressed by the English journalists John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon (Gordon 1721) writing under the *nom de plume* Cato.

"Freedom of speech... is the right of every man, as far as by it he does not hurt and control the right of another; and this is the only check which it ought to suffer, the

only bounds which it ought to know"

Brian Winston explains (op cit, p xiii) that liberty is therefore a potent brew; one not to be taken to excess,

"This does not mean that free expression is to be an unfettered right. It must be constrained. Unfettered, it can be destructive, damaging to privacy, reputation or even the safety of individuals... Unfettered free expression has therefore never been a civilized option".

Thus societies have laws such as those which deter libel and incitement to violence. However it must remain a matter for each age and each society to decide precisely where the line should be drawn, and where the boundary lies between the rights of citizens to enquiry freely, and the need, in the words of Lord Scarman, to "safeguard the internal tranquillity of the kingdom".<sup>6</sup>

### **03.05.00 The Pursuit of Truth vs the Pursuit of the Good; *Aletheia* and *Arete*.**

Let us introduce at this stage, a fundamental distinction about the goals of human thought and behaviour. This distinction is between,

- 1) The goal of wanting to discover and tell the truth, and
- 2) The goal of wanting to do what is morally good or politically expedient (virtue).

This distinction is of profound importance to understanding the role of journalism in society. I will refer to these concepts using the old Greek words *aletheia* and *arete* such that, *aletheia* means "having the goal of seeking and telling the truth", while *arete* means "having the goal of doing what is morally, or politically, good or virtuous".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> He was speaking in 1977 when the House of Lords considered Britain's last successful prosecution for blasphemy, the Gay News case. Britain's blasphemy laws, against which Mill argued in his essay, remained in force until 2008. For an account of the Gay News trial, see; (Levy 1995)

<sup>7</sup> These concepts were discussed by Plato in *Protagoras* and *Meno*. The Scottish scholar W.K.C. Guthrie translated *arête* (ἀρετή) as 'virtue' and noted the word often implied 'what is expedient'. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger revived the word *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I am using the words here only in the way I have outlined. *aletheia* is pronounced al-ee-thia.

It is important to note that any enquiry aimed at discovering what is true (*aletheia*) will require as few restrictions as possible to be imposed upon it (for example a scientific, legal, or journalistic enquiry). Even uncomfortable, unfamiliar and challenging matters must be available for scrutiny and consideration. There is therefore a strong connection between *aletheia* and freedom of thought and expression. However the relationship between *arete* and free speech is more problematic. Those whose goal is moral virtue or political expediency can be expected to demand freedom to express their own views (which they consider good), but they will often seek to deny the same rights to their opponents (whose views they consider bad or dangerous). As we will see in due course, the relationship between *aletheia* and *arete* is complex. However the model described here predicts that intolerance of dissenting views, and criticism of freedom of speech, is an indicator that the subject's goal is *arete*, not *aletheia*.

### **03.05.01 *Aletheia, Arete: Freedom of Speech or Censorship?***

Any debate about freedom of speech, fake news and hate speech can be seen in the light of the distinction between the conflicting goals of wanting to tell the truth (*aletheia*) and wanting to do what is morally or politically virtuous (*arete*). For example in November 2017, the BBC Radio 4 Today Programme broadcast an interview with the American conservative commentator Anne Coulter. Coulter told listeners that the values of Islam were not compatible with traditional, Western, liberal values. Coulter argued (BBC Today programme 2017) that recent mass immigration of Muslims into Western countries was causing mounting tension and anger,

"The issue is all of these middle easterners and Muslims being brought in... This is what it's all about. This is what Brexit was about, this is what Donald Trump is about [interruption from presenter; What? the Muslim threat?] the native countries are blowing off at the just constant importation of people who do not share our western values. That's the point at issue".

The broadcast provoked immediate criticism of Radio 4 for giving Coulter a platform from which to express her opinions. As the Radio Times reported (Allen 2017),

“Many listeners then took to Twitter to lambast the Radio 4 programme for giving Coulter a platform from which to air her views, including Scottish National Party MP Joanna Cherry and author/broadcaster Stephanie Merrit:

“Please @BBCr4today is it really necessary to have an extended interview in your top slot with such a hate filled bigoted ignoramus as @AnnCoulter? It's too much.”

“Dear @BBCr4today - what are you thinking, giving Ann Coulter such an extended platform to spout her misinformed racist hate speech? Is this supposed to be edgy? 'Balanced'? Seriously - please justify this decision.”

What is noteworthy here is not that people were disagreeing with Ann Coulter's views, but rather they felt Coulter should not have been permitted to express them. Coulter's critics were not seeking to win the debate, they were seeking to stop it. This clash of between *aletheia* and *arete* was made explicit immediately after the Coulter interview (BBC Today programme 2017) when presenter Nick Robinson asked the shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornbury,

"What is your view? Do we have to discuss these things? Is it right to do so? Or do you wish people would keep quiet about it?"

The MP gave a politician's answer saying that,

"Remember, before Jo Cox, one of my colleagues was murdered, her murderer shouted 'Britain First'. That is where we are".

While avoiding a direct answer, Emily Thornbury linked the discussion of “these things” to political assassination. The implication being that full and frank discussion of “these things” is dangerous and incompatible with the goal of social tranquillity.

In any discussion about whether *aletheia* or *arete* should prevail (i.e. whether certain subjects should be suppressed in the interest of doing what is morally or politically right); the pivotal question must be “how can anyone know?”, or “who



gets to decide what is politically right?" These are vexed questions which Radio 4's Nick Robinson is well placed to consider, not least because he has written about how the BBC once suppressed views it considered dangerous and contrary to the public good. During the 1930's Winston Churchill was critical of the British government's policy of appeasing Hitler. However Churchill's views were unpopular with many who recalled the horrors of the First World War and who wished to avoid a second. As one historian explains (Frankel 1996, p 334) there was widespread sympathy for Chamberlain's policy of giving Hitler what he wanted because it seemed the easiest way of avoiding conflict,

"Most Western leaders and their electorates shared the outlook of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Like many contemporary liberals, Chamberlain believed that war was fundamentally irrational, that Hitler's grievances were finite and limited, that a policy of concessions could satisfy those demands".

But Churchill's view was that appeasement was a short-sighted policy which would only postpone conflict, and make it more grievous when it finally came. He sought publicity for his views, but was not permitted to broadcast them on the BBC. Although he made broadcasts on American radio, his warnings about Nazi aggression were not heard in Britain. The Chairman of the Governors of the BBC, R.C. Norman, disapproved of the ban arguing that it was wrong for audiences to be deprived of hearing an alternative point of view on such "vital controversial questions." Norman (Robinson 2013, p 115), felt the BBC was not entitled to suppress points of view it felt were ethically, or politically, unfashionable,

"It cannot be right that their fellow countrymen should have no opportunity at such a time of hearing statesmen of the standing and quality of Mr Lloyd George, Mr Churchill and Mr Eden - to name only a few".

But the BBC continued to suppress Churchill's views because, as a civil servant's note explained (ibid), if appeasement of Nazi Germany is widely held to be the public good; then opposition to it should not be heard,

""The question boils down to the fairly simple one of whether or not it is desirable for speeches to be made on Foreign Policy in opposition to the government which

would... "be irresponsible and mischievous".

History proved Churchill right. His warnings were uncomfortable and divisive, but prescient. His later verdict (Robinson op cit, p 146) on the BBC's censorship was damning,

"For 11 years, they kept me off the air. They prevented me from expressing views that proved to be right. Their behaviour has been tyrannical."<sup>8</sup>

Hence those who argue that *aletheia* trumps arete need to be able to explain how they know what the public good actually is? How did the BBC know that it was morally and politically good to suppress criticism of Hitler? To use contemporary vocabulary, if one claims to be supporting the cause of the oppressed, on what evidence does one judge who exactly is the oppressor and who is oppressed? When fighting for social justice, how can one know what is just and what is unjust? How, in short, does one avoid a miscarriage of social justice? The only way is by having a full and frank discussion and by examination of all the evidence. Thus the goal of *doing* what is right is parasitic on *knowing* what is right. And knowing what is right, depends on knowing what is true. Thus does *arete* depend upon *aletheia*.

This crucial point was understood and discussed in Periclean Athens. In Plato's *Meno* Socrates points out that the desire to do good (*arete*) is potentially dangerous unless it is subject to thoughtful and detailed enquiry (*aletheia*). For Plato (Plato, 1956, p 124 and 142), the streets of hell were paved with good intentions,

"Isn't it clear then that this class [of people], who don't recognise evils for what they are, don't desire evil, but what they think is good, though in fact it is evil; those who through ignorance mistake bad things for good obviously desire the good... In short, everything that the human spirit undertakes or suffers will lead to happiness when it is guided by wisdom, but to the opposite when guided by folly".

As the classicist William Guthrie explains (Guthrie,W,K,C. 1975, p 228), for Plato virtue was reducible to knowledge of what is good and what is not. A naïve desire to do good in ignorance of the truth often results in evil,

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<sup>8</sup> For an account of Fleet Street's self-censorship in support of appeasement, see; (Cockett 1989)

"Only when accompanied by knowledge is it always beneficial... it is the presence of knowledge which ensures that the so-called virtuous activity will be good and beneficial, therefore virtue is knowledge".

Therefore for Plato, it is wrong to suppress freedom of speech in the name of the public good, because what is "good" cannot be known without the freedom to discuss it.<sup>9</sup> John Stuart Mill (op cit, p 84) made the same point two and a half thousand years later,

"This mode of thinking makes the justification of restraints on discussion not a question of the truth of doctrines, but of their usefulness; and flatters itself by that means to escape the responsibility of claiming to be an infallible judge of opinions. But those who thus satisfy themselves, do not perceive that the assumption of infallibility is merely shifted from one point to another. The usefulness of an opinion is itself a matter of opinion; as disputable, as open to discussion, and requiring discussion as much as the opinion itself".

The Canadian-American psychologist Paul Bloom (2005, p 100) has made the same point; that a desire to do good without factual knowledge about what actually *is* good, will lead to evil,

"In the real world, evildoers see themselves as good people doing good things, or good people forced to do difficult things because of special circumstances, or, at worst, good people who are forced, tricked, or goaded into doing bad things, against the grain of their fine characters".

It is important to note that this framework is unavailable to TDP because TDP is hostile to the concept of truth. Thus for TDP discussion about freedom of speech can only take place within the confines of *arete* – what is socially, ethically and politically desirable. One of the advantages of rescuing the concept of truth is that the conflict between *aletheia* and *arete* provides a framework in which to analyse any number of contemporary free speech issues. For example in a speech on Boxing Day 2017 (Johnson 2017), the British government Minister for Universities Jo Johnson, launched a robust defence of free speech. He called for universities to

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<sup>9</sup> Plato, in *The Republic*, argues a different case. For a discussion of the "noble lie" See Appendix A.

become “marketplaces of ideas” which would enable “truth to emerge” through unrestricted discourse. But he warned that,

“There are countervailing forces of censorship, where groups have sought to stifle those who do not agree with them in every way under the banner of “safe spaces” or “no-platforming””.

Such censorship he said (ibid) was dangerous and he attacked those who would rather shut down debate than “confront dissenting ideas or uncomfortable arguments”. He warned bluntly that students should not be “protected” from controversy,

“Shield young people from controversial opinions, views that challenge their most profoundly held beliefs or simply make them uncomfortable, and you are on the slippery slope that ends up with a society less able to make scientific breakthroughs, to be innovative and to resist injustice”.

Jo Johnson's speech echoed an earlier article written by Sir Michael Barber the new chair of the Office for Students. In the article (Barber 2017) Barber called for the,

“Widest possible definition of freedom of speech: namely, anything within the law”.

Barber urged students to test their prejudices by exposing them to the scrutiny of inconvenient facts and uncomfortable ideas,

“To avoid discomfort is to retreat from freedom of speech: to run away from the good, the true and the beautiful. Instead, universities must help students develop the resilience and character needed to live with and benefit from being challenged”.

Barber and Johnson are arguing for freedom of speech because it is necessary in order to establish what is true. Even the most ardent political activist must base his ardour on factual evidence. It is impossible for the activist to fight the oppressor if he doesn't know who the oppressor is. Or worse, if the oppressor has disguised himself as the oppressed in order to deceive the activist into assisting him with his programme of oppression. Virtuous behaviour depends on knowing what is true

and what is a lie. The influential Brazilian activist and educational theorist Paulo Freire made a similar point, observing that those who fight for what is right must be prepared to recognise that they might be wrong about what is right. *Arete* without *aletheia* leads to people becoming trapped in, "circles of certainty from which they cannot escape, these individuals make their own truth". For Freire (Freire 1970, p 13) this is the essence of sectarianism and tribalism; it creates a world in which each person closes himself in his own "truth" and,

"Feels threatened if that truth is questioned. Thus, each considers anything that is not "his" truth a lie. As the journalist Marcio Moreira Alves once told me, "They both suffer from an absence of doubt"

Thus for Freire (p 56), *aletheia* (which he refers to as "problem-posing education") is a vital tool to resist oppression. It is revolutionary "critical reflection" which,

"Regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality".

The same point was made by Karl Marx who viewed press censorship as a form of "terrorism". In 1842 he wrote in defence of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, a newspaper which opposed Prussian absolutism, saying, "No man combats freedom; at most he combats the freedom of others". He then pointed out (Marx 1842), as had Plato before him, that those who claim to know what is politically "good" (*arete*) without debate and enquiry (*aletheia*) are putting the cart before the horse,

"The speaker's distinction between the good press and the bad press makes any further refutation superfluous, since this distinction becomes entangled in its own contradictions, nevertheless we must not lose sight of the main thing, namely, that the speaker has formulated the question quite incorrectly and has based himself on what he had to prove".

### **03.06.00 Conclusion. Journalism Studies; a Voice Stilled by Truthphobia.**

We have attempted to sketch the contemporary journalistic landscape in which this project sits. It is an era of historic socio-economic, demographic and cultural upheaval on a scale not seen for decades. Citizens find themselves confronted by a

series of complex challenges, so called "wicked problems", in response to which they require accurate, trustworthy information on which to base their opinions and decisions. However, just when the need for journalistic truth is most acute, citizens increasingly perceive themselves to be surrounded by partisan propaganda. It is a world in which it is increasingly acceptable to call for the suppression of the other tribe's propaganda on the grounds that it is fake, hateful and inflammatory. In response to the perceived political polarisation of journalism, audiences are withdrawing their trust. Why, after all, should audiences expect partisan journalists to tell the truth?

In the midst of this deepening epistemic darkness, the truthphobia of TDP does not give scholars the tools to properly understand or explain what is happening. Journalistic truth is rarely discussed by academics because TDP holds that there is nothing to discuss. In the words of the British critical theorist Catherine Belsey (Belsey 1980, p 3). Truth has been written out of academic discourse, truthphobia has vanquished truth,

"The notion of a text which tells a (or the) truth... is not only untenable but literally unthinkable, because the framework which supported it... no longer stands".

Lewandowsky believes that academic truthphobia is to blame for encouraging the "current malaise in public discourse". According to Lewandowsky (Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook 2017, p 361) the abandonment of the concept of truth is propelling society towards a "dystopian future",

"If it becomes permissible to believe whatever one wants, beliefs become harder to change because contrary evidence fails to find traction (or may ironically strengthen previously-held beliefs; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010)".

Truthphobia means that, while audiences crave journalistic truth, and politicians and media corporations algorithmically take control of it, academics risk becoming marginalised because they are often perceived as having little to say that is useful or relevant. I have argued that this situation represents a Kuhnian crisis state and a catalyst for a paradigm change within the academy. I will also argue, not merely that TDP deprives academics of a voice, but that TDP is intellectually unsound

because it rests on a series of unjustified assumptions. Let us therefore now turn our attention to a critical examination of TDP starting with an attempt to define it.

## **Part Four. The Canonical Theorists and Texts of TDP.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What is TDP? What are its characteristics?
- Who are the canonical theorists of TDP?
- How intellectually valid are their hypotheses?



*“The ghosts of Marx, Freud and Saussure haunt modern theory saying; “That is not what I meant at all””.*

Leonard Jackson.

*“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”*

J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

*“Many are spoiled by that pedantic throng, who with great pains teach youth to reason wrong.”*

Pope.

#### **04.00.00 The Theoretical Landscape. In Search of TDP.**

A number of theorists have attempted to describe, using different terminology, the common characteristics of TDP. For example the American scholar Robert C Allen (Allen 1992, p 4) uses the phrase “contemporary criticism” which he sees as arising out 1960s Structuralism and 1970s Post-Structuralism. Allen sees a “family” of approaches all inspired by the semiotic linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Thus all the theoretical approaches are connected by,

*“Insights into language and culture provided by structuralist linguistics and the ‘science of signs’ (semiotics) spawned by structuralism. Hence my use of the term *contemporary criticism* as a shorthand designation for this diverse (and frequently contentious) family of critical approaches; semiotics, narrative theory, genre theory, reader or audience oriented criticism, ideological analysis, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist criticism, and British cultural studies”.*

The influential British media scholar John Fiske (Allen 1992, p 214-215) observes that a unique branch of TDP has flourished in the UK. This British approach is heavily influenced by social constructivism and a focus on power relationships derived from the Marxist ideology of the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci. Thus TDP is a politicised research tradition which sees journalism, not as an attempt to accurately describe the world, but in terms of a “structure of domination and subordination” in which different classes vie to control the propaganda message,

“Some basic Marxist assumptions underlie all British works in cultural studies... Contestation takes the form of the struggle for meaning in which the dominant classes attempt to 'naturalize' the meanings into the 'common sense' of society as a whole, whereas subordinate classes resist this process in various ways and to varying degrees and try to make meanings that serve their own interests”.

The Dutch media academic Teun Van Dijk has traced the genealogy of British Journalism Studies and sees it as a branch which has grown out of political sociology. Van Dijk (1988, p 9) agrees with Allen that French Structuralism and Post-Structuralism are major influences, and agrees with Fiske that the underlying assumptions are Marxist. This view assumes journalism is predominantly a tool for spreading the ideology of the dominant class,

“Much of this work has a Marxist orientation and is closely related to work in France and Italy, such as the work of French structuralists like Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Pecheux or Althusser. This orientation pays more attention to the ideological analysis of the media and of news”.

The British scholar Paul Manning picks out the Jamaican-born Marxist theorist Stuart Hall as being especially influential. Hall, who was Director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University during the 1960s and 1970s, combined Gramscian hegemonic theory with the revisionist Marxism of Althusser, plus a sprinkling of Post Structuralist, Saussurean semiotics. Manning (2001, p 40-41) explains that this resulted in,

“A new interest in the news media text as a site of struggle – an arena through which the powerful sought to secure hegemony, but within which the subordinate

might also resist and where oppositional readings, or elements of critical agendas, might surface... [This] Gramscian and hegemonic approach has proved highly influential and has played a large part in the development of cultural studies as a discipline”.

The Australian scholar of intellectual history Ian Hunter sees radical media theory as part of a more general development. Hunter refers to a "moment of theory", or a "theory boom" which emerged in the 1960s, and which was marked by an intellectual attitude hostile to empirical fact. The theory boom privileged theoretical conclusions even if they contradicted observable reality. Thus, Hunter observes (2006 p 81) the theory boom was irrational and truthophobic,

"The theory boom began when a certain kind of philosophical interrogation surfaced inside a wide variety of disciplines - linguistics, literary criticism, sociology, political economy, the “psy” disciplines... This attitude is skeptical towards empirical experience”.

TDP can also be seen in the context of the so-called “cultural turn”; a paradigm change within social sciences which occurred in the 1960s and 1970s and which placed culture at the forefront of academic study. The British sociologists Sasha Roseneil and Stephen Frosh describe the “cultural turn” as a "big tent" term (Roseneil and Frosh 2012, p 3) "drawing together a wide range of both theoretical and disciplinary positions". They note that these disparate theoretical strands privilege a subjective view of the world. This inward-looking subjectivism, they observe, has led to the emergence of identity politics,

"There has been a turn towards questions of language, selfhood and representation that one might describe as a shift of focus from ‘ideology’ to ‘identity’... for example in feminist, post-colonial and queer studies."

The influential Scottish sociologist Jock Young (1998) argues that TDP should be seen as historically situated and spawned by the upheavals and rebellions of the late 1960s. According to Young it emerged when a new generation was seized by an impulse to destroy the certainties of their parent’s generation,

"The sudden outburst of intellectual output occurring in the period 1968-1975 can be seen not so much as a series of academic 'breakthroughs' occurring within the interior world of academic debate, as strident signals of the change into late modernity occurring in the world surrounding the academy. For it is at times of change that fundamental revisions of academic orthodoxy occur".

For the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, TDP is also historically contingent. Hobsbawm argues that it represents a particular world view which should be seen in the context of late 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural and civilisational crisis. Hobsbawm (1995, p 11) believes it was a crisis of the,

"Beliefs and assumptions on which modern society had been founded since the Moderns won their famous battle against the Ancients in the early Eighteenth Century – of the rationalist and humanist assumptions, shared by liberal capitalism and communism".

Hobsbawm (p 287-288) agrees with Young that TDP is essentially destructive, or even nihilistic. Its theories are the matches and fuel of the cultural bonfire on which the baby-boomer generation disposed of old, unwanted ideas. Hobsbawm notes the mood of TDP is funereal. Its keyword was the preposition "after", which commonly appeared in its Latinate form "post",

"The world, or its relevant aspects, became post-industrial, post-imperial, post-modern, post-structuralist, post-Marxist, post-Gutenberg, or whatever. Like funerals, these prefixes took official recognition of death without implying any consensus or indeed certainty about the nature of life after death".

The English scholar Leonard Jackson agrees, but is more chronologically specific. He argues that TDP burst from its chrysalis in 1967 when the rationalism of scientific Structuralism became the irrational philosophical idealism of Post-Structuralism. For Jackson TDP is a heady brew of "new thought" which, despite its "logical poverty", intoxicated the baby boomer generation and became wildly fashionable. Jackson argues that the defining characteristic of TDP is a generational antagonism which insists that reality, truth and reason are oppressive ideas that "ought to be subverted". Jackson (1991, p 113) argues that the logical paradoxes and absurdities of TDP were part of its attraction. The more fanciful and

provocative the theories, the groovier they were,

“In effect a radical change in cognitive style had occurred. Academic disciplines like logic, linguistics, anthropology, political philosophy and so forth compare with the new thought rather as a team of sober accountants compare with a drunken artist. They are not fraudulent – you can trust them with your money. But they will never be fashionable; and they certainly don't have the same careless speculative verbal creativity... Post-Structuralism – as it came to be called – was a party”.

Jackson's insight is that the cultural, sociological and linguistic turns were not merely turns *towards* something, they were also turns *away* from something. What were lost were the precious contributions of philosophy and cognitive psychology. A consequence of this has been that subsequent generations of students have been prevented from becoming acquainted with important philosophical concepts and distinctions. The legacy is epistemic confusion. Jackson (p 255) sees TDP as strongly truthophobic, it assumes there is no reality or truth other than something which is,

“Produced in relations of power, or that meaning is a product of interpretation. This can form the basis of broad philosophical attacks on the concepts of impersonal rationality, objectivity and truth”.

One explicitly truthophobic branch of TDP is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is unapologetically political. It eschews describing reality in favour of activism. For CDA the goal of discovering the truth (*aletheia*) is firmly rejected in favour of doing what is morally and politically virtuous (*arete*). In the words of the Austrian academic Stephan Titshcer (Richardson 2007 p 2), CDA demands,

“Politically involved research with an emancipatory requirement”.

Van Dijk (Wodak 2003, p 96) explains that CDA is not an approach which seeks to enquire objectively or journalistically about what is true or false. CDA rejects an evidence-based approach in favour of overt partisanship and activism,

“Unlike much other scholarship, CDA does not deny, but explicitly defines and

defends its own socio-political position. That is, CDA is biased and proud of it”

The British media academic John Richardson (2007, p 2) adopts an extreme position, and argues that branches of academic enquiry based on evidence and open-mindedness are wrong, or even dangerous. For Richardson, *aletheia* is an impediment to *arete*, and academics who are not part of the solution, are part of the problem,

“We should recognise that all scholarly discourse is produced in social interaction, is part of a social structure and hence is socio-politically situated whether we like it or not; research which takes a neutral or impartial approach to social injustice does not solve the problem, indeed it could be argued that academic neutrality contributes to the perception of such injustice”.

This unabashed fusion of activism and theory makes it difficult to determine whether CDA is a research tradition or a political movement. That of course, its adherents would argue, is precisely the point. The assumption, that intellectual enquiry should serve the interests of Marxist political activism, can be traced to the influential social ideology known as Critical Theory which we shall consider next.

#### **04.01.00 Critical Theory and The Frankfurt School.**

The influence of Critical Theory on the TDP is substantial. The assumption that academic enquiry should have a political purpose is a commonplace within the academy. As the American academic Ashley Crossman (2018) puts it,

“We can recognize critical theory today in many feminist theories and feminist approaches to conducting social science, in critical race theory, cultural theory, in gender and queer theory, and in media theory and media studies”.

Critical theory originated in the Frankfurt School, the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) at the University of Frankfurt in 1923. Its founding father was the German Marxist philosopher Max Horkheimer who, in 1937, outlined his vision (Horkheimer 1972, p 210) for an intellectual attitude which,

“Aims at such an emancipation and at an alteration of society as a whole... Critical thinking... is motivated today by the effort really to transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality”.

In addition to Horkheimer, Critical Theory's most influential thinkers include Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. As Jews and Marxists they were doubly despised by the Nazis and fled Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933<sup>10</sup>. Thus Critical Theory developed in opposition to the rise of a new dark age which, to borrow from Churchill, was made more sinister “by the lights of a perverted science”. It was this abhorrence of the perceived amorality of science and its cold, robotic rationality, devoid of moral or political compassion, which acted as a spur to the development of critical theory.<sup>11</sup>

Critical theory is not descriptive, it is normative. It does not seek to describe the world, but to change it. Critical theory is “empowering”, or “transformative” and research is judged good in proportion to how empowering or transformative it is. As we have previously noted however, the privileging of *arete* over *aletheia* creates intellectual incoherence. How is one to know who should be empowered and who disempowered if there is no search for truth? The American political philosopher James Bohman points out that research in the critical theory tradition may frequently produce results which are not true. In other words critical theorists might produce biased findings to support their preferred political position. For traditional theorists this would be a fatal and unacceptable flaw, however for critical theorists it is justified provided the motive is social justice. Bohman (2016) points out that only with this in mind does critical theory make sense because it,

“Presupposes that there is one preferred goal of social criticism, a socialist society that fulfils the norm of human emancipation. Only with such a goal in the background does the two-step process of employing historical materialism to establish an epistemically and normatively independent stance make sense”.

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<sup>10</sup> Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse were of Jewish heritage. Habermas came from a protestant family and was a child in Germany during the war. He later studied under Horkheimer and Adorno.

<sup>11</sup> Lack of space precludes a detailed analysis of the deeper origins of the philosophy of Critical Theory; for example its relation to 18th century French Rationalism, Saint-Simonianism, the progressivism of Comte and, in Prussia, Hegel's historicism.

In other words, for critical theorists the fact they are producing propaganda is a virtue, whereas for empiricists it is a vice.

#### **04.01.01 Rationalism and the Genie in the Bottle.**

It is important to note that the original theorists of the Frankfurt School were neither truthophobic, nor irrational. Their beliefs were grounded in classical Marxism. By classical Marxism I am referring to the doctrine of Karl Marx, the scientific, economist whose magnum opus, *Capital*, set out to prove his thesis logically, with the support of copious empirical evidence. The Frankfurt School opened a door through which *arete* could enter, but what they envisaged was a partnership of equals with *aletheia*; rational enquiry tempered with compassion. What they opposed was the mentality which allowed Nazi scientists to dispassionately conduct experiments on subjects in concentration camps. The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School aimed therefore for the abolition of cruelty, not the abolition of reality, reason and truth. For example, Horkheimer, writing in exile, while Nazi terrorism tightened its grip on his native Germany, proclaimed that truth was precious, but under siege (Horkheimer 1972, p 237-238),

“The permanency of truth, too, is connected with the constellations of reality. In the eighteenth century truth had on its side a bourgeoisie that was already economically developed. But under the conditions of later capitalism and the impotence of the workers before the authoritarian state's apparatus of oppression, truth has sought refuge among small groups of admirable men. But these have been decimated by terrorism and have little time for refining the theory. Charlatans profit by this situation and the general intellectual level of the great masses is rapidly declining”.

Similarly Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1996, p 109) stressed the importance of viewpoint diversity and informed debate based on reasoned argument, free speech and evidence,

“A justified truth claim should allow its proponent to defend it with reasons against the objections of possible opponents; in the end she should be able to gain the rationally motivated agreement of the interpretation community as a whole”.



Thus Habermas' critical theory is not dissimilar to the classical liberalism of Mill in recognising the need for "unconstrained argumentation". As the American political philosopher Jeffrey Flynn (2004, p 436) explains, liberty and freedom of expression are precious, foundational ideas for Habermas who saw mutual understanding as arising from informed, enlightened argument,

"Participants in discourse must presuppose that all motives other than the cooperative search for truth have been excluded (such as strategic motives or coercive forces) and the only operative force is the 'force of the better argument'".

Contemporary Critical Theory however has long-since abandoned the rationalism and respect for truth espoused by the theorists of the Frankfurt School. The genie of *arete*, once released from its bottle, was not content merely to an equal partner of *aletheia*. Modern critical theory is less tolerant of viewpoint diversity. The Hungarian philosopher of science Imre Lakatos witnessed the transformation taking place during the 1960s and 1970s among the increasingly politicised students of the baby-boomer generation. In 1978 Lakatos warned his employers at the London School of Economics of the dangers of abandoning objectivity in education for the seductive temptations of *arete*. Lakatos (1978, p 247) spoke from bitter personal experience about what happens when "doing what is politically good" becomes the goal,

"I witnessed the demands of Nazi students at my University to suppress 'Jewish-liberal-Marxist influence' expressed in the syllabuses... Later I was a graduate student at Moscow University when resolutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party determined syllabuses in genetics and sent the dissenters to death".

But Lakatos was swimming against the tide of history. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Turkish scholar Faruk Yalvaç (2015) could describe contemporary Critical Theory as a heterogeneous family of post-positivist perspectives all of which eschewed rationalism and objectivity. For Yalvaç, what unites approaches such as feminism, post-structuralism, constructivism, and postcolonialism, is their truthphobia,

“Despite the occasional, sometimes intricate, differences between them, all critical theories are united in their critique of the main research agenda and the positivist orientations [in research], above all, the idea of value-free theoretical and social inquiry”.

#### **04.01.02 Ideologically Motivated Research.**

The quarrel with ideologically motivated research, such as contemporary Critical Theory, is simply “is it valid”? Ideologically motivated research (IMR) seeks to redefine validity in circular terms. Research is valid if it is ideologically correct. In simple terms, IMR is valid if its object is social justice or socialism. IMR is thus evangelical and truthophobic; whether its assumptions, arguments or conclusions are epistemically true is irrelevant.

But truth is not so easily evaded. The British writer E. P. Thompson (who was a classical Marxist) was offended by the truthophobic, self-referential nature of critical theory, memorably referring to it as, “an immaculate conception which requires no gross empirical impregnation” (Thompson 1978, p 17),

“It scarcely seems necessary to insist that this procedure is wholly self-confirming. It moves within the circle not only of its own problematic but of its own self-perpetuating and self-elaborating procedures... It is a sealed system within which concepts endlessly circulate, recognise and interrogate each other, and the intensity of its repetitious introversial life is mistaken for a 'science.'”

In other words IMR may be sceptical of value-free, objective rationalism; but objective rationalism is just as sceptical of IMR. The answer to IMR's normative assertion that all academic research should work towards socialist, or social justice goals, is to ask why? In the absence of any evidence or rational argument, whether one accepts or rejects IMR becomes a matter of quasi-religious faith. Critical Theory's strength is Critical Theory's weakness. *Quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur*, what is asserted without evidence may be dismissed without evidence.

#### **04.01.03 Cautionary Tales; IMR and Grievance Studies.**

Because of its irrationality and truthphobia IMR is vulnerable to hoaxes. For example in 1996 the American mathematician Alan Sokal famously submitted a paper entitled 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' to the cultural studies journal *Social Text*. The paper asserted that gravity was a linguistic and social construct. It was published despite the fact it was nonsense and intentionally scientifically illiterate. The paper's uncritical acceptance confirmed Sokal's view (2008 p xi) that ideological goals had largely replaced the goal of searching for the truth in many academic disciplines. Sokal's point was that whether research was true had become irrelevant. All that mattered was that it appeared to support certain fashionable political views. Even research which was clearly ridiculous would be published provided it had value as ideological propaganda. Sokal warned that jettisoning rationality was dangerous, and that much was at stake,

"Clear thinking, combined with a respect for evidence - especially inconvenient and unwanted evidence, evidence that challenges our preconceptions - are of the utmost importance to the survival of the human race in the twenty first century."

More recently, in 2018, three American academics, James A. Lindsay, Peter Boghossian and Helen Pluckrose repeated Sokal's hoax, but on a grander scale. They submitted twenty spoof papers to academic journals. The papers were a mixture of ridiculous, comical assertions posing as academic research. They included a scholarly argument that men should penetrate themselves with dildos to reduce transphobia, and faux academic research claiming that public parks encouraged rape culture among dogs. The authors solemnly explained (Lindsay, Boghossian and Pluckrose 2018),

"That dog parks are rape-condoning spaces and a place of rampant canine rape culture and systemic oppression against "the oppressed dog!"

Seven of the papers were published, despite the fact all of them were "outlandish or intentionally broken". The researchers referred to contemporary IMR as "grievance studies", and argued that its lack of epistemological rigour, and its ideological imperative were responsible for, "profoundly corrupting scholarship in the social sciences and humanities." They concluded (ibid) that,

"Something has gone wrong in the university - especially in certain fields within the humanities. Scholarship based less upon finding truth and more upon attending to social grievances has become firmly established, if not fully dominant, within these fields, and their scholars increasingly bully students, administrators, and other departments into adhering to their worldview. This worldview is not scientific, and it is not rigorous."

In conclusion the weakness of IMR is that once epistemic considerations are abandoned in favour of ideological ones, the distinction between what is true, and what is not evaporates. When this approach is uncritically translated to journalistic theory, the result is that political propaganda, rather than telling the truth, becomes the goal of journalism. According to IMR, "news" is simply what is politically useful, while "fake news" is what is not. Therefore a news report would be considered journalistically valid even if it contained lies and falsehoods, provided its motives were ideologically pure. This truthphobia, it may be argued, makes IMR worthless as a research tool in the discipline of academic journalism.

#### **04.02.00 Gramsci. The Man Who Would Be Caesar.**

A theorist whose work has strongly influenced TDP is the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. The popular view of Gramsci is of an iconic left-wing intellectual who opposed fascism and who was imprisoned because his writings criticised the hegemonic nature of the politics of the right. For example in a 2018 article headlined, "Why Antonio Gramsci is the Marxist thinker for our times" the *New Statesman's* Political Editor George Eaton (2018) explains that Gramsci was,

"A gifted Marxist theoretician and journalist, [who] was sentenced to two decades' imprisonment by Benito Mussolini's fascist government".

Eaton (ibid) notes that Gramsci has become the foremost influence on the Euro-communists and is "now quoted routinely by commentators" before concluding that,

"In an era of social media, viral videos and mass higher education, Gramsci's

concept of hegemony feels startlingly prescient. Indeed, he ever more appears not merely a Marxist thinker for our times, but perhaps the thinker".

However the popular, romantic picture of Gramsci is incomplete and misleading. It implies that Gramsci sought to benignly critique structures of power and dominance in society in the interests of social justice and liberty for all. This is the opposite of what he wanted to do. Gramsci's project was to impose a totalitarian dictatorship on the people of Italy. He spoke approvingly of the need for a "Caesar"; a leader who is a "Great "heroic" personality". The Caesar, he said, would be good (progressive), rather than bad (regressive). His definition of these terms however was crudely self-serving and arbitrary (Gramsci 1999 (1971), p 464),

"Caesarism is progressive when its intervention helps the progressive force to triumph, albeit with its victory tempered by certain compromises and limitations. It is reactionary when its intervention helps the reactionary force to triumph".

Gramsci was a contemporary of Mussolini and both were originally members of the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano – PSI). Both showed a talent for writing and both worked on the party newspaper *Avanti!* - Mussolini was its editor, while Gramsci became co-editor of the regional Piedmont edition. Mussolini favoured a brand of revolutionary socialism which combined patriotism, and authoritarianism, and he founded the Fascist Party to implement it. As the American scholar Edward Tannenbaum (1969) explains,

"The founders of the Fascist movement in March 1919 were almost all former revolutionary socialists... they wanted to overthrow the existing establishment and replace it with a rather vague national syndicalist utopia. At first Mussolini viewed himself as a kind of Italian Lenin".

Gramsci favoured international socialism and became a founding member of the Italian Communist Party in 1921. He spent two years living in the Soviet Union and, on his return, became leader of the party in 1924, by which time Mussolini had become prime minister. Mussolini and Gramsci were thus rivals. Both ruthlessly sought political power and both sought to impose a totalitarian dictatorship on Italy. But Mussolini was more adroit and more successful, and in 1926 he had

Gramsci imprisoned. It was while in prison that Gramsci set out his political ideology in a series of “prison notebooks”. These set out what “might have been”, had he, rather than Mussolini gained the whip hand. The notebooks were published posthumously and extracts from them first translated into English in 1957 by Louis Marks. A better known translation appeared in 1971, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith.<sup>12</sup> It was the appearance of this edition which rapidly led to Gramsci being embraced by a new generation of left wing thinkers. However the process of canonisation in the 1970s and 1980s tended to selectively omit and play down Gramsci's totalitarian ambitions. Instead of being portrayed as a failed candidate for dictatorship, Gramsci emerged romanticised as an innocent victim of despotism. For political activists this transformation into a heroic figure is understandable, but students of academic journalism are entitled to adopt a more critical and less naïve stance. This is because Gramsci took a very narrow view of journalism and saw it purely in terms of political propaganda.

#### **04.02.01 Gramsci & Machiavelli. Indifference to Truth. Power & Hegemony.**

Gramsci's major influence (beside those of Lenin and Trotsky) was the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli's project was the analysis of power and political hegemony and how the former could be used to obtain the latter. Machiavelli's *magnum opus* was his 1532 treatise *The Prince* which is a manual containing a wealth of practical advice on how a prince should most effectively rule.

Machiavelli describes various means by which hegemony can be obtained. It can be obtained through ability, force of arms, and luck, as well as by “seizing power through utterly wicked means”. Machiavelli is fundamentally amoral. For Machiavelli any method of obtaining hegemony is as valid as any other. Machiavelli (1988 (1532) p 30) cites the example of Agathocles King of Syracuse who invited his political rivals to a conference and then,

“At a pre-arranged signal, his soldiers killed all the senators and the richest men of the city. After this massacre, he seized control of the city, and thereafter held it without any civil strife”.

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<sup>12</sup> The two translations differ. I will quote from the 1971 translation unless otherwise stated.

Machiavelli explains coolly that this is a legitimate way to seize power and he stresses that he is not judging, merely describing, "Without considering explicitly the merits of this way of gaining power". While remaining morally aloof, Machiavelli (op cit, p 31) does point out that different methods have different consequences. Thus the penalty for seizing power through deception and wickedness will be an inglorious reputation,

"It cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow-citizens, to betray one's friends, to be treacherous, merciless and irreligious; power may be gained by acting in such ways, but not glory.... his [Agathocles] appallingly cruel and inhumane conduct and countless wicked deeds, preclude his being numbered among the finest men".

In a famous passage (p 61) Machiavelli evokes the metaphor of the Centaur "who was half-beast and half-man" to explain that a successful ruler must use both violence and cunning. The successful prince must use "both natures" and,

"Imitate both the fox and the lion, for the lion is liable to be trapped, whereas the fox cannot ward off wolves. one needs then, to be a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten away wolves. Those who rely merely upon a lion's strength do not understand matters".

There is nothing utopian about Machiavelli's ideology and it was precisely this that Gramsci found so appealing. For Gramsci the aim of politics was simply to achieve hegemony, power and control. Gramsci produced his own treatise on political power entitled *The Modern Prince*. In it Gramsci transposed Machiavellian political theory to the world of the 1930s. Gramsci is Machiavellian therefore because he believes that life presents us with a stark practical choice; dominate or be dominated, lead or be led (Gramsci 1999 (1971) p 347),

"The fact remains that there do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led. Given this fact, it will have to be considered how one can lead most effectively... if one wishes to secure the obedience of the led or ruled".

Gramsci's debt to Machiavelli is frequently, and wilfully, overlooked by Gramscian

scholars. It is however unambiguous. Gramsci's project is the ruthless pursuit of political power. As his editors and translators Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith make clear (Gramsci op cit, p 315),

"If there is one passage which perhaps more than any other encapsulates Gramsci's conception of the revolutionary party, it is the opening sentences of the section entitled "Prediction and Perspective" in which he evokes Machiavelli's Centaur as a symbol of the "dual perspective" which must characterise the revolutionary party (and State)".

Gramsci explains (p 353) that in the modern world the role of the Prince is taken by the political party and that the rule of the party should be "totalitarian",

"It has already been said that the protagonist of the new Prince could not in the modern epoch be an individual hero, but only the political party... it should be noted that in those régimes which call themselves totalitarian, the traditional function of the institution of the Crown is in fact taken over by the particular party in question".

In a much quoted passage Gramsci distinguishes between "the concepts of war of manoeuvre and war of position in military science" and the "corresponding concepts in political science". He argues that the war of manoeuvre, or "frontal attack", is the physical, violent overthrow of the existing regime; whereas the war of position is a more subtle process of undermining the existing culture of society and replacing it a new one. Gramsci (p 490) acknowledges that the reality in the West is that the former is difficult, if not impossible, therefore he argues it is necessary to identify what cultural institutions must be infiltrated and conquered,

"It is a question of studying "in depth" which elements of civil society correspond to the defensive systems in a war of position".

Gramsci is outlining what was later described as "cultural Marxism", a concept encapsulated in the German student leader Rudi Dutschke's dictum to carry out, "The long march through the institutions".<sup>13</sup> Gramsci, following Machiavelli's

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase is often, understandably, attributed to Gramsci, but it does not appear in his writing. It was Dutschke who enjoined activists to undertake the "Marsch durch die Institutionen".



dictum that “People should either be caressed or crushed” states that it is preferable to “assimilate” citizens by winning them over, rather than by coercing them to support the party (p 384),

“Force can be employed against enemies, but not against a part of one’s own side which one wishes rapidly to assimilate, and whose “good will” and enthusiasm one needs”.

Thus political hegemony should be obtained and maintained with a measure of consent. However this consent does not derive from a democratic mandate; it can be manufactured. Hegemony is the central Gramscian concept. It is the idea that people can be brainwashed into welcoming their own domination. As the American legal scholar Douglas Litowitz (2000, p 518) puts it,

"Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to describe a condition in which the supremacy of a social group is achieved not only by physical force (which Gramsci called "domination" or "command") but also through consensual submission of the very people who were dominated (a phenomenon that Gramsci variously called "leadership," "direction," or "hegemony")".

Thus for Gramsci (op cit, p 502) the central question is how to “educate” citizens so that they are happy to consent to the hegemony, and domination, of the party,

“How will educative pressure be applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into “freedom”?”

Gramsci (p 183) argues that this “education” can be achieved through skilful propaganda, because propaganda has the power to inculcate, manipulate and persuade,

"Ideas and opinions are not "born" spontaneously in the brains of each individual; they have had a centre of formation, of radiation, of propaganda, of persuasion, a group of men or even a single individual who has elaborated and presented them in their actual political form".<sup>14</sup>

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See (Marcusse 2010 (1972)). p55.

<sup>14</sup> Marks translates “diffusione” as propaganda. Hoare prefers “dissemination”. The essential meaning is

Gramsci (1999 (1971) p 653) argues that propaganda can be used to change the “collective consciousness... of convictions and beliefs”. This world view Gramsci refers to as the “common sense” of the people. Gramsci states that it is the task of “élites of intellectuals of a new type” to shape what the masses think and ensure their “mass adhesion” to the party ideology. The delicate task for this new aristocracy of intellectuals and academics will be to ensure that public discourse is carefully confined within certain approved limits,

“It is a question, in other words, of fixing the limits of freedom of discussion and propaganda”.

And what of the role of journalism? For Gramsci (2006, p 16), it is simply to influence and persuade the masses to willingly accept the hegemony of the party. For Gramsci, journalism is indistinguishable from propaganda. Journalism is merely one part of a larger “ideological structure”,<sup>15</sup>

“The press is the most dynamic part of this ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it; libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets.”

The Turkish scholar Asli Daldal (2014, p 152) summaries,

“Gramsci is not after doing away with power relations in the political life of men. Neither does he conceive of politics as being capable of perfect equality. Some will always dominate; a binary relation of power will always persist. Gramsci borrowed from Machiavelli the idea that power relations are embedded in the relations of force”.

Gramsci's legacy (so far as it is relevant to the present project) was to make truth *irrelevant* to the main business of undermining the old social order and replacing it

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much the same; what audiences believe depends on what they are told. The original Italian is, “un centro di formazione, di irradiazione, di diffusione, di persuasione”.

<sup>15</sup> I do not discuss Noam Chomsky's 1988 propaganda model in this paper. However its debt to Gramsci is substantial. It is intrinsically political and may thus be considered to be a form of IMR and, consequently, truthophobic.

with a new one. Gramsci is therefore truthophobic in that he is indifferent to truth.

#### **04.02.02 Why Gramsci?**

One is entitled to ask why the political doctrines of Gramsci should form the basis of any academic theory of journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Gramsci was not the only 1930s activist who believed that journalism should be used as propaganda to construct a new totalitarian world outlook, or “common sense”. Nor was he the only political thinker of the era to argue that the role of propaganda was to help manufacture the consent of the people so they would more easily submit to the hegemony of the party. Let us consider the two following statements (Welch and Fox 2012, p 25 and 29),

“We cannot be satisfied with just telling the people what we want and enlightening them as to how we are doing it. We must replace this enlightenment with an active government propaganda that aims at winning people over. It is not enough to reconcile people more or less to our regime, to move them towards a position of neutrality towards us, we would rather work on people until they are addicted to us”.

And,

“It may be a good thing to possess power that rests on arms. But it is better and more gratifying to win and hold the hearts of the people”.

Both these statements might have been written by Gramsci. They express, in modern terms, Machiavelli's dicta, “Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception” and “The vulgar crowd is always fooled by appearances, and the world consists chiefly of the vulgar”. However the two passages were not written by Gramsci, they were written by Goebbels. Similarly, and uncomfortably for Gramscians, there is very little difference between Gramsci's focus on constructing a new “common sense” and the Nazi focus on constructing a new outlook on life, or *Weltanschauung*. Consider the following Gramsciesque sentences,

“A man must first acquire a fund of general ideas and fit them together so as to form an organic structure of personal thought or outlook on life - a *Weltanschauung*. Then he will have that mental equipment without which he cannot form his own judgments on particular questions of the day, and he will have acquired those qualities that are necessary for consistency and steadfastness in the formation of political opinions”.

It is not Gramsci who is describing this “organic structure of personal thought or outlook on life”, it is Adolf Hitler (Hitler 1939 (1925) p 62). It is doubtless an unpalatable fact for Gramscians, but the projects of Hitler and Gramsci, in so far as they concern the seizure and maintenance of power, are much the same. Who, for example, wrote the following piece of social Darwinism which describes the fight for survival between rival social groups ending in the “liquidation” of the weaker?

“The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership”. A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to “liquidate”, or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise “leadership” before winning governmental power”.

The author was Gramsci (Gramsci 1999 (1971) p 212), but it might have been Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, or Franco. The fact that 1930s communists and fascists shared a common view of how to best dominate and control societies should not be surprising. Stalinism and Hitlerism were two sides of the same totalitarian coin. Both were locked in vicious struggles for hegemony. Indeed both ideologies borrowed ideas from one another at various times. For example Hitler (op cit, p 145) specifically acknowledged his debt to the Austrian “Marxist-Socialist” organisations in understanding “the right use of propaganda”,

“I saw that it was an instrument, which the Marxist Socialists knew how to handle in a masterly way and how to put it to practical uses”.

The British writer George Orwell was a famous truthophile who objected to the concept that journalistic truth was simply a tool for manipulation. In his dystopian novel *1984* he attacks Gramscian/Machiavellian indifference to truth and the use of

mass media in the service of achieving power. Orwell found the Gramscian<sup>16</sup> notion of “constructing common sense” sinister and obnoxious, and thus, during the scene in which O'Brien interrogates Winston, does Orwell answer Gramsci,

""There is a Party slogan dealing with the control of the past. Repeat it, if you please'. 'Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past' repeated Winston obediently... [O'Brien] 'We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?'"

In another passage (Orwell 2008 (1949) p 213-214), Orwell anticipates the internet age of online surveillance and 'Interception Modernisation Programmes',<sup>17</sup> by warning of the combination of technology and a ruthless will to power,

“The new aristocracy was made up for the most part of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organisers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists and professional politicians... every citizen important to be worth watching, could be kept under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propaganda, with all other channels of communication closed... [The possibility of enforcing] complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects, now existed for the first time”.

Given that the journalistic theories of Gramsci and Goebbels are, for all practical purposes, interchangeable, the question remains; why should journalism academics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century subscribe to the theory of one, when they would (quite understandably) recoil in horror at the thought of subscribing to the other? Perhaps the answer is that Gramsci was imprisoned and never had the opportunity of putting his ideas into practice. This facilitates the modern, sympathetic reading of Gramsci as a humane warrior for social justice, and “gifted Marxist theoretician and journalist”.

This reading is also facilitated by the fact that Gramsci focussed on the cultural battle, rather than on the physical battle for hegemony. Gramsci's writings disproportionately emphasise the role of cultural power and hegemony. But this

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<sup>16</sup> I do not mean that Orwell was literally criticising Gramsci, merely that Orwell's targets are essentially Gramscian.

<sup>17</sup> The UK government's routine interception of digital communication, and mass internet surveillance for purposes of national security and law enforcement.

emphasis is arguably only a function of the fact that Gramsci was writing in prison under the watchful eyes of his gaolers. Gramsci's editors and translators Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Gramsci 1999 (1971) p 447) make it very clear that Gramsci should not be mistaken for an ethereal, abstract thinker writing about political theory. His ambition was to establish a totalitarian state,

"The fact that, more than any other great revolutionary Marxist thinker, he concerned himself with the sphere of "civil society" and of "hegemony", in his prison writings, cannot be taken to indicate a neglect of the moment of political society, of force, of domination. On the contrary, his entire record shows that this was not the case."

In summary the romanticisation of Gramsci in the contemporary academic imagination, is only possible because Gramsci was prevented from trying out his theory of mental enslavement on the people of Italy. Gramsci is Mussolini defanged by fate. In the words of the English poet Thomas Gray, Gramsci is the tyrant forbidden by fortune to, "Wade through slaughter to a throne and shut the gates of mercy on mankind". In academic terms one might say that the Gramscian focus on power and hegemony misses the point. The question for academic journalism is not, "How can journalism be used to enslave the mind of man and blind him to truth?" A better question would be, "How can journalism be used to free man from mental slavery and open his eyes to truth?" On this question Gramsci is silent.

#### **04.02.03 The Inability of Hegemony & Power Theory to Explain Journalism.**

Gramscian hegemony and power theory has become highly influential among contemporary theorists of journalism. It is the most important lens through which TDP understands journalism.<sup>18</sup> The British media scholar Chris Atton (2002, p 493), for example, explains that journalism is best understood as a Gramscian site of struggle where different social groups battle to impose their world view on society,

"It is about struggle, the aim of which (in Gramsci's terms) from the point of view of

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<sup>18</sup> Despite its late 20<sup>th</sup> century popularity, Gramscian hegemonic theory tends to be cited less, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, than Foucauldian power theory. We will consider Foucault's influence and ideas in due course.

the bourgeoisie, is to contain and to incorporate dissident values of subordinate groups within an ideological space (Hebdige, 1979, p. 16). This ideological space must then appear permanent, natural and commonsensical, even as it is continually contested".

However, despite its widespread acceptance as a theory of journalism, hegemony theory explains neither what journalism is, nor how it works. This widespread misunderstanding can be seen as confusion between different levels of explanation. The British neuroscientist David Marr famously outlined three different levels of explanation. These he described as; Computational (relating to the goal of the object, what is it for), Algorithmic (how the object works) and Hardware Implementation (how the object is used in practice). Marr (Marr 1982, p 72) noted that an explanation on one level may be perfectly valid, but will fail to tell us anything useful about the other levels,

"An important point to note is that since the three levels are only rather loosely related, some phenomena may be explained at only one or two of them. This means, for example, that a correct explanation of some psychophysical observation must be formulated at the appropriate level."

To use Marr's analysis, Gramscian theory operates only at the level of hardware implementation; it tells us how it's possible to use journalism as a weapon of control, but it is silent regarding how news actually works. It is important to understand therefore that when Gramsci explains that journalism can be used (or misused) to undermine an existing hegemony and help create a communist dictatorship, this is a completely different endeavour to explaining what journalism is and how it works. For example a car, or a chef's knife, can be used as a weapon to kill, but this does not mean that cars and chefs' knives should be thought of primarily as weapons.

Journalism in the Gramscian view is therefore indistinguishable from propaganda; it can be used to control audiences. But how are we to suppose this happens? Hegemony theory is silent regarding *why* audiences believe the propaganda in the first place. One of central epistemic questions which any theory of journalism must be able to answer is simply, "Why should audiences believe that information

supplied to them by journalists is true"? or, to use the current terminology, "How can audiences distinguish between fake news and true news"? Hegemony and power theory has nothing useful to say about this.

The obvious answer, via the Folk Theory, is that audiences will believe news they believe to be true and which corresponds to reality. Similarly they will reject news they believe to be untrue or unreliable. In other words if propaganda did not claim to be true (or if it were shown to be false), no one would believe it. Therefore, if hegemony and power theory is to be comprehensible, it must logically assume the existence of the concepts of truth and falsity. Without these concepts hegemony and power theory makes no sense. To put it another way, no one would knowingly allow themselves to be persuaded or influenced by an obvious fiction or falsehood. Writing in 1936 the American journalist Will Irwin (Irwin 1936, p 3) made the same point; that propaganda only works when it disguises itself as truth. Hence propagandists develop sophisticated techniques for "tinkering with the news" because there is "no correction for lies and half-lies". Exposed as falsehood, propaganda is useless,

"In loose, popular usage it meant the next thing to a damned lie. "It's just propaganda" - paste that label on to any fact or set of facts which your opponent advanced in argument, and you condemned it on the spot".

In summary, the fact that journalism can be used as propaganda, is not the same thing as saying that journalism *is* propaganda. It is a serious error to confuse and conflate news with propaganda, overlook epistemic questions and the unique relationship journalism has with truth. The distinction between journalism and propaganda is a complex one, for the present we will note that there is a twilight zone, or boundary condition, between news and propaganda. As the British scholar of propaganda David Welch pertinently observes, there are many different kinds of truth and untruth, "the outright lie, the half-truth, the truth out of context". This means news and propaganda inevitably over-lap to some degree, making it difficult to know which is which (as propagandists and the producers of fake news intend). Indeed Welch's provocative definition of propaganda (Welch 1992, p 6) deliberately pushes it into the twilight zone where it clearly overlaps with journalism,



“We need to think of propaganda in much wider terms; whenever public opinion is deemed important, there we shall find an attempt to influence it... in any body politic, propaganda is not, as is often supposed, a malignant growth, but is an essential part of the whole political process”.

In conclusion Gramsci bequeathed two ideas to TDP; an indifference to truth, and the belief that the role of the journalist is to produce propaganda in pursuit of ideological power and hegemony.

#### **04.03.00 Post-Structuralism and the Advent of Irrationalism.**

The theorists of the Frankfurt School and Gramsci can be considered as advancing truthophobic positions while at the same time remaining largely, or wholly, rational. However a separate branch of TDP can be considered as both truthophobic and irrational. This branch derives from Post-Structuralism and we will consider it next.<sup>19</sup>

#### **04.03.01 Freudianism; the Irrational Unconscious.**

The intellectual roots of Post-Structuralism lie in the works of the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, and the code-based semiotic linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Freud's impact, although significant, can be dealt with briefly. For present purposes it will be sufficient to note that although Freud is a towering intellectual figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his psychoanalytic theories are today widely considered by clinicians to be obsolete, unscientific and incorrect<sup>20</sup>. Freud remains influential among students of literature, art and the social sciences, even though his theories are long-since debunked. As the American academic John Kihlstrom (2009) puts it,

“From a scientific point of view, classical Freudian psychoanalysis is dead as both a theory of the mind and a mode of therapy (Crews, 1998; Macmillan, 1996). No empirical evidence supports any specific proposition of psychoanalytic theory, such

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<sup>19</sup> I will follow Leonard Jackson and use the term Post-Structuralism loosely to denote French Post-Structuralism and Post-Modernism from the late 1960s onwards. These traditions are contrasted with the essentially scientific tradition of Structuralism which emerged from the work of the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson during the late 1920s.

<sup>20</sup> For a scholarly, fair-minded assessment of Freudianism, see (Webster 1995)

as the idea that development proceeds through oral, anal, phallic, and genital stages, or that little boys lust after their mothers and hate and fear their fathers... At best, Freud is a figure of only historical interest for psychologists. He is better studied as a writer, in departments of language and literature, than as a scientist, in departments of psychology."

The British scholar Richard Webster, while acknowledging Freud's historical and cultural stature, describes Freudian psychoanalysis as a pseudo-science which fails to explain human psychology and instead supplies us with a set of "magical" and "irrational fantasies" woven into a series of "bizarre theories". For Webster (1995, p xiv), Freud was lost in a labyrinth of medical error and self-delusion,

"It is not simply that Freud lacked the extraordinary psychological insight he has conventionally been credited with. It is that, in a number of his most crucial formulations and case histories, he shows an almost complete lack of ordinary psychological insight and sensitivity".

One of Freud's legacies is the attribution of all human experience, thought and action, not to conscious rationality, but to dark, irrational, unconscious forces and primitive suppressed sexual urges. These deep, irrational springs can be glimpsed when they bubble to the surface in the form of dreams and nightmares. While a gift to surrealist artists and writers, this over-emphasis on the fundamentally irrational nature of humankind is, argues Kihlstrom (1992), scientifically unjustified,

"The psychological unconscious documented by latter-day scientific psychology is quite different from what Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic colleagues had in mind in *fin de siècle* Vienna. Their unconscious was hot and wet; it seethed with lust and anger; it was hallucinatory, primitive, and irrational. The unconscious of contemporary psychology is kinder and gentler".

It is important to note however that Freud never considered himself to be a defender of irrationality. On the contrary he attacked irrational beliefs, among which he included religious ideas founded on blind faith and unsupported by empirical evidence. In his 1927 tract 'The Future of an Illusion', Freud wrote (1961 (1927) p 28) that such subjective personal belief "has no binding force" for anyone else. Why, he asked, should anyone accept a religious proposition as valid if it was

not true, or based on solid evidence? *Quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur,*

"Am I to be obliged to believe every absurdity? And if not, why this one in particular? There is no appeal to a court above that of reason... If one man has gained an unshakable conviction of the true reality of religious doctrines from a state of ecstasy which has deeply moved him, of what significance is that to others?"

In summary therefore, so far as the present project is concerned, it will suffice to note of Freudian psychoanalysis two things; a) that it offers a view of human rationality based on irrational foundations and, b) that it is considered clinically invalid. Most significantly, we should recognise that Freudian ideas have influenced TDP, not because they have been directly studied by journalism academics, but because they have reached TDP via other thinkers, notably Jacques Lacan about whom we shall have more to say presently. In Lacan threads of Freudian theory were interwoven with threads of the semiotic linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. It is therefore to de Saussure to whom we now turn.

#### **04.04.00 Semiotics and the Legacy of de Saussure.**

It is hard to overstate the influence on TDP of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and the semiotic, linguistic framework which is attributed to him. Saussurean semiotics, as understood by post-structuralism was deeply entrenched in the pedagogic media texts of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even today, although semiotics is less commonly cited in academic discourse, its invisible influence, as a foundational premise, lingers on.<sup>21</sup>

The well known scholars of journalism John Fiske and John Hartley (Fiske and Hartley 1978, p 23) used Saussurean semiotics (henceforth SS) to justify the view that objective reality is not really real, but is rather a socially constructed discourse,

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<sup>21</sup> Some contemporary scholars of journalism do still refer explicitly to de Saussure. For example the Australian academics Mei Li and Naren Chitty, writing in 2017, base their thesis on Saussurean linguistics, "It should be noted that signifiers, used in de Saussure's sense (de Saussure, 1983), associated with liberal news values (such as Western anchors and journalists) may be adopted by a State-Owned Transnational Media Corporations (SOTNMC) in countries that do not host a liberal democracy." (Li and Chitty 2017)

Anecdotally, the present author's son was taught that Saussurean semiotics provides the theoretical justification for media theory in a module at a British university in 2017.

"The more closely the signifier reproduces our common experience, our culturally determined intersubjectivity, the more realistic it appears to be. But we must be at pains to emphasize that the signifier to which the signifier relates is itself arbitrary... The signified is determined by our culture, not by some external natural reality".

Elsewhere, Hartley (2001, p 7) explains that journalism is best understood, not as information about the real world, but as an autonomous discourse constructed by the semiotic system which produced it,

"Once we have understood that news is a discourse generated by a general sign system in relation to a social structure, we can move on to see that the particular way in which news discourse has developed and is used, is to some extent autonomous."

The influential British media theorist Stuart Hall (Hall 1997, p 16) cited SS as authority for his own theories, writing for example in 1997 that,

"The social constructionist view of language and representation which we have been discussing owes a great deal to the work and influence of the Swiss linguist, Saussure."

Hall (p 17) stressed that SS was an important part of the scaffolding which supported the radical media theory of TDP. If it was true that language did not describe reality, but rather created it, then, de Saussure's beliefs had profound implications which were,

"Very far-reaching for a theory of representation and for our understanding of culture. If the relationship between a signifier and its signified is the result of a system of social conventions specific to each society and to specific historical moments, then all meanings are produced within history and culture".

Here we should note that "if" is the operative word. If post structuralist semiotic theory is well-founded, then we would have reason to believe in the validity of TDP. The unstated corollary being that if Saussurean semiotics is ill-founded, then a

major part of the conceptual scaffolding of TDP would fall away. A great deal rests on Hall's use of "if".

SS is widely found in pedagogic texts such as the *Routledge A Level English* (Beard 2003, p 1) textbook which informs students that there can be no objective reality, because words do not refer to material reality, but only to other words,

"What is real and what is a representation of reality? Such a question might sound very philosophical, but it is a crucial one for students of literature and language to answer... Words themselves, language, are only labels for things; they are not the things themselves. The word 'computer' is the name of the machine this book is being written on; it is not the machine itself. The lack of any real connection between items of language and the objects named by language has often been pointed out".

There is no mention here of Hall's conditional "if". The textbook informs students that the Saussurean hypothesis is settled fact. The assumption that the hypothesis is valid is frequently used by scholars to justify the view that journalism is best studied as a 'text', or 'discourse'. This approach conflates form with content and privileges the former over the latter. It is pernicious to the study of journalism because it is insensitive to the informative *content* of news. It has encouraged theorists to ignore the crucial fact that the main purpose of news is to convey useful information about the real world to audiences. SS takes tools designed for the study of literary fiction, and uncritically uses them to study fact. Eagleton (2008, p 92) notes how currents of late 20th century literary criticism insist that literature is,

"An 'autonomous verbal structure' quite cut off from any reference beyond itself, a sealed and inward-looking realm which 'contains life and reality in a system of verbal relationships'".

Eagleton (p 95) correctly notes the dominance of form over content and the almost total elimination of the latter in the minds of theorists,

"What is noticeable about this kind of analysis is that, like Formalism, it brackets off the actual *content* of the story and concentrates entirely on the form".

The significance of this is that, if news is simply considered to be a 'text', just as the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound, or Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* is a 'text', then whether or not a news report is true or false is a consideration which can be entirely disregarded. By employing SS scholars of journalism can find justification for viewing a news report merely as an autonomous "system of signs" which does not refer to the real world at all, but, ultimately, only to ideas (created by society), or to other signs in an endless chain of signifiers. Thus semiotics encourages the truthophobic belief that reality is not *described* by language, but is *produced* by it. This school of thought was gestated in the "New Criticism" of T.S.Eliot, and emerged in full flower in the post-structuralism of theorists such as Jacques Derrida who famously declared that,

*"Il n'ya pas de hors-texte - there is nothing outside of the text"*.

As the British scholar of semiotics Daniel Chandler (2006, p 80) explains,

"Postmodern theories grant no access to any reality outside the signification".

In summary irrealism and truthphobia are conclusions which rest on the assumption that SS is a sound hypothesis. However it is not. Professional linguists have long since viewed SS as an obsolete, discredited theory which is of only historical interest. Consequently it is not an exaggeration to say that for 21<sup>st</sup> century media theorists to rely (even indirectly) on the authority of SS, is like NASA rocket scientists basing their calculations on the assumption that the sun orbits the Earth.

SS was largely abandoned by professional linguists during the 1950s when it was superseded by the generative grammar proposed by Noam Chomsky. SS can be considered a "code-based" formulation of language and it was, curiously and perversely, only after it had been discarded by professional linguists, that it was adopted by non linguists as a basis for the burgeoning fields of cultural, media and journalistic studies, as well as by post-structuralist literary theorists. Moreover, since the 1950s, scholarly linguistics has continued to advance in new directions, supported by research in cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience. This has led to the widespread adoption of approaches such as intention-based semantics, of

which Relevance Theory is a prominent variant. Thus, as the French cognitive psychologist and linguist Dan Sperber, and the British linguist Deirdre Wilson explain, (Sperber and Wilson 1995, p 8) code-based theories, despite their lingering popularity outside of linguistics, do not describe how language actually works,

"The recent history of semiotics has been one of simultaneous institutional success and intellectual bankruptcy. On the one hand, there are now departments, institutes, associations, congresses and journals of semiotics. On the other, semiotics has failed to live up to its promises; indeed its foundations have been severely undermined... No semiotic law of any significance was ever discovered, let alone applied to linguistics... the assumption that all systems of signs should have similar structural properties became more and more untenable. Without this assumption, however, the semiotic programme makes little sense".

The American and French linguists John Goldsmith and Bernard Laks (2019 in press, p 22) agree that SS is today merely a quaint, historical curiosity,

"For the vast majority of contemporary linguists, regardless of the school to which they adhere, structuralist linguistics, as it was practised between 1925 and 1965, is as foreign as the blast of light that still reaches us from the Big Bang."

Or, as the American linguist Mark Turner (1987, p 12) puts it more bluntly, de Saussure is, "Wrong on a grand scale".

In summary what is noteworthy is how SS has been used by radical media theorists of TDP. It has been presented as a scientific framework, complete with an impressive lexicon of technical terminology, which can be cited as evidence that news does not report facts about the real world, because the real world is a construct which does not exist outside of language. However SS is best viewed as a 19<sup>th</sup> century pseudo-science, long-since discredited. Therefore any conclusions drawn from it should be rejected as ill-founded and unsound. Excellent technical critiques of SS are available elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> what I will focus on here is showing how

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<sup>22</sup> See; (Jackson 1991) and (Harpham 2002 (2013)) Eagleton (op cit) provides a good critical analysis, especially pages 127-150. Goldsmith and Laks is essential reading, (Goldsmith and Laks 2019 (in press))

SS rests on the assumption that the material world is an illusion. However SS does not, and cannot, prove this irrealist assumption. This means that scholars are not entitled to cite SS to support the very thing it asserts. In other words I will argue that SS, as it has been used by TDP, suffers from a vicious circularity.

#### **04.04.01 Semiotics; Philosophers and Linguists “Have Always Agreed”.**

De Saussure, in constructing his phenomenological model of language, rejected the common-sense, folk notion that words are names for real things. This realist, materialist view, which is referred to as nomenclature, is dismissed by de Saussure in favour of his own formula; semiotics, or the science of signs.<sup>23</sup> De Saussure's insistence that the signifier refers to a mental concept, and not to a concrete referent in the real world is the central, pivotal claim of his thesis so far as students of journalism are concerned. It provides one of the foundational blocks on which the radical media theory of TDP rests. As Eagleton (2008, p 109) points out,

"In order to reveal the nature of language, Saussure as we have seen, had first of all to repress, or forget what it talked about. The referent, or real object which the sign denoted, was put in suspension so that the structure of the sign itself could be examined".

Here then (Saussure 1959, p 111-112) is the single most important paragraph in de Saussure's oeuvre from the point of view of academic journalism, (emphasis added),

"Psychologically our thought - apart from its expression in words - is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists *have always agreed* in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. *There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language*".

This is the pivotal moment where de Saussure cites the authority for his project. He informs his readers that reality is constructed by language and we can be

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<sup>23</sup> Saussure's word was semiosis, but semiotics is the more commonly used term.



assured this is true because “Philosophers and linguists have always agreed”. But who are the “philosophers and linguists” who have “always agreed”? We are not told. Readers are left to work out for themselves who these authorities might be.<sup>24</sup> De Saussure appears to be drawing on the fashionable intellectual ideas of his age; i.e. German idealism and phenomenology. Although these ideas were the taken for granted ideas of his era, de Saussure may have had in mind the popular German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann whose works were very much in vogue in the salons of Europe in the 1870s. For example Von Hartmann writes (1884, p 298) in Saussurean terms that,

“All conscious human thought is only possible by the help of language, since we see that human thought without language (in the uneducated deaf and dumb, and also among healthy men who have grown up without human education), in the most favourable case, very little exceeds that of the cleverest domestic animals”.

Von Hartmann is thus a representative spokesman for mainstream 19<sup>th</sup> century European philosophical and linguistic thought, and his assumptions mirror those of de Saussure.<sup>25</sup> Let us continue our arboreal journey back down the intellectual tree in search of the roots.

Von Hartmann cites as authority for his views, the writing of the German idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling. Schelling, an erstwhile friend of Hegel, was an influential metaphysician during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who claimed, according to von Hartmann (p 293), that language creates all human thought,

"As without language not only no philosophical, but no human consciousness at all is conceivable".

Schelling was a colleague of Johann Fichte with whom he shared a radical irrealism and transcendental phenomenism.<sup>26</sup> Together Fichte and Schelling represent the

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<sup>24</sup> The problem of identifying de Saussure's sources is complicated by the fact that he did not write the *Cours* himself. The *Cours* was ghost written after his death and based largely on lecture notes taken by students.

<sup>25</sup> I am not arguing that de Saussure was specifically influenced by von Hartmann. I am pointing to von Hartmann as an example of the dominant view of language in 19th century German, idealist thought. This view leads back to Fichte and Johann Herder.

<sup>26</sup> For details of the rupture between Fichte and Schelling see, (Vater and Wood 2012) For a discussion of Neo-Kantianism epistemology see, (Ibri 2015) For a discussion of the influence of Fichtean metaphysics see, (Beiser 2018)

flowering of German idealism, romanticism and phenomenism. This is an intellectual tradition which preaches subjectivism and places the individual at the centre of the universe. In the epistemology of Fichte and Schelling, reality is a figment of the imagination, a human construct. As Schelling (1978 (1800)) put it,

“The world is the original, yet unconscious poetry of the mind [Geist].”

This rejection of objective reality and the refusal to consider that anything enduring might exist outside of our own minds earned, from Bertrand Russell, a stinging rebuke. Fichte, says Russell, (1947, p 744) preached a philosophical narcissism which,

“Carried subjectivism to a point which seems almost to involve a kind of insanity. He holds that the Ego is the only ultimate reality, and that it exists because it posits itself; the non-Ego, which has a subordinate reality, also exists only because the Ego posits it.”

#### **04.04.02 Fichte. Only Stupid People Would Disagree With Me.**

Fichte should be considered an important (if frequently overlooked) actor in the intellectual history of TDP. This is because, as we trace the lineage of the concepts which underpin TDP, we reach, in Fichte, a terminus. For present purposes, it is not necessary to ask “what is the intellectual authority cited by Fichte?”<sup>27</sup> Fichte explains, with refreshing candour, that there is none. Fichte freely accepts that there is no logical reason to accept the assumptions of idealism. Instead, he challenges, (in Fiala 2012, p 93) what is required is purity of faith, and an iron will,

“What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is; for a philosophical system is not a dead piece of furniture that we can accept or reject as we wish, it is rather a thing animated by the soul of the person who holds it.”

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<sup>27</sup> It is of course possible to trace Fichte’s intellectual influences, e.g. the *glaubensphilosophie* of Hamann, Herder and Jacobi, or to Kant or even Plato. But in the present context there is little to be gained. Fichte represents a distinctive current of philosophical and linguistic thought which became well established, and which runs, broadly uninterpreted, into Saussurean semiotics and into the DNA of TDP.

Fichte combined subjectivism and metaphysical idealism, with incipient German nationalism. Fichte saw language as the essential glue which bound these disparate elements together. In his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1806(1922), p 128), he asserts that the concrete world is merely an insubstantial world of shadows,

"Everything else that may become visible within this infinity of the world of images is a nothing proceeding from nothing, a shadow of the shadow, and solely the means by which that first nothing of infinity and time itself becomes visible and opens up to thought the ascent to invisible being without image."

Fichte rejected the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which he saw as contemptibly French and British, in favour of Romanticism and subjectivism. It was the spirit of the Counter Enlightenment which Fichte saw as liberating and ennobling. This necessitated a violent swing away from rational argument based on empirical evidence, towards subjective feelings and emotion. Certainty was not to be found in the world of factual reality, but rather deep inside the self. For Fichte (p 155-156) feelings mattered more than reason,

"Whoever feels this within him will be convinced; whoever does not feel it cannot be convinced, for my proof rests entirely on that supposition; on him my words are lost."

For Fichte it is language which brings to life the transcendental world. Fichte states (p 61) that it is through the magic of language that this "supersensuous world" of thought and feeling is given form. In other words, language constructs reality,

"Designation by language at once inserts the Thing-without-image in the continuous connection of things which have an image... The words of such a language in all its parts are life and create life."

He adds (p 62), in a way which closely anticipates de Saussure and late 20th century Post Structuralism, that people do not construct language; language constructs people,

"Hence they do not form the language; it is the language which forms them."

For Fichte language was also a political instrument. Writing while Prussia was suffering the ignomy of Napoleonic occupation, he pointed to the existence of the German language (p 213) as proof of Germany's right to independence,

"Whenever a separate language is found, there a separate nation exists, which has the right to take independent charge of its affairs and to govern itself."

Fichte saw the future German state, not merely as achieving equality with France and Britain, but rising above them. Fichte (p 25) asserted the superiority of the Teutonic, German *volk* and believed it was their destiny to lead and guide weaker, impure races,

"You will see in spirit the German name rising by means of this generation to be the most glorious among all peoples; you will see this nation the regenerator and re-creator of the world."

The British political philosopher Erica Benner (2012) summarises Fichte's belief that non-rational arguments were admissible in the over-riding interest of political and cultural change. Irrationality and subjectivism - the appeal to feelings and emotions - were weapons which could be used to undermine the existing status quo. Encouraging the belief that reality and truth were illusions, was a tool which could be used to topple French intellectual hegemony and usher in a brave new Teutonic world,

"With frequent allusions to Martin Luther, whom he hoped to succeed as the leading German crusader against foreign corruption, Fichte insisted that self-liberation should be conjoined with a mission to seek the "salvation" of "the whole human race" under German guidance."

The German scholar Günter Zöllner notes that Fichte was enormously influential in the development of German 19th century idealism. Zöllner sees Fichte as the theorist who, more than any other, turned around the ship of intellectual thought, steering it away from the empirical rationalism of the 18th century Enlightenment, into the waters of 19th century German idealism and towards late 20th century

irrationalism and truthphobia. Zöller (2016, p 1) correctly describes Fichte as "the founding figure" of German idealism, who, in his embrace of irrealism, opened the door to,

"Later nineteenth - and twentieth-century developments in philosophical thought, from existentialism and liberalism to nationalism and socialism."

In the context of the present project, it is important to understand that, although they became wildly popular and fashionable, there is no rational basis for Fichte's fundamental claims. Fichte merely asserts that the real world is not real. For Fichte what is felt strongly to be true, is true. Anyone who disagreed with his assertion that reality was unreal was, he said (p 157), "stupid",

"We have nothing more to do here with the stupid surprise of some, when we assert such a world of pure thought, and assert it, indeed, as the only possible world, and reject the world of sense."

For present purposes then, our arboreal journey has reached its end in Fichte. TDP can therefore be said to ultimately rest on assertions which Fichte made at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which he felt to be true, for which he acknowledged no evidence could ever exist, and with which he said, only "stupid people" would disagree. The American scholar of German philosophy Dan Breazeale (2018), agrees that Fichte's magnum opus, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, is not only Romantic, Germanic will, it is also pure speculation,

"It must be granted that the truth of the *Wissenschaftslehre's* starting point cannot be established by any philosophical means, including its utility as a philosophical first principle. On the contrary—and this is one of Fichte's most characteristic and controversial claims—one already has to be convinced, on wholly extra-philosophical grounds, of the reality of one's own freedom before one can enter into the chain of deductions and arguments that constitute the *Wissenschaftslehre*. This is the meaning of Fichte's oft-cited assertion that "the kind of philosophy one chooses depends upon the kind of person one is."

Marx (Marx 1846), anticipating Russell, viewed Fichtean-inspired, German idealism with contempt, referring to it as "philosophic charlatanry" and absurd "illusions".

Comparing German theorists to a factory churning out faulty goods, he wrote that they were responsible for,

"Fabricated and fictitious production, deterioration in quality, adulteration of the raw materials, falsification of labels, fictitious purchases, bill-jobbing and a credit system devoid of any real basis."

The American academic Damon Linker (2000) summarises that German phenomenism and idealism were the intellectual heart of the Counter Enlightenment. He notes they were forms of irrationalism which went on to inspire 20<sup>th</sup> century post-structuralism,

"By the early decades of the twentieth century, Germany had become the undisputed home of the philosophical Counter-Enlightenment. If today the most celebrated Counter-Enlightenment figures hail from France or Italy, that should not obscure the fact that the ideas of such authors as Derrida and Foucault, Vattimo and Virilio descend directly from the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger".

Having charted the intellectual authority for German idealism on which SS depends, let us return to de Saussure himself.

The Polish-American scholar of de Saussure, Beata Stawarska, has rightly drawn attention to de Saussure's underlying idealistic and phenomenological bias. According to Stawarska (2018), while it is unclear whether de Saussure read the works of Hegel and Husserl, he was certainly indirectly influenced via the *avant garde* theorists of the Russian Kazan Linguistic School,

"The Kazan linguists like Kruszewski whom Saussure cites used the language of phenomenology they had adopted from Hegel (Kruszewski wanted to develop "something like a phenomenology of language"). I therefore would say that Saussure was influenced by the legacy of Hegel's phenomenology in linguistics".

Stawarska (2015, p 155) explains that for de Saussure, concrete reality was an ambiguous mental, or psychic, construct,

"The object language, or the semiological system, emerges in this perspective as spiritual through and through — as can be exemplified by Saussure's claim that both the signifying and the signified facets of the sign are to be figured as psychic rather than physical, that is, that we are dealing with the psychic imprint of the sound, as tied to an idea, and not with mere sound vibrations that could be studied naturalistically... Following phenomenology, knowledge seems positive only at the lowest level stance of immediate sensuous certainty; it shows itself to be mediated and thus shot with form from the more advanced stance of the understanding".

Stawarska continues (p 158) that de Saussure assumed that reality was far from real because,

"Matter in phenomenology is internal rather than external to consciousness; both belong to pure thought without collapsing one into the other".

Thus (p 164) in de Saussure's scheme there is no material substance to which language can refer,

"There are no pre-existent unities, whether at the level of sound or sense; language does not conform therefore to the rational categories derived from substance metaphysics, since nothing in it is substantial, there are no bounded beings to be found at the bottom of the sea".<sup>28</sup>

As metaphysical systems, phenomenology and idealism may be logically coherent, but it is hard to see them as a sound basis for a theory of practical journalism. Journalism, as we shall see, always assumes a realist ontology; i.e. that there is a real world which exists independently from our minds, and that journalism can describe it. In this most basic sense, journalism could not exist if there were no reality, because there would be no events to report and no reporters to report them. Phenomenology, idealism and metaphysics automatically disqualify themselves as candidates for media theory because they disavow the possibility of the existence of information about the real world. It is important to understand what I am suggesting is not, as many scholars of TDP assume, that SS *justifies* a subjectivist, relativist, anti-realist ontology; but - on the contrary - that it *assumes* this viewpoint

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<sup>28</sup> Goldsmith and Laks have produced a useful conceptual map charting, amongst other things, how de Saussure was influenced by currents of German idealism. See; (Goldsmith and Laks)

and provides no evidence of any sort to support it. As we have shown by tracing its origins back to Fichtean idealism, SS is a circular argument which presupposes the truth of what it sets out to prove.

#### **04.04.03 Semiotics vs Contemporary Developmental Psychology.**

De Saussure's doctrine that language constructs the concepts which construct our perception of reality, is vulnerable to another fatal objection. It requires us to accept the premise that human infants first acquire language, and then begin to construct categories in their mind. Finally, as a result of this process, the illusion of physical reality emerges, somehow, as a construct. Unfortunately for SS, this sequence is the reverse of what actually takes place. De Saussure cannot of course be criticised for his ignorance of 21<sup>st</sup> century developmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience, but modern media theorists who base their arguments on discourse theory have no such excuse. They are obliged to confront compelling scientific evidence that the theories they advance are psychologically implausible. A detailed account of how language relates to concept formation, and how infants learn to speak and think, is outside the scope of the present paper. It is a tangled area involving complex psychological and philosophical concepts. Let us content ourselves with a few brief points.

While noting, and putting to one side, the ambiguity about what is meant by 'concept' and 'language', there is strong evidence to suggest that the 'correct' chronology is as follows. First comes perception and observation of concrete reality, then comes categorization and the formation of concepts, and then, lastly, comes the acquisition of language; a process of labelling of the things encountered. According to contemporary research, categorization, and the organisation of perceptual information, takes place spontaneously within the brain in response to observation of reality and prior to language acquisition. As the Nobel prizewinning biologist Gerald Edelman notes (1987, p 7),

"One of the fundamental tasks of the nervous system is to carry out perceptual categorization in an unlabelled world".



As the American cognitive psychologist Paul C. Quinn explains, in a paper aptly entitled *Born To Categorize*, "Categorization begins in early infancy when core abilities can be used to organize perceptual experience". Quinn goes on to point out (2014, p 139) that,

"One could not have much of a concept of cats, for example, without knowing what they looked like and what parts they had. Concepts must include perceptual information, or else they would not be very helpful."

Contemporary research into early word-learning reveals a far more rich and nuanced picture than that painted by the crude assumptions of 19th century Saussurean semiotics. Once the basic process has begun, the sophisticated ability to form advanced concepts develops *alongside* the acquisition of language. As the American cognitive psychologist Sandra Waxman and linguist Erin Leddon explain (Waxman and Leddon 2014, p 182), the process proceeds as an inseparable *pas de deux*,

"The process of word-learning involves powerful, implicit links between the linguistic and conceptual systems. Even before infants learn to speak, novel words guide their attention to objects, and highlight commonalities and differences among them".

Waxman adds (p 181 & 184),

"Infants naturally form *categories* to capture commonalities among objects and events and learn *words* to express them... Early word-learning also draws upon the infants perceptual and conceptual ability to identify objects and events in their environment, and to notice commonalities among them".

Quinn makes the important point that the very concept of 'concept' is misleading in its lack of granularity. For example Quinn argues (p 138) that mature, abstract concepts are quite different things from the simple categorizations of infancy,

"Young infants divide the world of objects into perceptual clusters that later come to have conceptual significance for adults (i.e. mammals, cats, tabby cats). As such, the conceptual representations found later in development may be viewed as

informational enrichments of the category representations that infants form on the basis of perceptual experience".

The significance of this to the present project is that it pulls the rug from under Saussurean semiotics. De Saussure insisted that signifiers refer to the signified and that the signified was a concept, not the physical referent. But contemporary developmental psychology tells us that this formulation is naïve. Concepts do not leap into the brain fully formed, *ex nihilo*. They are part of a continuum. Perception and conception are not two distinct processes - as Saussureans assume. Thus even sophisticated mature concepts, such as 'philosophy', 'democracy', 'journalism' etc., are merely more developed, richer, versions of much simpler concepts. Quinn argues (p 139) that to imagine the distinction as a contrast of opposites is to blunder into a false dichotomy,

"In nature, perceptual (form) and conceptual (function) information are often correlated, and investigations designed to tease apart whether perceptual or conceptual information is the more potent determinant of categorization behaviour may serve only to perpetuate what is arguably a false dichotomy. Instead, the way to proceed would be to explain how perceptual and conceptual knowledge are integrated (not dissociated) to form mature concepts".

In summary, scholars of TDP have argued, since the 1960s, that SS shows us that news is a discourse which cannot refer to objective reality because language is a system of signification which *constructs* reality. The authority for this view is given as de Saussure. However, as we have seen, de Saussure did not prove any such thing, nor could he. De Saussure merely repeated the fashionable assumptions held by many European, and especially German, intellectuals during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that reality was an illusion created by the will of God, or by the will of man. This view, as we have seen, is a metaphysical, or theological, claim for which no evidence could possibly exist. It is a view contradicted by the observations of contemporary developmental psychology, supported anecdotally by the lived experience of billions of parents around the world.

SS had died a natural death by the 1950s, and it might have lain undisturbed thereafter were it not for the intervention of the controversial French theorist

Jacques Lacan. Lacan resurrected SS which he fused with elements of Freudian psychoanalysis to create a conceptual Frankenstein's monster. It is Lacan's monster which we will consider next.

#### **04.05.00 Jacques Lacan. Dissolving Reality and Truth.**

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan assumed almost the status of cult leader among young intellectuals who flocked to hear his seminars at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris during the 1960s and 1970s. He is a controversial figure who has been both acclaimed as a genius, and derided as a fraud. As the British academic Richard Webster (1995) puts it,

“For many literary intellectuals Lacan remains one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century. By some others the rise of Lacan is regarded as a shameful indictment of the intellectual standards which prevail in American and European universities and an affront both to science and reason”.

Lacan fused two disparate intellectual traditions which had apparently little in common; the semiotic linguistics of de Saussure and Freudian psychoanalysis. He did this in a highly eccentric way, re-interpreting and borrowing morsels from each, and presenting the ensuing intellectual soup in a distinctive, wilfully obscure, literary style.

The significance of Lacanianism to the current project is that it introduces into TDP a justification for irrationality and truthphobia. It does this by arguing from the authority of Freud and de Saussure that reality is constructed by language which in turn is, ultimately, a product of the human unconscious. Thus Lacan argued that reality itself, along with meaning, truth and knowledge is entirely subjective and relative. Lacan therefore rescues the aggressive phenomenology of 19<sup>th</sup> century German idealism by dressing it in new, psychoanalytical clothes.

Lacan famously reconfigured de Saussure's model of the sign into a pseudo-algebraic equation in which he placed a capital 'S' above a lower case 's' and

separated the letters with a horizontal bar. In doing so Lacan sought to state the primacy of the signifier (the linguistic sign) over the signified (the idea which the sign represents). In thus inverting Saussure, Lacan asserted the primacy of language over what it represents. In this moment of theatre Lacan creates a world in which signifiers exist prior to signifieds, and language precedes reality. As Chandler explains (2006, p 25), Lacan, by rewriting de Saussure, privileges language over reality by establishing,

“The autonomy of language in relation to reality. The Saussurean model, with its emphasis on internal structures within a sign system, can be seen as supporting the notion that language does not reflect reality but rather constructs it”.

The American scholar Steven Ungar points out that Lacan's arbitrary formulation "destroyed the integrity of the sign" as established by de Saussure. Professional linguists consequently viewed Lacan's algorithm as preposterous which led to it being "dismissed outright among those who did not consider the study of psychosis and the unconscious as central to the ambitions or ends of linguistics". Ungar (2006, p 170) explains that Lacan's thesis is linguistically unjustifiable,

"Much like Barthes several years later, Lacan modified and adapted aspects of the Course to his own ends, as if Saussure provided Lacan with a new vocabulary in support of his own hypotheses (Dosse, 1997: 105)".

Richard Webster (1995) dryly notes that Lacan's pseudo-algebraic formula is a spurious invention, yet everything that comes afterwards depends upon it,

“It is upon the foundation of this formula that the whole of Lacan's sprawling intellectual edifice rests, like an infinite world balanced upon a pea”.

Having asserted that language creates reality, Lacan's next move, carried out in *Science and Truth*, written in 1965 (Lacan 2006, p 736), was to claim that language is created by the unconscious (which, according to Freud, is fundamentally irrational),

"It is well known that I already took for granted at that time, as others do now, that

the way opened up by Freud has no other meaning than the one I have taken up - namely, that the unconscious is language".

It is noteworthy that Lacan does not provide any evidence to support the ambiguous idea that "the unconscious is language", he merely asserts it to be true and "well known". Indeed the absence of empirical supporting evidence is a prominent feature of Lacanianism. The next move (p 737) is for Lacan to express an extreme truthphobia; that the "intolerable" words "I speak truth" must be "pronounced with horror",

"Everything that can be said of truth - namely, that there is no such thing as a metalanguage; no language being able to say the truth about truth, since truth is grounded in the fact that truth speaks, and that it has not other means by which to become grounded. This is precisely why the unconscious, which tells the truth about truth, is structured like a language, and why I, in so teaching, tell the truth about Freud who knew how to let the truth - going by the name of the unconscious - speak".

Lacan then traces the "material cause" of truth which he says is none other than the "form of impact of the signifier" which he claims is the penis. This becomes journey's end, the ultimate explanation of human truth, reality and knowledge (p 743),

"Here we see the literal character trait that specifies the copulatory signifier, the phallus, when - arising outside of the limits of the subject's biological maturation - it is effectively (im)printed... as we shall see, this theory is necessary to a correct integration of the function - from the standpoint of knowledge and the subject - of truth as cause".

For Lacan there is therefore no reality other than the shifting sands of his eclectic reading of Freud's unconscious; everything else is illusion. In *The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire*, written a year after *Science and Truth*, Lacan offers a different account of his truthophobic hypothesis. Once again he stresses the dissolution of the link between truth and reality, arguing that there is no reality outside of language (p 684),

"Thus truth draws its guarantee from somewhere other than the Reality it concerns: it draws it from speech."

The significance of Lacan's formulation of reality and truth to the present project is that it provides a justification for later academics to claim that journalism cannot write about truth, because truth does not exist outside of language and the unconscious mind.

#### **04.05.01 Lacan; Genius, Fraud or Intellectual Terrorist?**

Lacan remains a controversial figure; for some a prophet, while for others a fraud. For example Lacan's translator Bruce Fink (1995, p xiv) argues that he was a visionary intellectual,

"Lacan points to the possibility of radicalising or revolutionizing science, as it is usually understood, by introducing psychoanalytic notions therein - thus in a sense pushing back the frontiers of science in such a way as to redefine the object of scientific enquiry".

However Lacan's opaque writing style, which rejoices in perplexing ambiguity and aggressive paradox, understandably prompts many scholars to accuse Lacan of sophistry and intellectual charlatanism. For Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (Sokal, Bricmont and Mermin 1999, p 4-5), Lacan is a naked emperor whose *modus operandi* was to import,

"Concepts from the natural sciences into the humanities or social sciences without giving the slightest conceptual or empirical justification" while at the same time, "manipulating phrases and sentences that are, in fact, meaningless".

While the English philosopher and writer Roger Scruton (2015, p 175 and 180) caustically writes,

"The frame of the nonsense machine was assembled by Jacques Lacan... Derrida had cast doubt, in his theory of deconstruction, on the possibility of meaning anything. Lacan showed that it is not necessary to mean anything anyway. You can go on

meaning nothing for page upon page”.

It is not a novel accusation. In May 1962, the *Times Literary Supplement* published a front-page article, ‘The Myth of Clarity’ (Webster 2002 (1996)) which accused the new wave of French intellectuals of laying waste to the traditional French virtue of *la clarté* and replacing it with abstrusity. Everywhere, complained the article,

“Private symbols and half formulated intuitions pose as proofs and profundities. Everywhere the functions of prose and poetry are confused in maelstroms of ambiguity”.

While Noam Chomsky recalled meeting Lacan several times and bluntly considered him, “An amusing and perfectly self-conscious charlatan”. (Wolters 2013).

The British clinical neurologist and writer Raymond Tallis, has described Lacan's influence on critical theory in an article entitled *The Shrink from Hell*. In it Tallis refers to Lacan as an "intellectual terrorist" who supplied a spurious, pseudo-scientific underpinning on which later theorists could justify their own irrationalism, irrationality and truthphobia. Lacan should be seen therefore as a conceptual railway junction in which disparate lines of theory converge, and then re-emerge. He is, Tallis (2000) explains,

"One of the fattest spiders at the heart of the web of muddled not-quite-thinkable-thoughts and evidence-free assertions of limitless scope which practitioners of theorrhoea have woven into their version of the humanities. Much of the dogma central to contemporary Theory came from him."

Lacan was expelled from the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) for charging his patients an hourly rate for sessions as short as ten minutes. Tallis (ibid), drawing on research by the French historian and psychologist Elizabeth Roudinesco, describes how Lacan's psychiatric fraud,

"Reached its natural conclusion in the ‘non-session’, in which ‘the patient was not allowed either to speak or not to speak’ as Lacan ‘had no time to waste on silence’. With the help of non-sessions he averaged 80 patients a day in the penultimate year

of his life. Non-sessions were perhaps an improvement on sessions, in which, disinhibited through dementia, he would indulge his bad temper, raging at patients and occasionally punching them or pulling their hair."

Tallis (ibid) concludes that Lacan was an "extraordinary charlatan" who, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is able to "command the adoration of the vulnerable and the gullible". His ghostly influence remains to the present day in TDP and in university departments where academics are,

"Even now trying to, or pretending to, make sense of his utterly unfounded, gnostic teachings and inflicting them on baffled students."

#### **04.06.00 On Sophistry, Humbug, Bullshit and Obscurantism.**

The American philosopher Harry Frankfurt, in a paper provocatively entitled *On Bullshit* (2005) has attempted to define Lacanian-style sophistry. Frankfurt argues that it is form of discourse defined by its indifference to truth. The goal of the bullshitter, says Frankfurt, is neither *arete*, nor *aletheia*. It is purely to persuade,

"When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false... He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose."

The Flemish philosophers Filip Buekens and Maarten Boudry have written in similar vein on the subject of obscurantism. Obscurantism has all the characteristics of Frankfurt's bullshit without, happily, any of its concomitant crudity. Buekens and Boudry (Buekens and Boudry 2015) argue that a hallmark of obscurantism is its wilful vagueness. The possibility that obscure writing might have meaning, invites readers to interpret the text and supply their own. Thus an obscure text functions in the same way as an abstract poem or painting. It exploits the open-mindedness of the audience who "make inflated judgments of profundity, regardless of the content". However what is appropriate in a poem or painting,



might be considered an abuse in the context of academic discourse,

"Obscurantism suggests a deliberate move on behalf of the speaker, who is accused of setting up a game of verbal smoke and mirrors to suggest depth and insight where none exists. The suspicion is, furthermore, that the obscurantist does not have anything meaningful to say and does not grasp the real intricacies of his subject matter, but nevertheless wants to keep up appearances, hoping that his reader will mistake it for profundity. This promise of a deep insight into intriguing subject matters is often sufficient to lure the audience into a futile quest for understanding."<sup>29</sup>

There is of course nothing novel in obscurantism. The Sophists were criticised in Periclean Athens for their wily use of language to baffle and persuade. Shakespeare regretfully observed, "Words are grown so false, I am loathe to prove reason with them." While Pope criticised similar semantic misdemeanours among his contemporaries in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century,

"Such laboured nothings in so strange a style,  
Amaze the unlearned and make the learned smile".

In summary, there emerges from Lacan a disturbing, chaotic, nightmare world of shifting meaning where nothing can ever be understood, and where the springs of human action and thought are mired in a world of illusion and hallucination. It is a surreal neo-Freudian world where the forces that shape all human life are repressed, deviant sexuality. It is a world moreover of wilful obscurity and paradox. The outcome is a strong sense of irrationality which attests to the futility of attempting to know anything. Students of journalism may wish to reflect on the influence of Lacan, and on the wisdom of accepting him, knowingly or tacitly, as a foundational theorist to explain how journalism works in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **04.07.00 Louis Althusser. Reality and Truth Dissolved in Psychosis.**

While Lacan's direct influence on academic journalism is limited, his real importance lies in his influence on the work of his contemporary, the French

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<sup>29</sup> There is a lively academic literature which scrutinises Lacanian-style sophistry, and sophistry in general. For example see; (Gordon Pennycook, et al. 2015)

Marxist theorist Louis Althusser. In other words, the sap of Lacanianism reaches the blossom of journalistic theory via further conceptual branches. Althusser blended Lacan's irrationalism with a reformulation of Marxism, and is arguably the single most influential political theorist in the context of Journalism Studies. The American philosopher William Lewis (2018) describes Althusserian ideas as having been,

"Broadly deployed in the social sciences and humanities and has provided a foundation for much "post-Marxist" philosophy... Though this influence is not always explicit, Althusser's work and that of his students continues to inform the research programs of literary studies, political philosophy, history, economics, and sociology".

Althusser's significance for the present project is the impact he had on later media theorists, notably Stuart Hall. The media academics Meenakshi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Durham and Kellner 2006) write that Althusser's ideas were,

"Enormously influential in the 1970s, especially shaping early British cultural studies... As Stuart Hall has pointed out, 'Althusser's interventions and their consequent development are enormously formative for the field of cultural studies'".

To understand Althusser's intellectual adventure, it is important to understand that he suffered severe psychotic mental illness throughout his career. Psychosis is characterized by an impaired relationship with reality. The American writer and activist Asad Haider (2018) describes how Althusser received, at various times, both powerful psychiatric medication and electroshock therapy,

"Today we would categorize it [Althusser's condition] as a severe bipolar disorder, characterized by frequent psychotic episodes. He was regularly institutionalized, receiving drugs and electroconvulsive therapy".

Althusser's psychosis reached a tragic climax when he murdered his wife during a psychotic episode in 1980. Althusser (Althusser 1994, p 15-16) wrote that the murder took place on an "unfathomable night which I have never been able to

fathom” when he realised, to his horror, that what he had done was real, not merely inside his head,

“Suddenly, I was terror-struck. Her eyes stared interminably, and I noticed the tip of her tongue was showing between her teeth and lips, strange and still”.

All of Althusser's work and thinking is intimately concerned with the relationship between what is real and what is imagined. However his psychosis meant he was uniquely (for a philosopher) incapable of understanding this difference except in pathological terms. For Althusser reality and unreality, truth and falsity all merge; it is like someone with severe colour blindness trying to teach others the difference between colours. This became a serious problem (and a source of great confusion to later commentators) when Althusser attempted to analyse Marx's materialism.

Because he could not understand Marx's essential distinction between reality and illusion, the word “materialism” means neither what Marx wanted it to mean, nor what later scholars assume it to mean. In fact for Althusser it means approximately the complete opposite. It is only through an awareness of his psychosis that one can begin to make sense of the extraordinary contradictions within Althusser's work. In the words of the editors of Althusser's autobiography, Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, (op cit, p 8-9) in reading Althusser we enter the realm of phantasy and hallucination in which,

“We are brought face to face with a powerful representation of madness... the fragile balance between madness and reason”.

It is an extraordinary omission of Althusserian scholarship that his psychosis is so commonly overlooked. Other important themes which are also frequently neglected are the impact on his thought of his Catholic upbringing, faith, and his confession that he was an intellectual fraud. For example, of two of his most famous texts, 'For Marx' and 'How to Read Marx's Capital' he later wrote (op cit, p 148),

"I became obsessed with the terrifying thought that these texts would expose me completely to the public at large as I really was, namely a trickster and a deceiver and nothing more, a philosopher who knew almost nothing about the history of philosophy or about Marx... what I feared was a catastrophic, public refutation of

my position".

We will consider the relevance of Althusser's psychosis and Catholicism shortly. However in reflecting on his influence on TDP, one is perhaps entitled to ask to what extent should a theory of journalism be founded on the thinking of a severely mentally ill man who was unable to distinguish reality from illusion?

#### **04.07.01 Althusser and Lacan.**

Althusser was initially a great admirer of Lacan and was fascinated by Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage' and his theory of the Gaze<sup>30</sup>. In Lacanian mirror theory there is an alternative to subject and object. This is the "Ideal-I" which is simultaneously neither and both. Thus, according to Lacan, when an infant looks into the mirror, a type of psychic "ghost" is summoned into being which will "always remain". While in Gaze Theory, Lacan asserts (1978, p 79-90) that the subject is elided into the gaze of "the other", in the "illusion of the consciousness of seeing oneself see oneself".

There is no clinical or observational evidence to support either of these recondite, Lacanian theories. They are not recognised by contemporary clinical psychology and should be considered intellectually bogus. They are also strongly truthophobic in that they blur the traditional distinction between subject and object, and thus between what is known subjectively and what is known objectively. As the Irish academic Maria Scott (2015) summarises,

"The fantasized gaze turns the subject into an object: 'The gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us. It is an x, the object when faced with which the subject becomes object.'"

Althusser was also much taken by Lacan's famously opaque literary style which he emulated. Althusser recognised this literary technique was a powerful tool to baffle and confound one's intellectual enemies. In his essay *Freud and Lacan*

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<sup>30</sup> Althusser later denounced Lacan for fraudulently misquoting Freud in order "to constitute an entire theory distinguishing between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary" which "does not exist". (Montag 1991).

(Althusser 1996 (1969) p 56) Althusser wrote approvingly that Lacanian obscurity could be used as a defence mechanism to defeat critics who could not strike what they could not pin down. Thus Lacan's language was,

"The language of a man of the besieged vanguard, condemned by the crushing strength of the threatened structures and corporations to forestall their blows, or at least to feint a response to them before they are delivered, thus discouraging the opponents from crushing him beneath their assault."

Althusser (1994, p 94) developed his own technique of obscure writing which he confessed enabled him to

"Achieve a reputation at the highest level within the university (I may have been an impostor, but there was no other way for me then)".

For Althusser, wilful deception shrouded in sophistry and intellectual fraud were purely subjective points of view. He realised that the more ambiguously he wrote, the more students might be able to read something meaningful into his words – even if the meanings were accidental or spurious. Thus, he argued, (p 103) readers could profit from intentional vagueness.

Althusser's importance to the intellectual history of journalism studies is that he fused two apparently incompatible traditions; Marxist theory, and Lacan's blend of linguistic and psychological irrationalism. In so doing he surgically removed Marxism's traditional reliance on rational empiricism and replaced it with irrationalism and truthphobia. He did this at a time when there was an urgent demand from a new generation of intellectuals for a philosophy that would justify the spirit of the late 1960s and 1970s. Just as Lacan had re-written Freud and Saussure, so Althusser rewrote Marx in his own image. It was the image of his age.

#### **04.07.02 Althusser and the Death of Marxist Materialism.**

For Karl Marx, Marxism was always a scientific project based on reason and the existence of objective reality and truth. Thus in the Preface to *The German Ideology* Marx (1846) attacked metaphysics, unreason and German idealism as

errors which occur when factual evidence is ignored,

"Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands".

The belief in the existence of an objective, material reality is a cornerstone of classical Marxist doctrine. In Marxist ideology this view is referred to as Materialism. We have previously discussed German idealism and its influence on de Saussure and we will not rehearse it here, save to note that idealism was the view espoused by Hegel who was a major influence on Marx. Indeed it is idealism which primarily separates the two thinkers. Marx (1873) explicitly rejected Hegelian idealism which he viewed it as an irrational, upside down view of the world,

"My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel... the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea." With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought... With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell".

Marx's doctrine of Dialectical Materialism was grounded in gritty economic and physical reality and the urgency of freeing the industrial working class from the grip of oppressive capitalism through revolutionary action. As we have previously noted, anything else, any departure into spiritual, metaphysical, or religious liberation, Marx (1846) insisted would be, "philosophic charlatany",

"The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises... People cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. "Liberation" is an historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions".

However by the 1960s classical Marxism was in crisis. In part this was a result of disillusion with Soviet communism after the repression of the Hungarian uprising

in 1956, but more generally, it was a response to the post-war affluence of the West. Growing prosperity was beginning to dissolve the traditional, rigid social categories based on class. The widespread availability of modern consumer goods seemed a symbol of this new age of affluence, as the Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell (1959) acknowledged to his party conference,

"There has been an especially notable increase in comforts, pleasures and conveniences in the home. Television, whether we like it or not, has transformed the leisure hours of the vast majority of our fellow citizens. Washing machines, refrigerators, modern cookers have made women's lives a great deal easier".

Writing a year later in 1960, the Austrian-British philosopher Friedrich Hayek (2006 (1960) p 222) described socialism's crisis as deep and existential and claimed that it had "collapsed",

"It has not merely lost its intellectual appeal; it has also been abandoned by the masses so unmistakably that socialist that socialist parties everywhere are searching for a new programme that will insure the active support of their followers".

However socialism may have been down, but it was not yet out. A new generation of young, left-wing activists and intellectuals, who referred to themselves as the New Left, yearned, not merely to liberate the working class, but also to liberate themselves from old-fashioned conventions and rules. The American philosopher, and historian of Marxism Andrew Levine (2003, p 90), explains the urgent intellectual challenge for the New Left was therefore to reinvent Marxism as an ideology suitable for young, aspirational, middle class activists,

"Their self-designated charge was to forge a theory suitable for leading the proletariat to victory in the class struggle. Their predicament, however, was that somehow the proletariat had disappeared."

It was into this void that Althusser stepped with his intoxicating fusion of Marxism and Lacanianism. What Althusser created has been described variously as Neo-Marxism, New-Marxism, Post-Marxism, Post-Modern Marxism, Analytical Marxism,

Structural Marxism or Freudo-Marxism. The British social theorist Michèle Barrett (1991, p 109) explains that what was needed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was not a rational philosophy committed to gritty, industrial reality, but one which promised personal liberation,

"It was necessary to consider subjectivity more generally, including unconscious as well as conscious processes, and to analyse personal experience and perceptions as well as cultural and symbolic systems... Althusser's influence on both of these trends in Marxism was immense".

The key to the new philosophy was to be a rejection of classical Marxist materialism and a *de facto* return to the Hegelian, or Fichtean, idealism which Marx had so vehemently opposed. Objective reality had to go, objective truth had to go and objective knowledge had to go. The liberation of the industrial working class from capitalist oppression was to be replaced with the liberation of anyone, or any group, which felt itself to be oppressed. As Barrett explains (op cit, p 110), what was needed was a doctrine of subjectivism,

"Subjectivity is "a massive lacuna in Marxism... [which] has stood in the way of a broader consideration of experience, identity, sexuality, affect and so on. As will readily be noted, the 'new social movements' have all attached much more importance to issues to do with subjectivity, and the politics of personal life and the self".

The Australian scholar of intellectual history Ian Hunter (2006, p 101) agrees that the great success of Althusserianism was that, while piously claiming to be a return to authentic Marxism, it was in fact the exact opposite. It rewrote Marx for the affluent baby boomer generation who were seeking a philosophy of personal liberation and self-reflective spirituality,

"Rather than offering an account of economy and society, Althusser reworks the text of Capital in accordance with the requirements of metaphysical history and the transcendental epoché".

#### **04.07.03 Althusser's Irrational Turn. Psychosis as Theory.**



The problem for Althusser was that he regarded himself as an orthodox Marxist-Leninist who embraced materialism and for whom the word of Marx was sacred. His solution would be a large-scale, arbitrary re-defining of key Marxist concepts inspired by Lacanian theory and underwritten by his own psychotic inability to distinguish reality from fantasy. This manoeuvre would be carried out under the protection of a shield of linguistic ambiguity and obscurity, and would enable Althusser to turn Marxist objectivity into subjectivity, while claiming (and genuinely believing) he was doing no such thing. As Levine puts it (2003, p 89), with some understatement,

"Tactfully, without making his opposition explicit, Althusser therefore sided against the philosophical system that Lenin actually did help to shape; the one that everyone, except the Althusserians, called 'dialectical materialism'".

Althusser's irrational turn was made explicit in 1970 in an essay entitled *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*. In it (Althusser 2001) he discussed the role of ideological state apparatuses (IDAs) which he says function to repress citizens by controlling the ideology of society. He then attributes to Marx the Lacanian concept that,

"Ideology is conceived as a pure illusion, a pure dream, i.e. as nothingness. All its reality is external to it. Ideology is thus thought as an imaginary construction whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud".

After which he famously concludes (ibid) that,

"Ideology is a 'Representation' of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence".

Here Althusser is attempting to understand and describe the relationship between reality and what people believe about reality. For a psychotic this is an impossible task which leads him into insoluble paradox. Althusser is attempting to have his cake and eat it. He claims, in orthodox Marxist vein, that the conditions of existence

are "real", but that the relationship is "imaginary". In other words the world which is apparently objective and material is always wrapped in the subjective imagination. Marx's material world may be "real", but this is ultimately an illusion because all our impressions of the world exist only within our minds. Thus Althusser applies what amounts to simple philosophical scepticism to Marx and encloses his objectivity within a bubble of subjectivity. Althusser then uses Lacanian theory to place this bubble ambiguously inside another bubble. He asserts (ibid) that reality may exist, but only when interpreted (like a dream) by psychoanalysis. Thus ideology, or 'world outlooks' are,

"Largely imaginary, i.e. do not 'correspond to reality'. However, while admitting that they do not correspond to reality, i.e. that they constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be 'interpreted' to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology = illusion/allusion)".

Then, lest his readers grow concerned that he has turned Marx upside down and betrayed Marxism, Althusser reassures them,

"It remains that in this inverted presentation of things, we are not dealing with an 'inversion' at all, since it is clear that certain notions have purely and simply disappeared."

Althusser also makes an astonishing intellectual claim (ibid), equating Marxism with the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza the Seventeenth century Dutch philosopher,

"The accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing)... Spinoza explained this completely two centuries before Marx, who practised it but without explaining it in detail."

Althusser does not explain here precisely what he means by being a Spinozist. Spinoza often wrote in a cryptic, ambiguous style which has led commentators to numerous contradictory readings. Hegel, for example (1995, p 281), understood Spinoza to be a solipsist (an extreme idealist who denies the existence of the real,

material world and other people),

"Spinoza maintains that there is no such thing as what is known as the world; it is merely a form of God, and in and for itself it is nothing. The world has no true reality, and all this that we know as the world has been cast in to the abyss of the one identity. There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth whatever; according to Spinoza what is, is God, and God alone".

The suggestion that Karl Marx, the arch realist, subscribed to this sort of metaphysical abstraction and Fichtean idealism is surprising, if not absurd.<sup>31</sup> It is so disconcerting for Althusserians, that some have gone to a great deal of trouble to argue that Althusser did not adopt a Hegelian reading of Spinoza. For example, writing in 1992, the American intellectual historian Robert Paul Resch was dismissive of those who "do not bother to understand" Althusser. Resch (1992, p 42) argued passionately that Althusser read Spinoza as a "materialist and realist",

"Althusser is often condemned out of hand by those who do not understand or do not bother to understand either Spinoza's philosophical position or what Althusser accepts and rejects in it... What strikes Althusser so forcefully about Spinoza's philosophy is the rigorous and original materialist and realist positions that it defends".

However two years after Resch wrote this, Althusser's autobiography was published. In it he made it quite clear that he *did* read Spinoza just as Hegel had done. Althusser (1994, p 216) saw in Spinoza someone for whom reality was contained within a mental, or metaphysical bubble,

"What I discovered in Spinoza... was a formidable theory of religious ideology, an 'apparatus of thought' which turns the world upside down... though I have to admit this is a somewhat Hegelian reading of Spinoza, it is not in my view a false reading".

What now emerges is an unmistakable sense that while Althusser claimed to advocate classical Marxist materialism and realism, his conception of realism was

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<sup>31</sup> Andre Liebich discusses Althusser's conviction that Marx should be read as an irrealist, "Althusser affirms that the Young Marx's antecedents are important and they are to be found in Kant, Fichte, and Feuerbach and not in Hegel." (Liebich 1979)

quite different to Marx's, or indeed, to the normal understanding of the word. For Althusser the real world was "real", yet it only existed within the imagination. For Althusser, as we have noted, reality was indistinguishable from unreality. Or as he explained (1994, p 81) in his autobiography,

"I intend to stick closely to the facts... but hallucinations are also facts".

Thus, to borrow a recent phrase, one may say of Althusser's use of the words "reality" and "materialism", "You keep using those words; I do not think they mean what you think they mean".

Althusser's psychosis made it impossible for him to understand Marx's materialism other than in terms of mental experience. What for Marx was obvious was for Althusser an incomprehensible riddle. The neurologist Shaheen Lakhan (Reitan 2013) explains that psychotic individuals locate their reality inside bubbles of phantasy, often asserting that one cannot have knowledge about knowledge,

"The dissonance between the mental world of the psychotic individual and the external world represents a split view of the internal, mental experience and external reality... [leaving psychotic individuals] in a permanent state of cognitive dissonance between internal experience and internal reality".

This clinical description closely matches and explains Althusser's deep confusion between the real and the mental. It also explains why Althusser could insist he was a materialist while, at the same time, believing reality and unreality were identical. For example, in a much quoted passage, Althusser draws on Lacan's complex (and clinically unjustified) Mirror Theory and Gaze Theory to place his bubbles of subjectivity within further bubbles of subjectivity. Althusser asserts that individuals are "hailed" or "interpellated" by ideology which functions like a "double mirror". This interpellation "subjects the subjects to the Subject" trapping them in endless layers of transcendental subjectivity, while at the same time creating, or constructing, "reality". Finally Althusser introduces the concept of God as the ultimate inner and outer bubble layer (Althusser 1971). In doing so he hints, in an extremely long sentence<sup>32</sup>, that ideology and God are one and the same; both

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<sup>32</sup> According to the Flesch Reading Ease formula, any sentence containing more than twenty

creating and being created by the individual.

"We observe that the structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects in the name of a Unique and Absolute Subject is specular, i.e. a mirror-structure, and doubly specular... the guarantee that this really concerns them and Him, and that since everything takes place in the Family (the Holy Family: the Family is in essence Holy), 'God will recognize his own in it', i.e. those who have recognized God, and have recognized themselves in Him, will be saved".

In these key passages Althusser transforms Marxism from a scientific enterprise founded on an iron belief in material reality, to an irrational, quasi-religious, metaphysics based on subjectivism.

#### **04.07.04 Althusser's Catholic Marxism. Marxism as Religion.**

For a Marxist intellectual to introduce theological mysticism into a reading of Marx is sufficiently remarkable as to require some explanation. Although it is something commentators generally pass over in embarrassed silence, the Australian political and theological scholar Roland Boer (2007, p 484) notes that Althusser was brought up as a devout Roman Catholic and, as he made clear in his posthumously published autobiography, he never lost his faith, though for most of his career he sought to repress it,

"Althusser is a "catholic" Marxist, sliding between the catholicity of the Church itself, especially the Roman Catholic Church, and the internationalism of Marxism... Although he perpetually tried to reject or contain the Church as an item of feudal history, as an item of practical ideology, and so on, the repressed kept returning".

Althusser's Catholicism is a neglected area of study, doubtless because it is an uncomfortable pill for Althusserians to swallow. As the Slovenian scholar of politics and philosophy Agon Hamza (2016, p 48) puts it,

"Here lies the "embarrassing" moment of Althusser with regard to his followers and disciples: most of them do not mention his affiliation with the Church or his

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nine words is "very difficult" to understand. This paragraph consists of two sentences, the second of which contains 108 words

Catholic past, as if that marks a past that has to be repressed or forgotten, an embarrassment that has to be, at best, not talked about".

Douglas Johnson (Althusser 1994, p xv), writing in the introduction to Althusser's autobiography, explains that Althusser never lost his faith, though he suppressed it knowing it would be unfashionable among his followers,

"He was brought up in a strict Catholic tradition and before the war he was one of the leaders of the Catholic youth movement... the revelations of one of his former teachers at Lyons, Jean Guilton, suggest that he never broke off relations with Catholics... In 1979 he sought an audience with Pope John Paul II".

Indeed, in an extraordinary passage, Althusser describes his vision of Marxism as being a promised land of egalitarianism reached by crossing a "vast river of shit" (1994, p 225). It is noteworthy that it is not merely Marx's industrial proletariat who can cross to the other side, "everyone" can achieve salvation by following the "helmsman". The revolutionary journey will not be easy, warns Althusser, but the rewards will be great,

"If, however they succeeded in crossing this vast river of shit, then on the horizon would be the shore with sunshine and soft spring breezes. Everyone would disembark; there would no longer be strife between individuals and interest groups... instead there would be fruit and flowers in profusion for everyone to gather and enjoy... In saying this I believe I am being true to Marx's own thought".

This conception, which Althusser claims is "true to Marx's own thought" is strikingly similar to the traditional Judaeo-Christian fable of crossing the river Jordan, which for Christians symbolises the moment when the believer is filled with the Holy Spirit and emptied of sin. As the British scholar Norman Cohn explains (2004, p 287-288), Marxism without its scientific bedrock of economic, materialism reduces to Utopian Millenarianism. Althusser's project, in the final analysis, dissolves into a quasi-religious doctrine of salvation and redemption,

"What Marx passed on to twentieth-century Communist movements was not the fruit of his long years of study in the fields of economics and sociology, but a quasi-apocalyptic phantasy... Capitalism as a perfect hell in which an ever smaller

number of enormously wealthy men ruthlessly exploit and tyrannise over an ever larger mass of pauperised workers... now about to go under in a sea of blood and fire so that the way shall be cleared for the egalitarian Millennium."<sup>33</sup>

It is Althusser's deeply ingrained French Roman Catholicism, along with his psychotic illness, that puts into context his ineluctable urge to transform Marxist materialism into something transcendental. As Boer (op cit, p 483) points out, the famous, long paragraph from 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' makes much more sense when "ideology" is viewed as a thinly disguised synonym for the God of French Catholicism,

"I cannot stress the Catholic saturation of the second passage enough... "religious ideology" calls a particular person who, created by God, must respond to this call. God speaks to this person through the Bible and Church and, if this subject responds to the law of love, he will have eternal life and so on."

Alain Badiou was Althusser's most passionate disciple and his successor at the Ecole Normale Superieure. However he later wrote a scathing critique of his erstwhile mentor condemning his irrational turn which,

"Reduced ideology into the mechanism of illusions without taking into account the content of the class struggle".

(Badiou and Balmes 2016, p 22)

According to Badiou (Hoens, Jottkandt and Buelens 2009, p 1) what Althusser did was to cease writing philosophy, and begin writing anti-philosophy (irrational, truthophobic theorising). For Badiou this trend, which he traces to Lacan, is little more than a form of religion,

"When philosophy is interpretation, analysis, or theory, it is nothing but a variant of religion. It is dominated by the nihilist figure of the priest".

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<sup>33</sup> Russell also noted the latent theological character of Marxism, and offered a dictionary to enable translation between Marxism and Judeo-Christian ideology. Thus Russell offers; "The Messiah = Marx", "The Elect = The Proletariat", "Hell = Punishment of the Capitalists" etc. See; (Russell 1947) p 383

#### **04.07.05 The Significance of Althusser: The Irrational Turn.**

In summary one can say that Althusser performed radical surgery on Marxism by cutting off both of Marx's legs and replacing them with Lacan's truthophobic irrationalism, tintured with the mysticism of French Catholicism, the whole project seen through the prism of psychotic mental illness, and wrapped in obscure, ambiguous language.

For theorists what remained was Marx's moral tone, his condemnation of oppression, his call for revolutionary resistance and a belief in a future, utopian earthly paradise of social justice. What was lost was any rational way of objectively determining what oppression actually is, or judging who exactly is oppressing whom. Oppression and injustice could henceforth be measured by an individual, or group's, subjective feelings or emotions. Writing in 1978 the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson accused Althusser of executing an "extraordinary fracture" in Marxist theory which was nothing less than an assault upon reason itself. In an excoriating and scholarly critique, Thompson (1995 (1978) p 5) blamed Althusser for turning Marxism into an irrational cult. In exchange for traditional Marxism, he argued, Althusser offered,

"An a-historical theoreticism which, at the first examination, discloses itself as idealism... Althusserian Marxism is not only an idealism but has many of the attributes of a theology, then what is at issue, within the Marxist tradition, is the defence of reason itself".

The British writer Anthony Daniels argues that Althusser's work achieved popularity because it served the needs of a generation in search of a theoretical framework to justify both the destruction of existing rules, and the establishment of a doctrine of freedom from personal responsibility. Althusser, Daniels (1993) concludes, found himself in the right place at the right time,

"Future intellectual historians... will find it puzzling that he should have been accorded respect and even veneration by people who were not themselves without intelligence... Althusser and his admirers were emblematic of the folly of an age".



For journalism, Althusser is significant largely because his irrationalist neo-Marxism influenced the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall and his doctrine of Hallism.

#### **04.08.00 Stuart Hall.**

Our arboreal journey has taken us from Fichtean roots, up the tree trunk and along several thick conceptual branches. In Stuart Hall we finally emerge into daylight and approach the blossom and fruit of contemporary journalistic theory. Stuart Hall is today not infrequently cited by academics. For example, as we have previously noted, the distinguished scholar Thomas Hanitzsch does so in his 2017 paper on journalistic roles.

It is hard to overstate the importance and impact of Stuart Hall on TDP. For practical purposes one can argue that Stuart Hall is the embodiment of TDP. Academic journalism and media theory has not advanced significantly beyond the formulations he constructed between the 1970s and the 1990s. He was influenced by the irrationalism of Althusser (with its Lacanianism and Post-Structuralism), by Gramsci's hegemonic indifference to truth, and by the normative Marxist imperative of the Frankfurt School. To these he brought his own unique perspective of race. He is often referred to as the "Godfather of multiculturalism", but could equally be referred to as the 'Godfather of Identity politics'. His obituary in the *Guardian* in 2014 (Butler 2014) described him as an intellectual giant,

"Known as the "godfather of multiculturalism", Hall had a huge influence on academic, political and cultural debates for over six decades".

For other commentators Hall is an iconic, heroic figure; an academic "rock star", not merely for his ideas, but also because of the colour of his skin. The British cultural theorist and film maker John Akomfrah (Hudson and Pears 2014) describes Hall as a role model,

"Stuart Hall was one of the few people of colour we saw on television who wasn't crooning, dancing, or running. He was a kind of rock star for us [black teenage bookworms], a pop icon with brains whose very iconic presence on this most

public of platforms – television – suggested all manner of ‘impossible possibilities.’”

The *Guardian* journalist Suzanne Moore (2014) goes even further and describes Hall as an intellectual and political deity, recalling that his writing altered how people saw the world,

"Hall's words were political interventions that changed the terms of the debate... My God!" I remember saying. "This man should be in charge of the universe."

Nor was Hall's influence confined to the UK. The American academics Katherine Sender and Peter Decherney (Sender and Decherney 2016) testify to his influence in the US stating that,

"Stuart Hall's significance as a scholar, teacher, and public intellectual would be hard to overstate, not only in his chosen country, the U.K. (he was born in Jamaica), but increasingly in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. He influenced dozens of fields in the humanities and social sciences."

#### **04.08.01 Hallism - Irrationality and Truthphobia.**

Hall's debt to Althusser is unambiguous. Writing in 1985, in a paper entitled *Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates*, Hall (1985, p 92) accurately summarises that Althusser's achievement was to re-write Marxism for the modern age,

"Althusser was the key figure in modern theorizing on this question who clearly broke with some of the old protocols and provided a persuasive alternative which remains broadly within the terms of the Marxist problematic. This was a major theoretical achievement... Althusser's break with a monistic conception of Marxism demanded the theorization of difference—the recognition that there are different social contradictions with different origins".

Hall was quick to spot that, according to the new Marxism, being oppressed was now no longer the sole preserve of the industrial working class. Other groups could also be oppressed, not on rational grounds, but on non-rational, emotional or

intuitive grounds. Hall pushed open the door which Althusser had unlocked and drew on his own personal experience of being a black Jamaican (op cit, 108-109),

"Let me take a brief, personal example as an indication of how some of the things I have said about Althusser's general concept of ideology allow us to think about particular ideological formations. I want to think about that particular complex of discourses that implicates the ideologies of identity, place, ethnicity and social formation generated around the term "black"... based on my own experience, both in the Caribbean and in Britain".

Drawing heavily on Althusser's psychotic reading of Lacan's eccentric readings of Freud and Saussure, Hall (ibid) explains that,

"At different times in my thirty years in England, I have been "hailed" or interpellated as "coloured," "West-Indian," "Negro," "black," "immigrant." Sometimes in the street; sometimes at street corners; sometimes abusively; sometimes in a friendly manner; sometimes ambiguously".

Hall (ibid) argues that his very identity is created by the words which people use to describe him,

"As a concrete lived individual, am I indeed any one of these interpolations? Does any one of them exhaust me?"

Hall is here expressing a view known as nominalism. This is the Post-Structuralist, Saussurean belief that language creates reality, specifically ideas and concepts. As the Canadian-American philosopher Leonard Peikoff (1967) explains,

"Denying that concepts have an objective basis in the facts of reality, nominalists declare that the source of concepts is a subjective human decision: men arbitrarily select certain characteristics to serve as the basis (the "essentials") for a classification".

From the point of view of intellectual history, one can argue that Hall's paper marks the birth of modern identity politics. The British academic Helen Davis (2004, p 164) quotes Hall as explaining how Hallism, this new "conceptual space", was

created,

"Class, as the 'master category', was obliged to take its place alongside other 'primordial' social divisions, like race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality."<sup>34</sup>

I should clarify that, in using the word "irrational" to describe Hallism, I am not suggesting that Stuart Hall was himself irrational. He was not. I am attempting to express the Hallist doctrine that to be "oppressed", one does not have to prove one's case with empirical fact; one simply has to subjectively feel oppressed. This is because Hallism shifts the "site of struggle" away from evidence; to language and "the text" in the structuralist, or nominalist, tradition. Drawing on Gramscian hegemonic theory, and uniting it with Saussurean semiotics, as reinvented by Lacan and Althusser, Hallism makes oppression a question of who controls the definition. For Hall (1985, p 112) the oppressed are oppressed by language,

"Often, ideological struggle actually consists of attempting to win some new set of meanings for an existing term or category, of dis-articulating it from its place in a signifying structure. For example, it is precisely because "black" is the term which connotes the most despised, the dispossessed, the unenlightened, the uncivilized, the uncultivated, the scheming, the incompetent, that it can be contested, transformed and invested with a positive ideological value".

Hall makes it clear that, although he chose race as his subject, identity politics is not limited to oppression based on race. Hall says "any key concept" could be equally valid because oppression, "Exists ideologically only in relation to the contestation around those chains of meaning, and the social forces involved in that." Thus Hall (p 113) explains,

"I could have taken any key concept, category or image around which groups have organized and mobilized."

By the time of Hall's death, identity politics had indeed blossomed into a much

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<sup>34</sup> Hall was initially reluctant to admit other groups through the door he had opened. When feminism became the second social category to enter the temple of oppression, Hall was famously petulant, sourly recalling, "It's not known generally how and where feminism first broke in. I use the metaphor deliberately: As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, capped on the table of cultural studies". (Hall 1992)

wider site of contestation. For example in 2018, according to the Anti Oppression Network (Anti Oppression Network.), Marx's original concept had been relegated to "classism", merely one of many forms of modern oppression taking its place alongside colorism, racism, ableism, lookism, sizeism, saneism, speciesism, colonialism, nativism, ageism, cisgenderism, sexism, human-centrism, hetosexism and others.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to understand the nature of the ideological shift that Hall has wrought. Traditionally (i.e. within the Folk Theory) racism was regarded as "racial discrimination". It was held to be morally obnoxious because human beings should not be treated unequally or discriminated against unjustly. For example, the American Declaration of Independence, written in 1776 by Thomas Jefferson states,

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness".

Thus in the traditional, Enlightenment model, racism (or other forms of prejudice) are objectionable because they are hypocritical and offend against the principle that all humans share a common humanity. Thus the 18th century radical Thomas Paine (1987 (1775) p 52) attacked slavery by appealing both to moral sentiments and to reason,

"Our traders in MEN (an unnatural commodity!) must know the wickedness of that SLAVE-TRADE, if they attend to reasoning, or the dictates of their own hearts".

The civil rights leader Martin Luther King assumed the same ideology; that it is both immoral, and irrational to discriminate against a human being because of the colour of his skin. King (King, 1963) cites Jefferson, and argues that it is intellectually indefensible to argue that one human being could be inferior to another due to skin pigmentation,

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<sup>35</sup> Curiously "irrationalism" is absent from the network's list of oppressions, though its antithesis "intellectualism" is included and described, without irony, as the belief that, "Deliberate action is a result of a process of conscious or subconscious reasoning".

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."<sup>36</sup>

The American legal scholar Lawrence Solum (2006) summarises that the enlightenment view, which descends from Aristotle, is that natural law can be discovered by reason, and that,

"For the fully virtuous agent, reason, emotion, and desire work together in harmony - they are not at war."

In short, under this model, oppression is a judgement founded on reason and fact as well as on moral sentiment. However according to Hallism, the tribunal of reason is not recognised. As we shall presently see, the doctrine of Hallism holds that whether or not a particular group is oppressed can simply be "contested". But crucially, in Hallism, there is no mechanism to explain *how* it is contested beyond appealing to subjective feeling.

For example an influential textbook of social justice education published in 1997, explains oppression in terms of psychological, subjective criteria and the use of language. The book's authors, the American academics Rita Hardiman and Bailey Jackson (Hardiman and Jackson 1997), argue that oppression is "psychological colonization" which can be "accepted" or "resisted". But they are silent regarding how anyone can judge who is oppressed and who is not,

"Psychological colonization of the target group occurs through socializing the oppressed to internalize their oppressed condition and collude with the oppressor's ideology and social system... Part of the method of establishing dominance in the system of oppression is the naming of the target group by the agent group. The ability to name reflects who has power. Agent groups establish their dominance by controlling how targets are named".

This lack of rational criteria for oppression is a fatal weakness in Hall's project. As

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion about the changing understanding of racism, see Appendix A.

the feminist blogger Rebecca Reilly-Cooper pertinently pointed out in 2018 (Cooper 2013),

"The problem with some versions of intersectional identity politics is that, in elevating subjective experience above objective knowledge, they dissolve the possibility of making coherent, meaningful claims of injustice or oppression at all. On this logic all complaints are reduced to an expression of one's personal preference or feelings, with no way to distinguish genuine injustice from mere dislike".

#### **04.08.02 Hallism and Truth. The Impact on Journalism.**

Hallism had significant impacts on both the culture of British journalism, and on wider social attitudes. For example in 1978, in his influential *Policing the Crisis; Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, Hall argued the case for journalistic nominalism; the view that describing a problem *creates* the problem. Hall argued that journalists who reported the fact that young black men were disproportionately involved in mugging in the UK, were responsible for creating a problem which would not otherwise have existed. Hall (Hall et al. 2013 (1973) p 1) intellectualised the concept of "shooting the messenger",

"Part of what is standing in the way – producing crime, so to speak, as a simple and transparent fact – is the label 'mugging' itself".

Hall suggests (ibid) the solution is journalistic self-censorship,

"If we could abolish the word, that would have been our principal – perhaps our only – 'practical proposal'. It has done incalculable harm – raising the wrong things into sensational focus, hiding and mystifying the deeper causes. A moratorium should now be declared on its highly suspect use, especially by politicians, judges, the police, criminal statisticians, the mass media and our moral guardians".

Hall's thesis in *Policing the Crisis* reduces to the Gramscian, Althusserian view that journalists report crime only because they are propagandists for the ideologies of the racist ruling elite. Since one of the consequences of truthful journalism,

according to Hall, is to provide oxygen for racism; then, Hall implies, truthful journalism must itself be racist. Or, to put the argument more moderately, journalism which reports truth without due regard for the possible social or political consequences, is racist. This view, which equates the possible future consequences of something with the thing itself, I will refer to as 'journalistic consequentialism'. Journalistic consequentialism, in conflating telling the truth with the possible, future *consequences* of telling the truth, is both a logical non sequitur and highly truthophobic. It implies that journalism should be guided by the principle that news should only be reported if its consequences are socially and politically good.

However journalistic consequentialism is not without consequences of its own. For example the 1999 Macpherson report which accused British police collectively of "institutional racism", embraced the Hallist concept that it is racist to fail to consider the consequences of behaviour, even if the behaviour itself is innocent and fair minded. The report noted with approval (Macpherson 1999, par 6.33) that institutional racism takes place when behaviour is "uncritical" which means that,

"The actor has failed to consider the consequences of his or her actions for people from ethnic minorities" irrespective of the intent of the individuals concerned".

However it can be argued that this focus on the unknowable future consequences of innocent behaviour promotes a culture in which people's main concern is to avoid, at all costs, the damning social label of "racist". The consequences of this may be far from trivial. For example the sexual exploitation of more than 1,400 girls in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013 by mainly Pakistani-heritage offenders, was prolonged by fears that discussing what was occurring would be considered racist. As the Independent Inquiry noted (Jay 2014, p 91),

"Frontline staff appeared to be confused as to what they were supposed to say and do and what would be interpreted as 'racist'. From a political perspective, the approach of avoiding public discussion of the issues was ill judged".

The report continued (p 94),



“Several councillors interviewed believed that by opening up these issues they could be 'giving oxygen' to racist perspectives that might in turn attract extremist political groups and threaten community cohesion... This was at best naïve, and at worst ignoring a politically inconvenient truth”.

Before concluding (p 147),

"People must be able to raise concerns without fear of being labelled racist".

Hall's nominalism, consequentialism and truthphobia left a lasting mark on both journalistic theory and praxis, despite the fact his arguments were essentially political, rather than intellectually compelling. The words of the British sociologist Colin Sumner (1994, p 284), though aimed elsewhere, seem an apt description of *Policing the Crisis*,

"At the end of the day, the book should be judged not so much as an academic discourse but as a political brick that was hurled through the windows of various establishments that had it coming to them."

However our main focus here will be on Hall's epistemology; i.e. the influential model which he proposed to account for how audiences choose to believe one news report rather than another. Due to its truthphobia it is perhaps better described as a rejection of epistemology, or as an anti-epistemology. It is the closest thing within TDP to a mechanism for distinguishing between fake news and news, though I will argue it is woefully inadequate. Hall called it the encoding-decoding model and he first published it in 1973. In order to understand it, it will be useful to first understand how it fitted into media theory as it existed at the time.

#### **04.08.03 Encoding-Decoding. Limited or Powerful Effects? Theory in 1973.**

Underpinning all of Hall's arguments is the assumption that audiences are highly susceptible to media influence. Hallism sees audiences as vulnerable to journalists who "reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order". To put it simply Hallism, while rejecting the classical economic determinism of Marxism, replaces it with a cultural determinism in which

audiences are passive victims of journalism's ideological oppression.

But is this so? Are audiences really helpless and devoid of critical judgement? Hall never provided any empirical research to justify this view which appears to be psychologically implausible. Indeed even for Hall this picture was uncomfortably unrealistic. One of its major drawbacks is that it is unable to explain how citizens can become Marxist revolutionaries in the first place and challenge the status quo. As the British social psychologist Sonia Livingstone explains (2006, p 8-9), it is an inadequate picture,

"The audience as duped mass, represents – or is often represented as - the pessimistic starting point from which critical theory, cultural studies and feminist approaches have been seeking escape routes".

Hall's conceptual challenge was therefore to modify his theory to make it more psychologically plausible and provide a mechanism to explain how audiences are able to choose between one media message and another. Hall's dilemma was that he did not want to create a model which bestowed upon audiences unlimited rational free will. Free will arguments are destructive of Hall's entire project and suggest that human beings are not as culturally determined as Hallism would have us believe. Hallism (Hall 2011) is also politically hostile to free will arguments viewing them as neo-liberal. In short, underpinning Hall's dilemma are the vexed and eternal philosophical questions; "Do humans possess free will and make rational choices and judgements based on evidence?" or "Are human decisions determined by powerful forces beyond their control?" Hall was committed to the latter (Livingstone 2006, p 9) and therefore sought a compromise; a model in which the audience would be,

"Generally conformist but just occasionally resistant".

Hall was not working in an intellectual vacuum. He played an important role in the lively intellectual debates which surrounded the emergence of TDP in the early 1970s. Hall was among those seeking to overturn the long-established rationalist and positivist theories of the older generation. In media and communication studies, these positivist ideas were expressed in a theory known as Uses and

Gratifications Theory (UGT).

UGT was pioneered by the American and Israeli sociologist and communication scientist Elihu Katz and explained in his 1955 book *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. Katz's approach was based on empirical research which examined how audiences actually interact with media (radio and TV). These observations led him to conclude that audiences were not passive consumers, but rather actively sought information and entertainment. Katz's thesis was that audiences used mass media for their own gratification (intellectual, psychological or emotional). Because it concluded that the media had only a *limited* effect on audiences, who are discerning, the model is known as the Limited Effects Model.<sup>37</sup> More broadly we can describe Katz's approach as rational and evidence-based. It is often referred to as "behaviourist".

During the late 1960s and early 1970s UGT and behaviourism in general was coming under attack from a new generation of academics who felt it limited the study of media to a dry, statistics gathering exercise. The new, baby-boomer generation's quarrel with UGT was that it over-stated the extent to which audiences were rational and discerning. As Katz describes (Katz 1987, p 5), they supported the,

"Constructionist proposition that the media are architects of social and political reality."

This intellectual trend is referred to as the "Return to the concept of powerful mass media" taking its name from an influential 1972 paper by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann.<sup>38</sup> In January 1973 Katz, sensing that he was swimming against the tide of intellectual fashion, published a paper entitled *Uses and Gratifications Research*. In it he attempted to answer his critics and pointed out that UGT accepted that audiences were, to some extent, influenced by the media. Katz cited research by Natan Katzman (Katzman 1972, p 212) which had studied how audiences reacted to TV soap operas and concluded,

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<sup>37</sup> For an overview see Esser (2008) and Katz (1987).

<sup>38</sup> Noelle-Neumann's paper was read to the International Congress of Psychology in August 1972 and appeared in book form in 1973.

"They can establish or reinforce value systems. They can suggest how people should act in certain situations. They can legitimize behavior and remove taboos about discussing sensitive topics such as drugs and premarital sex.

The big question is to what degree the daytime serials change attitudes and norms and to what extent they merely follow and reinforce their audience. A study of viewers is the obvious step toward an answer. Lacking that study, it seems that the soap operas both reinforce and cause change".

Katz challenged his critics to provide some evidence to show UGT was wrong. Without evidence he argued, there could be no rational basis for them to object. Katz (Katz 1973, p 520) demanded evidence-based theory, not theory-based evidence,

"To assert that mass communication is a latter-day opiate of the masses presupposes a media-output audience-satisfaction nexus that gratifications research treats as hypothesis rather than fact".

It was into this feisty debate that Hall stepped with his highly influential paper *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* which was published in September 1973.<sup>39</sup> *Encoding and Decoding* is Hall's best known paper and is frequently cited today in pedagogic media studies and journalism texts. But how could Hall reply to Katz? He did not have any empirical evidence to offer (as Katz had demanded). Instead Hall decided to offer a purely theoretical model. To justify this approach he would follow Althusser and reject the entire scientific, rational world in which the Americans were operating. Instead Hall would substitute the ambiguous and murky world of Post-Structuralist semiotic linguistics. If he could not answer Katz's arguments, he would bypass them. Hall would counter evidence based-theory with theory-based evidence. As the German writer Matthias Becke (Becke 2002) summaries,

"Stuart Hall integrated different traditions in his model, and not all of them are

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<sup>39</sup> Hall revised his paper several times, the best known version being a shortened version published in 1980 in *Culture, Media, Language*. I will quote from both, but will cite the original 1973 stencilled version unless otherwise indicated. My source for the 1980 text will be, (Hall 2001)

easily compatible. In some sense, 'Encoding / Decoding' is a Marxist critique of the liberal 'uses and gratifications' tradition that draws heavily on the structuralism of Louis Althusser... When 'Encoding / Decoding' emerged in the 1970s, this was, and still largely is, received wisdom in cultural studies".

There are therefore two parts to Hall's encoding-decoding model; the theoretical scaffolding which he offers to justify the model, and the model's epistemological mechanism. Let us begin by examining the theoretical scaffolding.

#### **04.08.04 The Theoretical Scaffolding. Decoding Hall's codes.**

Hall (1973, p 1) begins by explaining that he will use the concepts of encoding/decoding, long established concepts in communication theory, to argue that,

"Communication between the production elites in broadcasting and their audiences is necessarily a form of 'systematically distorted communication'".

He also explains (ibid) his argument will be based on semiotic linguistics,

"I therefore want, for the moment, to retain a base in the semiotic/linguistic approach to 'televisual language.'"

We have already discussed the semiotic linguistics of de Saussure and have noted that a key feature is the assertion that language does not describe the real, physical world. According to de Saussure, words are signifiers; signs which signify mental images or ideas (the signified). These mental images are not the same thing as the real, physical referents. As Raymond Tallis summarises (2000, p x), for Saussure and the neo-Saussureans,

"At the heart of language is not an external relationship between a particular physical sound and a material thing, but an internal relationship between oppositions."

Transplanting this 19<sup>th</sup> century irrationalism to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hall explains that

television is a "discourse" which means that it is therefore also a "language". Following Lacan, Althusser and de Saussure, Hall argues (op cit, p 2) that since language does not describe reality; then neither can television,

"The raw historical event cannot in that form be transmitted by, say, a television news-cast. It can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual language. In the moment when the historical event passes under the sign of language, it is subject to all the complex formal 'rules' by which language signifies".

However, in constructing this argument, Hall is confusing and conflating the "form" and "content" of language and also the form and content of a TV news bulletin. This is a mischievous conflation. Communication and language do not work in the way Hall assumes. For example if a taciturn customer were to go into a cafe and point to the written word "latte" on the menu; the customer would expect to receive a real, physical cup of latte - not the word "latte" on a piece of paper. Nor would he expect to be served the "idea" of a latte. If the customer asked for a "latte" by *speaking* the word "latte"; he would similarly expect to receive a real cup of latte which he could drink. He would not expect the barista to serve him with the spoken word "latte". Language is a powerful communication tool precisely because it does not require us to carry around all the items to which we wish to refer. Because his semiotic argument is so unconvincing, if not ridiculous, Hall archly advises his readers to switch off their common sense. He disarmingly reassures them (2001, p 167),

"We must not be fooled by appearances".

On this fragile linguistic evidence Hall believes he has established, in these early pages, that "the formal sub-rules of language are 'in dominance'" and consequently that Katz's rational world of empirical audience research is rendered invalid, because it is enclosed in a bubble of Post-Structuralist linguistic unreality. Taking aim at Katz, Hall says (1973, p 4) that UGT,

"Cannot be understood in simple behavioural terms. 'Effects, uses, 'gratifications' are themselves framed by structures of understanding... which permit the meanings signified in language to be transposed into conduct or consciousness".

Just as Althusser re-invented Marxism by enclosing Marx's objective materialism inside a bubble of subjectivism; so Hall believes he has bypassed Katz's scientific materialism by wrapping it inside a bubble of Post-Structuralist linguistics. However he has not done so because his assumptions about language are wrong. Audience research is not rendered impossible or invalid because it uses language, any more than ordering a coffee is rendered impossible because it uses language. Hall describes (p 5) as "new and exciting" his discovery that all traditional, empirical research is rendered irrelevant because it only refers to language and not to reality (or that there is no reality outside of language),

"There seems some ground for thinking that a new and exciting phase in audience research, of a quite new kind, may be opening up. At either end of the communicative chain, the use of the semiotic paradigm promises to dispel the lingering behaviourism which has dogged mass media research for so long".

As Helen Davis accurately observes (2004, p 66-67),

"This was the moment when media studies went textual"<sup>40</sup>.

Hall's next step is to introduce his model of encoding and decoding which he illustrates with a diagram. The diagram is based closely on the well-known Shannon and Weaver model of communication. Claude Elwood Shannon formulated this model in a 1948 paper entitled *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*. The model is highly technical and its details need not detain us here. What is noteworthy is that it is only intended to apply to the technical transmission of data over electronic signalling networks. It does not refer to what any particular message may or may not mean. The Shannon and Weaver model is therefore "semantically agnostic" which is to say the semantic meaning of messages sent and received is irrelevant. Claude Shannon made this clear, as the Argentinian philosopher of science Olimpia Lombardi explains (Lombardi, Holik and Vanni 2016),

"One of the most cited quotes by Shannon is that referred to the independence of

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<sup>40</sup> Hall refers to this as the "linguistic turn" in cultural and media studies, which should not be confused with the linguistic turn in philosophy and the advent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's increased focus on language. Hall's turn was Post-Structural or Post-Modern. It was an irrational and truthophobic turn.

his theory with respect to semantic issues: "Frequently the messages have meaning; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities. These semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem... Shannon information is not a semantic item: semantic items, such as meaning, reference or representation, are not amenable of quantification".

In the present context what is noteworthy is that Hall, in borrowing from Shannon and Weaver - and by adding the forbidden semantic dimension to their model - is confusing and conflating several different things. These are: the idea of a message being faithfully conveyed from one person to another, the idea of comprehension (whether a message is understandable) and the idea of whether a message is understood *correctly* and what this might mean in terms of the meaning which the sender *intended* to convey (if indeed there was one). To this very muddled bricolage of ideas Hall, in the 1973 version (Hall 1973, p 10), adds further layers of confusion by discussing the "complex codes governing the genre" which are to be found in the genre of western movies or TV dramas. These codes include,

"A highly organized set of codes and genre-conventions (a code-of-codes or meta-code)."

Hall omitted this section from the 1980 version presumably because he recognised that it introduced an entirely different and confusing set of ideas, all of which he was describing indiscriminately as "codes". He did however retain and expand a discussion about "denotative and the connotative" meanings, though on a reduced scale. Even in the streamlined 1980 version however there is a highly ambiguous and confused mixture of different ideas, all of which Hall is referring to as "codes" which can be "encoded" and "decoded".<sup>41</sup>

The British media and communications scholar David Morley worked with Hall in the 1970s and attempted to use the encoding/decoding model as a basis for audience research on the current affairs programme *Nationwide*. Morley looked for evidence that audiences "decoded" television messages according to various social

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<sup>41</sup> Hall borrowed the idea of "negotiated" codes and readings from the University of Kent sociologist Frank Parkin. Parkin also offered the example of the industrial worker reflecting on a media debate about wage demands in his 1971 book, '*Class inequality and political order: social stratification in capitalist and communist societies*'. See (Morley 1974)



and demographic factors hypothesised by Hall. However, looking back on his experience, he conceded that ambiguity created a serious flaw in Hall's model. Morley (Hall 1973, p 10) concluded that Hall's biggest error was that he confused the *form* of the message (and the audience's ability to comprehend it), with whether or not the audience agreed or disagreed with the *content* of the message,

"The notion of decoding may well blur together a number of processes that would be better addressed separately — it suggests a single act of reading of a text. Perhaps what is involved is a set of processes — of attentiveness, recognition of relevance, of comprehension, and of interpretation and response."

Morely (Morley and Brunson 1999, p 298) also expressed concern that Hall's theoretical framework had led his research into an "intellectual swamp" of confusion,

"If it then seems that I have taken us down some wrong turnings, it may be possible for the reader to more easily find his or her way back, or onwards, out of the swamp".

The Australian Cultural Studies academic Graeme Turner (2003, p 110) was blunter, calling Hall's theory a naive oversimplification, and Morley's attempt to empirically validate it "a waste of time",

"It is not surprising that Morley fails to achieve this goal in *The Nationwide Audience*; many would hold that the "specific factors" (class, occupation, locality, ethnicity, family structure, educational background, access to varied forms of mass communication and so on) are so many and interrelated that even the attempt to make definitive empirical connections is a waste of time".

Turner concluded (p 112) that instead of validating Hall, Morley had invalidated him,

"Morley's study demonstrates that it is not possible to tie differential readings to gross social and class determinants, such as the audience's occupation group. The polysemy of the message is a product of forces more complex and subtle than these, and Morley admits this".

In summary, the theoretical framework which Hall offers to justify the encoding-decoding model, is a form of linguistic idealism, which he derived from fashionable 1970s post-structuralism. Hall invokes Shannon and Weaver in an attempt to gloss his theory with a technical sophistication. But his use of Shannon and Weaver is unjustified and incoherent. Hall also uses the word "code" improperly, and ambiguously, which results in muddle and confusion. In short, it is hard to accept any of this as a sound basis for a theory of journalism. There is no robust theory here, only the illusion of theory. There is a colourful display in the shop window, but inside the shelves are bare. Let us now consider the theory-less encoding-decoding model from an epistemological point of view.

#### **04.08.05 The Problem of Hall's Worker.**

In the second half of *Encoding and Decoding* Hall famously describes how audiences "read", or "decode" TV output. Hall says that audiences can choose to decode messages acceptingly and uncritically (within the dominant code), semi-critically (using a negotiated code), or very critically (with an oppositional code). This begs the question; *how* do audiences decide which code to use? It is an extraordinary and under-remarked feature of Hall's thesis that on this critical issue he is silent. For example Hall (2001, p 169) mentions that,

"It is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one "mapping.""

However Hall says nothing about *how* this is done. Hall's silence is significant. To explain it we will need to decode exactly what Hall means by "decode". In his paper Hall uses the words; "messages", "codes", "discourses" and "TV newscasts" interchangeably. This, as we have noted, confusingly conflates the form of a message with its content. It also deflects attention from the question of what any particular "message", "code", "discourse" or "TV newscast" might actually contain. The problem becomes apparent if we ask ourselves how we would react to receiving an email, or a text message. Would we accept what it said uncritically, or would we challenge what it said? It is impossible to answer this question (in fact the question is meaningless) unless we know what the message says. The nature of

our reaction will depend entirely on the *content* of the message. Thus the answer to the question "how does a TV viewer react to a TV message"? is; "It depends on which viewer and which message".<sup>42</sup> It is only at the end of his paper that Hall (p 173) finally provides an example to illustrate his meaning. His example is that of a "worker" who is watching a TV debate about the need to limit wages, and who chooses to "decode" what he hears with the "oppositional code",

"It is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way... This is the case of the viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but "reads" every mention of the "national interest" as "class interest".

Hall memorably ends the paper (*ibid*) on a triumphant note, saying that this breakthrough moment, when the message is rejected by the worker, is,

"One of the most significant political moments... the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the "politics of signification" – the struggle in discourse – is joined".<sup>43</sup>

But Hall, in being so brief, is getting off the bus at a point which suits him. We can see the weaknesses in Hall's scheme if we probe a little deeper. Who is Hall's worker? How is he able to reach his conclusion with so little effort, and without the need to think carefully about the facts?

Hall's readers in 1980 would have recognised, in this example, a reference to the Winter of Discontent of 1978-1979 during which trade unions demanded large pay rises for their members. In pursuit of these claims, which the Labour government of Jim Callaghan protested were unaffordable, numerous strikes took place. Infamously bodies were unburied in Liverpool, while mountains of rubbish lay uncollected in the streets. The unions, for their part, argued that large pay increases were necessary because of high levels of inflation which had eroded the real value

<sup>42</sup> As Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson explain in *Relevance Theory*, meaning is, "Deducible from the input and the context together, but from neither input nor context alone." See, (Wilson and Sperber 2006)

<sup>43</sup> The word "moment" is a favourite of Gramsci's who speaks of "moments of crisis" and "political moments" in the revolutionary struggle. See for example Gramsci 1971, page 289.

of earnings. Inflation in 1975, for example, had reached a UK record of 25%. In short, upon sober reflection, the issue of pay restraint is a complex economic, political and social debate which gripped the UK during the 1970s. Hall's scheme, that audiences can choose how to respond to political messages on TV by choosing a code, starts to appear glib and unsatisfactory.

Here, for example, is a moment from a TV debate from 18th January 1979 during which the Chancellor Denis Healey clashed with the General Secretary of the TGWU Moss Evans. It is exactly the sort of TV debate Hall describes in his paper. Healey was appealing to the unions to adhere to the 5% guideline for pay increases. Evans' workers were at that time striking in support of a 40% rise. Healey (Thames Television, 1979) pleads his case by explaining the consequences of large pay rises,

"If we can keep settlements roughly where they have been and not establish a new high 'going rate', we can keep inflation under control... and I think very few people in the country want to go back to the days of confetti money, heavy cuts in public expenditure and increases in taxation, but that inevitably will happen".

Moss Evans replies (ibid) by reproaching the Chancellor and pointing out that his members had sacrificed in the past by showing restraint. Now, he says, the time has come for a return to free collective bargaining with employers, so workers can obtain the best deal possible,

"This is very, very unfair because you're expressing a point of view that the only way people can improve their standards of life is by exercising restraint... During periods of crisis you make a sacrifice. Once these sacrifices have been made, surely you're entitled then to be able to bargain freely with the employer?"

Having fleshed-out Hall's example, let us return to the vexed question; how do audiences decide which code to use when they listen to Dennis Healey and Moss Evans? Hall, who is a Marxist, makes it clear that the correct choice for the worker is to choose the "oppositional code" when "reading" Denis Healey's "discourse" and reject pay restraint. Presumably Hall would have sympathised with Moss Evans' view and chosen the "dominant/hegemonic code" to read Evans. But why should audiences agree with Hall's choice of codes? What if the TV newscast were dealing

less with opinion and more with factual news reporting; how would Hall's worker choose which code to use? How, to use more contemporary phraseology, can Hall's worker choose between fake news and the truth? Hall's scheme tells us nothing beyond, in Gramscian vein, that citizens' decisions are controlled by the hegemonic media. Thus logically Hallism is doomed to incoherence and trapped in its own circular logic;

- All audience opinions are constructed by media messages.
- All audiences can decide to contest the media messages.
- All audiences' decisions to contest the media messages are constructed by media messages.

It was not immediately apparent, at least not to voters in 1979, that the Hallist choice of codes was correct. In the May general election voters elected the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher with a parliamentary majority of 43 seats. One of the unintended consequences of the lack of pay restraint turned out to be the destruction of union power during the 1980s. There we might leave it, were it not for the fact that Hallism has bequeathed to TDP, through its irrationality and truthphobia, the worst of both possible worlds.

#### **04.08.06 Encoding and Decoding - Truthiness; the Worst of Both Worlds.**

Hall has allowed audiences the freedom to choose which code to select, stating that (2001, p 171) the intended reading in which the TV discourse is encoded,

"Cannot determine or guarantee, in a simple sense, which decoding codes will be employed."

However, as we have seen, Hall is a Marxist and he expects audiences to choose wisely. Hall does not make this explicit, nonetheless his paper ends with the implication that audiences are free to choose their own codes; provided they choose the correct one.

Hall has not merely failed to achieve what he set out to do (construct a plausible theoretical model that gives audiences a degree of free will), he has made matters worse. Hallism contains an intrinsic expectation (like Critical Theory, Althusserianism and Gramscianism) that the correct political view is Marxist. Yet Hallism does not allow the "correct" Marxist view to be deduced rationally from evidence and debate. Instead it is simply something that one instinctively knows or feels. The encoding-decoding model which is central to Hallism, encourages the view that audiences can break free from the media's "complex structure in dominance" by instinctively *feeling* what is right without any rational justification. Hallism therefore supports the view that knowledge can be obtained by *feeling* what is true.

This view is often referred to as "voluntarism". It was, unsurprisingly, a commonplace of 19<sup>th</sup> century German idealism.<sup>44</sup> For example the German idealist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer contrasted the "will" with the intellect and argued that human beings are governed by irrational, instinctive forces which form the core of human decision making.<sup>45</sup> Whether thought of as irrationalism, or voluntarism, or truthphobia, this approach is a prominent feature of TDP. In 2005 the American satirist Stephen Colbert, observing the prevalence of voluntarism, coined the word "truthiness" defining it as, "The belief in what you *feel* to be true rather than what the facts will support". On his TV show (Watson 2014) he told his audience that,

"The truthiness is, anyone can read the news to you. I promise to feel the news at you".

Later explaining (Colbert 2006),

"That's where the truth lies; right down here in the gut... Every night on my show, the Colbert Report, I speak straight from the gut. I give people the truth unfiltered by rational argument".

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<sup>44</sup> For a precis see (Walker 1912).

<sup>45</sup> Schopenhauer's metaphysical idealism differs in its technical detail from Fichte's. As a student Schopenhauer attended lectures by Fichte, but was unimpressed writing in his notes, "Raving nonsense" and "lunatic babbling". See Safranski (1991, p 141).

Colbert's humour is effective because it accurately describes a widely held epistemological stance to which Hallism made an important contribution. This position is a retreat from the Enlightenment view that journalism functions by providing empirically measurable facts about the real world. The replacement epistemology is that it is acceptable for journalism to assert as statements of fact, impressions based on intuition. This anti-epistemology is well-entrenched in TDP and in modern scholarship.

For example the Swedish scholar of journalism Leon Barkho is dismissive of an Enlightenment approach to news-gathering which he argues is merely the "collection of data". For Barkho it is possible to arrive at the truth without "much effort". He uses the example of the Arab-Israeli conflict as one where it is obvious that the Israelis are morally reprehensible. For Barkho (2013, p 33 and p 36) news reporting should be seen as a form of ritual activity, not an attempt to discover the truth,

"Many of us would agree that millions of Palestinians languishing under an Israeli military occupation for more than six decades are the 'disadvantaged people'... It may not take many of us a lot of effort to see who the 'oppressed' and 'their oppressors' are, but we still have to be fair, neutral and balanced when talking and writing about both. No matter how disgusted and disdainful 'the oppressors' are in our eyes."

For Barkho truth is what is strongly felt, and the purpose of journalism is to reinforce, not challenge, these powerful feelings of truth. Barkho (2018) argues that no amount of journalism can change what is strongly felt to be true. What is subjectively felt to be true counts as a "fact",

"What I am after when giving this particular example is the fact that there are people who are occupied and there are people who are occupiers and there are people who are oppressed as a result of occupation and there are people who are oppressors because they exercise occupation".

For Barkho the text of news can be decoded with any code one chooses. The choice of code is subjective and intuitive. Barkho (Barkho and Richardson 2010) operates

within TDP and Hallism. He sees journalism in terms of hegemonic propaganda for the powerful, and quotes Hall in support of this view,

"It should be noted that such elite ideological dominance arises "as a property of the system of relations involved, rather than as the overt and intentional biases of individuals" (Hall, 1982: 95). In short, the current practices of journalism play an essential role in maintaining authority within the political system".

Employing a Hallist anti-epistemology, Barkho is able to instinctively feel that Israel is the hegemonic force, rather than its Arab neighbours. But epistemology is not optional, because the question remains, "Is it *true* that Israel is the hegemonic force"? How can such a thing be known without "a lot of effort"? As the American academic Howard Wainer (2015, p 3) puts it,

"Escaping from the clutches of truthiness begins with one simple question. When a claim is made the first question that we ought to ask ourselves is "how can anyone know this?" And, if the answer isn't obvious, we must ask the person who made the claim, "what evidence do you have to support it?"

In other words, moral decisions and political opinions must always be founded on consideration of the factual evidence. To argue otherwise is simply an attempt to replace a belief which is reasonably justified with one which is not. And so, despite Hallism and TDP, we are inevitably drawn towards some examination of the evidence. For example Colonel Richard Kemp, the political commentator and former commander of British forces in Afghanistan, argues (2018) that the consensus view of Israel rests on ignorance of the real facts and a reliance on partisan, ideological propaganda,

"The greatest slur campaign in the history of the world is being directed at Israel. International organisations universities and media organisations believe the lying propaganda that's being put out against Israel and they leap to the attack and the problem with it is, it's not just unfair, but also it incites the violence against Israel... so people who condemn Israel unfairly, like the United Nations, the European Union, media organisations and other governments have got blood on their hands".

A view shared by the Palestinian, former member of Hamas, Mosab Hassan Yousef



who addressed the U.N. Human Rights Council in September 2017 (Yousef 2017) to berate the Palestinian Authority for oppressing its own people while blaming the oppression on Israel,

"You are the greatest enemy of the Palestinian people. If Israel did not exist, you would have no one to blame... You fan the flames of conflict to maintain your abusive power. Finally, you use this platform to mislead the international community, and to mislead Palestinian society, to believe that Israel is responsible for the problems you create".

Given the complexity of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the prevalence of claim and counter-claim, it is hard to accept the bold assertion that the truth can be discerned without "much effort". Worst still, how is voluntarism different from prejudice and bigotry?<sup>46</sup> The journalist and Middle East analyst Douglas Davis, argues that simply "feeling" Israel to be wrong is indistinguishable from something much darker. Davis (2002) sees institutional anti-Israel bias deeply ingrained within western media and intellectual culture and he singles out the BBC for fanning the flames of an ancient racial hatred,

"In my judgement, the volume and intensity of this unchallenged diatribe has now transcended mere criticism of Israel. Hatred is in the air. Wittingly or not, the BBC has become the principal agent for re-infecting British society with the virus of anti-Semitism".

The former *Guardian* journalist and commentator Melanie Phillips (2018) also sees a widespread irrational demonization at work which echoes the visceral hatred of former ages,

"Most anti-Semitism on the Left takes the form of obsessive and paranoid falsehoods, distortion and double standards directed at Israel's behaviour, with much of this onslaught echoing the tropes of medieval and Nazi Jew-hatred. This targeting of Israel as the collective Jew is the new anti-Semitism".

Hanoch Marmari (2002), the former Editor of the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz,

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<sup>46</sup> For the avoidance of doubt, I am referring here to voluntarism as an abstract intellectual concept, not to any specific example, nor to any individual.

reflects on the irrationalism of truthphobia and truthiness and concludes,

"One day, historians examining this period of crisis will have to consider the circular process by which the media were transformed from observers to participants. From covering the story to playing a major part in it, to stimulating and sometimes agitating the environment for their own media purposes".

It is noteworthy how far we have come since the original Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. The contrast between the irrationalism of Hallism and the rationalism of Habermas is striking. For both Hall and Habermas the goal is socialism, but whereas Hall's worker can choose his code intuitively, using truthiness and without much effort; for Habermas the choice is dependent on weighing evidence and thinking carefully. An epistemic task which Habermas admits (1996, p 115) is often impossibly complex in the face of "wicked" problems,

"Complex operations are required to reach a decision in cases of this sort... one must select, interpret, and apply the norm most appropriate to the present case in the light of a description of the situation that is as complete as possible. Thus, problems of justification and application in complex issues often overtax the individual's analytical capacity".

What Hallism offers then, in place of logical, rational analysis, is truthiness, emotionalism and voluntarism. These doctrines are essentially the same in that they subordinate intellect to feeling and intuition. In them, if we look closely, we can see the ghost of Fichte nodding in approval.

#### **04.08.07 Epilogue. Hallism, Political Correctness and Left Fascism.**

In June 1967 a fiery clash between heavyweights of the Left took place in Germany. The dispute was between the student leader Rudi Dutschke and Jürgen Habermas. At issue was what action should be taken to promote socialism. Dutschke called emotionally for revolutionary action, while Habermas objected, pointing out that it was irrational to act without carefully considering the consequences. The differences between the two socialists boiled into acrimony with Dutschke defending the need for action unhindered by rational calculation of effect. For

Dutschke (1998) the situation was something he could feel and all that was required now was action,

"Everything now depends on the conscious human will, to finally become conscious of the history it has always made, to control, and to command it, which means, Professor Habermas, that your objectivity devoid of concept is crushing the subject of emancipation".

Habermas, (ibid) prickled by this ominous appeal to human will, famously replied by accusing Dutschke of irrationalism and voluntarism; a poisonous recipe for "left fascism",

"In my opinion, he has presented a voluntarist ideology, which was called utopian socialism in 1848, and which in today's context, I believe I have reasons to use this characterization, has to be called left fascism".

The American scholar of German intellectual thought Russell Berman (2008), argues that fascism is precisely the combination of irrational, subjective feeling (unsupported by evidence), combined with authoritarianism.<sup>47</sup> It is intuitively feeling certain that you are right and that your opponent is wrong, plus the will to enforce your certainty. For Berman fascism is concentrated *arete* undiluted by *aletheia*,

"Fascism: because of its ideology of unconstrained voluntarism, a triumphalism of the will, with neither ethical nor institutional limitations; a contemptuous disregard for democratic institutions and processes; and an adventurist willingness to engage in violence".

Was the confrontation between Habermas and Dutschke a simple clash of personality types? Or is it possible to argue that it provides an insight about where the Hallist turn away from the Enlightenment values of rationality and individual free will might lead? Does the Hallist doctrine, that the correct code can be chosen without much effort or consideration of evidence, contains latent authoritarian tendencies?

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<sup>47</sup> Berman is referring to generic fascism rather than the historic Fascism of Mussolini's Fascisti.

In 1994 an essay was published which criticised the growing trend towards political correctness and bemoaned the loss of times past. "In the old days", argued its author, left wing thought centred on class and economic concerns. However today things have changed and we have entered the politically correct world "characterised by the rise of identity politics". The essay's author described the politically correct as self-righteous "Puritans" and then sniped (p 168) at the rise of Hallism and cultural studies. First to be critiqued was nominalism based on Post-Structuralist, semiotic linguistics,

"PC is a product of what we might call 'the culturing of politics' - an approach which is based on the recognition that our relationship to 'reality' is always mediated in and through language and that language and discourse are central to the operations of power. It is politics 'after cultural studies'".

This was followed by an attack on the idea that problems can be solved by controlling the use of the language which describes them. It appears to be an attack on Hall's 1978 nominalist, consequentialist approach to mugging. The author dismisses this approach as ill-conceived stating that "major lessons" have since been learned. It was wrong he says because,

"A strategy designed to silence problems without bringing them out and dealing with them is dealing with difficult issues at the level of symptom rather than cause... One of the major lessons we have learned since the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy and cultural theory is that you do not escape from the effects of a model or a practice simply by turning it on its head".

Next the author suggests turning away from truthphobia and returning to the concept of truth. He does so somewhat guardedly and with some Post-Structuralist qualifications, but he does so nonetheless. He says it is wrong to arbitrarily insist one is right and that one's opponents are wrong by "legislating some Absolute Truth into being",

"What's more, what is being legislated is another single, homogeneous truth - our truth to replace theirs... The last thing we need is the model of one authority

substituting one set of identities or truths with another set of 'more correct' ones"<sup>48</sup>.

The author of this anti-Hallist essay, which is entitled *Some "Politically Incorrect" Pathways Through Political Correctness*, was none other than Stuart Hall himself. In it (1994, p 164) he regretted that political correctness was being implemented by "'our side in defence of what, in most cases, I take to be 'our issues'" adding (p 173), "Our enemies are bad enough; God save us from our friends". *Politically Incorrect Pathways* is an extraordinary, and under-studied, paper. It is academically neglected probably because it does not fit the stereotype of Stuart Hall created by the canonical texts of his earlier years. In *Politically Incorrect Pathways* Hall recognises and confronts the perils of Hallism should a dose of authoritarianism be added to it. In the closing paragraphs (p 182) Hall fires a salvo at the quintessentially Gramscian doctrine that what is important is achieving power and hegemony,

"There are those who believe that politics consists of getting 'our side' where 'their side' used to be and then exercising power in exactly the same way they did".

Hall then turns on Gramscian hegemonic theory (ibid) which he rejects arguing that it is power that corrupts and oppresses, and to avoid the tyranny of power it is necessary to,

"Unsettle permanently all the configurations of power, preventing them - right or left - from ever settling again into that unconsciousness, the 'deep sleep of forgetfulness'".

If a student were to read only this one paper of Hall's, he would be forgiven for thinking him a classical liberal theorist. Hall's attack on power, in this mature essay, is indistinguishable from those of any number of Enlightenment thinkers. For example those of the American statesman John Adams (1775) who warned that,

"*Obsta principiis*, Nip the shoots of arbitrary power in the bud, is the only maxim which can ever preserve the liberties of any people."

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<sup>48</sup> The author is using the word "truth" euphemistically. He means "our *version* of the truth". He might have chosen to say, "our lies to replace theirs".

In summary, one may conclude that Hall's most influential paper, *Encoding-Decoding* is flawed intellectually and, in its irrationalism, encourages voluntarism and truthiness. It is unhelpful in explaining what journalism is or how it works. One critic has claimed that Hall's Encoding-Decoding model lacks theoretical rigour, internal logic and conceptual consistency. The critic was, with endearing candour, Stuart Hall himself (Davis 2004, p 66),

"The encoding/decoding model wasn't a grand model... I didn't think of it as generating a model which would last for the next twenty-five years for research. I don't think it has the theoretical rigour, the internal logic and conceptual consistency for that".

#### **04.09.00 Canonical Theorists – A Summary.**

In this section we have attempted to sketch the family tree of TDP in academic journalism by identifying the theorists who have contributed most to its creation. Within their theories we have identified currents of irrationalism and truthphobia which contain elements of nominalism, consequentialism and voluntarism. These doctrines are rooted in 19th century German idealism and phenomenology which were rediscovered by the baby boomer generation during the late 1960s and 1970s. They were dressed in new clothes by *maitres a penser* such as Lacan and Althusser, and emerged as a gnomic metaphysical doctrine. In the writings of Hall, these theories were laundered of some of their more obvious absurdities and found respectability and acceptance within TDP. However, notwithstanding their acceptance, many of these arguments are incoherent and do not survive scrutiny. In the next section we will delve deeper into the philosophical assumptions which underpin TDP. In so doing we will attempt to lay the foundations for an alternative theoretical paradigm for journalism studies.

## **Part Five. The Foundational Philosophical Assumptions of TDP.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What are the philosophical assumptions of TDP?
- How valid are they?

*"We create our own reality based on our internalized preconceptions. Since there is no longer one objective truth, we are free to create our own truth. So you see, there is no right and wrong, just an infinite number of equally valid 'stories'".*

Clay Butler.

*"Philip Ernst omitted a pine  
from his painting because it  
'spoiled the composition'  
until remorseful at  
misrepresenting the scene  
he attacked the tree with an axe."*

Chris Greenhalgh.

#### **05.00.00 Two Dogmas of TDP.**

TDP rests, in large part, on two dogmas. One is the belief that there are no objective reality, truth, facts or knowledge, and that all these things are in fact subjective opinions. The other dogma is social constructivism; the belief that all our knowledge is in reality socially constructed, i.e. contingent on social or cultural factors. These two dogmas are intertwined and form a self-reinforcing intellectual structure. Both dogmas, I shall argue, are ill founded. One effect of abandoning them is, as we shall see, the rehabilitation of the notion of journalistic truth as a legitimate, if not central, object of academic study.

#### **05.01.00 Apologia; Why We Need to Talk About Philosophy.**

Most second and third generation scholars of TDP rarely state the philosophical assumptions which underpin their arguments. The validity of these assumptions is therefore today taken for granted and seldom questioned. However many first



generation scholars did set out their fundamental beliefs about reality and human knowledge. For example the eminent American scholar of journalism Michael Schudson, writing in 1978, neatly summarised the philosophical assumptions of TDP in his book *Discovering the News*. Schudson (1978, p 6) explains that journalists before the First World War did not doubt the “firmness of the 'reality' by which they lived”. He explains that they were “naive empiricists” who had not yet discovered that reality is not real, but is socially constructed,

“Philosophy, the history of science, psychoanalysis, and the social sciences have taken great pains to demonstrate that human beings are cultural animals who know and see and hear the world through socially constructed filters. From the 1920s on, the idea that human beings individually and collectively construct the reality they deal with has held a central position in social thought”.

Here Schudson has expressed both dogmas of TDP; the belief that there is no objective reality, and the belief that our knowledge is socially constructed. Later in his book Schudson offers a socio-historical explanation for why these beliefs became increasingly fashionable during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. But nowhere does Schudson consider the *validity* of these ideas. Nor does he inform readers why anyone should believe them. Like de Saussure before him, Schudson merely appeals to the authority of a nameless consensus of philosophers and social scientists as evidence that reality is not real, facts are not factual, and that there is no such thing as truth. It is noteworthy that Schudson does not identify the shadowy cartel of thinkers on whom he relies for his irrealist epistemology. Having delivered this flimsy, hearsay evidence, he quickly moves on.<sup>49</sup> Because the foundational dogmas are, in large measure, philosophical assumptions about reality and knowledge, it will be necessary to introduce some philosophical analysis into what follows.

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<sup>49</sup> In an email to the present author Schudson quotes his authority as Berger and Luckmann's influential 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality*. Schudson writes that this is a, “Broad, theoretical statement about the subfield of sociology called the "sociology of knowledge". We will consider Berger and Luckmann in due course.

### 05.02.00 The Philosophy of Journalism.

In this section I will sketch an epistemology for journalism and attempt to define the nature of "journalistic truth". I make no claim to being able to solve the eternal riddles of philosophy. However I contend that a great deal of confusion and mischief has been caused by the widespread, and perhaps willed, equivocation of key terms. In other words discussions of journalistic truth are plagued by what the British sociologist Anthony Giddens has called the 'double hermeneutic'. This is the way in which technical terminology can be both widely misunderstood and, at the same time, widely adopted. This process of constant slippage between words and ideas leads to a swamp of confusion where it is hard to know what people are talking about, and what they actually believe. Giddens (1986, p xxxv) explains that the very process of discussing the fashionable intellectual ideas of the age (often in an imprecise way), leads to distortion and mutation of the original ideas,

"The point is that reflection on social processes (theories, and observations about them) continually enter into, become disentangled with and re-enter the universe of events that they describe."

In Journalism Studies the key words which have suffered grievously from this slippage and confusion include; reality, truth, knowledge, subjectivity and objectivity. To illustrate the quagmire we are about to enter we can consider the following simple sentences;<sup>50</sup>

1. 'What is the reality?' (i.e. the reality of the situation? meaning 'What's the truth'?)
2. 'What is reality?' (a completely different question about metaphysics)
3. 'What is real?' (an ambiguous question which could mean 'What's true?')
4. 'What is the truth?' (i.e. of the situation).

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<sup>50</sup> Note the use of the definite article 'the' in what follows. Note also that the words truth, reality and knowledge can be used interchangeably in some contexts, but not in others.

5. 'What is truth?' (a metaphysical, or legal question perhaps).
6. 'How true is that?' (introduces the concept of degrees of truthfulness and untruthfulness).
7. 'Do you have knowledge of the truth?' (i.e. do you know what's true?)
8. 'What knowledge do you have?' (what do you know?)
9. 'What is knowledge'? (probably a metaphysical question).

We can see from these examples that we are dealing with high levels of ambiguity. We can also see how easy it is to generate further complexity and confusion by shuffling the words to create neo-Lacanian paradoxes. For example we can make up a sentence such as,

"The only true knowledge about reality is that our knowledge of reality is not really true".

I have invented this sentence intending it to be meaningless. However it is so rich in ambiguity that it might appear to be profound and convey numerous poetic layers of meaning. In order to find our way out of the swamp, let us start from dry ground and proceed one careful step at a time.

### **05.03.00 Ontology vs Epistemology.**

Our starting point will be that there is such a thing as a real, physical world which contains real objects such as cups of coffee, tables, people, politicians, journalists, buildings, mountains, rivers etc. I do not know of any Journalism Studies or media theorist who denies the existence of the real, physical world. Nevertheless it is *philosophically* possible to doubt the existence of reality. Any such discussion would fall into the category of ontology, which is a branch of metaphysics and

which we will define as a philosophical enquiry into the nature of reality. A crucial distinction must therefore be observed between ontology and epistemology. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and how we know things. I contend that journalism is always a purely epistemic project. It is *never* ontological.

The confusion between the two is a constant menace and one to which students of journalism need to be alert. Confusing ontological with epistemological questions will lead us rapidly off the path and into the swamp. Or, to vary the metaphor, considering ontology will lead us down a rabbit hole into a philosophical wonderland where reality and meaning quickly dissolve.

Ontology and metaphysics therefore belong to philosophy, or religion, or art, or cosmology; but not to journalism. Journalism is entirely concerned with what we know about the physical world and how justified our knowledge is. For example a newspaper might report that five people died in a car crash which closed a major motorway for six hours. This would be factual information i.e. a list of things that are known about the car crash. Good journalism would attribute the source of the knowledge; e.g. to police, eye-witnesses, hospital staff etc. Such a report would therefore be epistemic and not ontological. In fact it is hard to imagine what an ontological news report would look like. It might ask, What is life? What is death? Is death the absence of life? What is a car? What is the nature of matter? What is it for two objects to collide? Are people real? Is reality real or an illusion? These are fascinating ontological and metaphysical questions for philosophers, but they are not appropriate questions for a news report. An ontological newspaper would not sell many copies.

To put this another way, journalism is always an applied, real world activity which always assumes a realist ontology. Journalism therefore rejects phenomenology and idealism, the metaphysical beliefs that we can only have knowledge of the mental phenomena inside our head. Journalism assumes that the mental phenomena in our head are *caused* by real objects which exist objectively and independently of human perception.

Perhaps the best known example of a media theorist steering off the path of epistemology and into the swamp of ontology is the Post-Modern, French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard. During the 1980s Baudrillard proposed an aggressive subjectivism and relativism based on metaphysics and ontology, and the belief that reality is not real. Simulation, Baudrillard claimed, was the current stage of the simulacrum in which all is composed of references with no referents; a hyperreality in which the dominant simulacrum was in the form of the counterfeit. Baudrillard (1988) introduced the notion of the simulacrum which he explained,

“Is never that which conceals the truth - it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true”.<sup>51</sup>

In 1991 Baudrillard published an essay entitled *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* in which he freely combined ontological and epistemological arguments to argue, not merely that the media reporting of the Gulf War was hoaxical, but that the war was “not a war”. Echoing Althusser's psychotic belief that reality is not really real, he explained (1995, p 81),

"Brecht: "This beer isn't a beer, but that is compensated for by the fact that this cigar isn't a cigar either. If this beer wasn't a beer and this cigar really was a cigar, then there would be a problem." In the same manner, this war is not a war, but this is compensated for by the fact that information is not information either."

Baudrillard (p 63) freely switches between ontology and epistemology. For example he writes epistemologically that,

“The images are censored and all information is blockaded in the desert; only TV functions as a medium without a message, giving at last the image of pure television”.

Before concluding (ibid) with his signature mixture of ontology and epistemology,

“This is why we could advance the hypothesis that this war would not take place.

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<sup>51</sup> Baudrillard claimed to have taken this sentence from the book of Ecclesiastes. However it does not appear there.

And now that it is over, we can realise at last that it did not take place”.

The most sympathetic reading of Baudrillard's text is that he is pointing out that information, especially in the fog of war, is often uncritically conveyed to audiences by an unquestioning media who may have limited opportunity (or inclination) to check the facts. Thus interpreted, Baudrillard's apparent extreme ontology is really epistemology in disguise.

However Baudrillard reveals the serious shortcoming of an ontological approach. It cannot be selective. If one wishes to climb down the rabbit hole into ontological wonderland, then *all* material reality has to be questioned. If we are all living in a Matrix-like simulation, then Baudrillard could not logically claim that the Gulf War was not real, but that our TV sets are real. Both would have to go. Baudrillard's ontology leads irreversibly into extreme philosophical skepticism, idealism and solipsism. Philosophically this is the belief that the real world is an illusion. Skepticism is impossible to refute as we will presently see. But not being certain that our experience of the world is true, is not the same thing as being certain that it is false. As Bertrand Russell memorably explained (1992. (1948) p 9),

“Scepticism, while logically impeccable, is psychologically impossible, and there is an element of frivolous insincerity in any philosophy which pretends to accept it”.<sup>52</sup>

Or, as Wittgenstein (1974 (2000) p 32) sagely remarked,

"It is so difficult to find the beginning. Or better, it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back."

Ontology and metaphysics ask what came before the beginning, and what comes after the end. Ontological questions are inadmissible therefore because, although they are grammatically correct, they are semantically meaningless. As Wittgenstein puts it (1963 (2000) p 34),

<sup>52</sup> Russell quipped that he, “Once received a letter from an eminent logician, Mrs. Christine Ladd-Franklin, saying that she was a solipsist, and was surprised that there were no others. Coming from a logician and a solipsist, her surprise surprised me.” Russell op cit. p.195

"Scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked. For a doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something can be said."

So much for ontology. Let us climb back out of the metaphysical swamp into which Baudrillard has led us.

#### **05.04.00 Truth as Correspondence to Reality.**

If we accept there *is* a real world, as all journalists must (and as even Baudrillard does) then our mission becomes much clearer and a path through the swamp comes into focus. The purpose of an epistemology of journalism must be to explain how audiences and journalists can distinguish between a true account of reality and a false one. The idea of journalistic truth therefore implies a measure of correspondence between reality and how reality is reported. The best way to express this concept was formulated by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* (4,7) when he famously said,

"To say of what is, that it is not; or of what is not, that it is, is false. While to say of what is, that it is; and of what is not, that it is not, is true."

Aristotle is saying simply that a report is true if it truthfully represents reality. If it does not do so, it is false. The beauty of Aristotle's correspondence theory of truth is its minimalist simplicity and profundity. Theorists of TDP find fault with this simplicity and look for something more complicated, more metaphysical and more interesting. In the words of the American philosopher David Marian (2016),

"Authors of the modern period generally convey the impression that the correspondence theory of truth is far too obvious to merit much, or any, discussion".

However the correspondence theory of truth is an elegant and respectable framework and, while it cannot be philosophically proved, neither can it be

philosophically disproved. Above all else it is psychologically plausible. It is therefore an excellent choice for journalism and it will be adopted here as a working hypothesis, and as a foundational, philosophical assumption.

#### **05.05.00 Subjective, Inter-Subjective and Objective Truth.**

As pointed out by Schudson, it is commonly held in academic journalism, and the social sciences generally, that there is no such thing as objective truth. Instead it is said that all truth is purely subjective. I am going to argue the complete opposite. I will argue that there is no such thing as subjective truth and that the only coherent, non-figurative meaning of the word truth must be objective truth. I will argue that 'subjective truth' is better referred to as 'subjective belief'.<sup>53</sup>

In an English sentence the subject is the person, or thing, which is operating the verb. The object is the person, or thing, affected by the verb. So for example in the sentence, "Harry saw a snake in the grass" Harry is the subject, and "snake" is the object. Hence 'subjective' typically means, "seen from the perspective of the subject". Let us suppose that Harry has indeed seen a snake very close to him. He freezes and his heart starts beating quickly. At this moment we can say that "Harry believes the object he is looking at is a snake". But can we say that "It is *true* that the object Harry is looking at is a snake"? More to the point, do the two sentences mean the same thing? The answer is no they do not. Saying that someone believes something, is not the same as saying that what they believe is true. Suppose that, after staring intently at the snake, Harry realises that what he saw was a piece of old rope. He approaches it slowly and picks it up laughing with relief at his error. In this example it would be accurate to say that Harry believed he saw a snake, but he was mistaken. What he believed was not true.

To this an adherent of TDP, claiming to believe that all truth is subjective, might

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<sup>53</sup> It is a curious and under-studied phenomenon that attempts by radical media theorists to prove that there are no objective facts typically end up suggesting the exact opposite. EG the Glasgow Media Group's *Bad News* (1976) used government figures (which they claimed were objectively true) to criticise TV news (which they claimed was not). Its authors appeared untroubled that they were appealing to the existence of objective facts to attack the existence of objective facts. Earning, from Martin Harrison, the just riposte that "The underpinning to the group's conclusions collapses". See; (Harrison 1985)



object that Harry "believed it was true that the rope was a snake". And therefore, as far as Harry was concerned, it was "true". In other words it was subjectively "true" for him. Note that I have put quotation marks around the word true. I have done this to indicate that the word true is being used in a non-literal way. In this case the word "true" is confusingly being used to mean "believed to be true, but in fact false". So the problem with the idea of "subjective truth" is that it is in reality a figurative, or metaphorical, use of the word "truth" which, unhelpfully, means almost the complete opposite of its literal meaning. Saying "It was true for Harry" is simply a confusing way of saying "Harry believed it". The point about the word "belief" is that it *always* implies believing something to be true. It is not possible to believe something and simultaneously not believe it. Because we have distinguished between the words "belief" and "truth", we can now see the difference between a subjective belief and an objective truth. Beliefs do not have to correspond to reality, whereas statements which are true do. In summary I contend there is no such thing as "subjective truth" and that it is simply a lazy and imprecise use of language. It can be ruinously confusing to discuss these questions without clearly defining how the words are being used, and whether they are being used technically, colloquially, or figuratively.<sup>54</sup> As The English philosopher G.E.Moore put it (1993 (1925) p 109-110),

"Some philosophers seem to have thought it legitimate to use the word 'true' in such a sense that a proposition which is partially false may nevertheless also be true... I am not using 'true' in any such sense. I am using it in such a sense (and I think this is the ordinary usage) that if a proposition is partially false, it follows that it is not true, though, of course, it may be partially true."

The next category to consider is Inter-Subjective truth. I will use this phrase to describe a belief which is shared by more than one person, or by an entire community. As with subjective truth, so with inter-subjective truth; it is simply a group belief. It doesn't matter how many people believe something. Truth is not a democracy. In the words of the British comedian Ricky Gervais (@rickygervais. 2014), truth "Doesn't give a shit what you "believe"". Or, as the Israeli-American physicist Nir Shaviv puts it (Stirling 2016),

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<sup>54</sup> See section 07.02.03 for a discussion of how this technique can be used for political ends.

“Science is not a democracy. The fact that a majority thinks one thing doesn’t mean anything, doesn’t mean that they are right. The question is, ‘What is the evidence?’”

For example consider a class of six year old children who all firmly believe that the tooth fairy is real. They will place their milk teeth beneath their pillows at night and wake to find their teeth replaced by money. An adherent of TDP might say that for these children the "truth" has been constructed and that the tooth fairy is "real" for them. But once again this would be to misuse the words "truth" and "real" by using them analogously not literally.

Let us imagine a charity race in which one runner easily beats all the others. After the race the organiser tells the losers consolingly, "You are all winners"! Here the organiser does not literally mean that the losers are winners, which would be nonsensical. Rather the organiser is speaking metaphorically. For example to convey the idea that all the runners succeeded in completing the course and in raising money for charity. It is perfectly reasonable to speak metaphorically, we do it all the time. But if a journalist wanted to know the name of the race winner (i.e. the runner who crossed the line first), it would be confusing to inform him that "all the runners were winners". Similarly to say that it is "true" for these children that the tooth fairy is real simply means, "the children believe (wrongly) that the tooth fairy is real and they behave as if she were". Crucially, we should remind ourselves that the children's beliefs do not correspond to reality. Therefore, although there is such a thing as inter-subjective *belief* (or group *belief*), there is no such thing as inter-subjective *truth*.

And so to objective truth. This, I contend, is the only type of truth that is worthy of the name, precisely because it does not have any *subjective* element to it. In other words its truth does not depend on anyone believing it. Its truth exists independently of the subject. In other words objective truth is truth which corresponds to objective, physical reality. We might at this stage remind ourselves that we are not, as students of journalism, concerned with the ontological nature of reality. Our starting point was the acceptance that real objects really do exist "out

there" waiting to be discovered and that these objects exist regardless of whether anyone observes them or not. This is precisely what is meant by "objective reality". As the Scottish philosopher David Hume (2007, p 111) put it,

"We always suppose an external universe, which depends not on our perception, but would exist, though we and every sensible creature were absent or annihilated."

Or, in the words of Albert Einstein (Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen 1935.),

"Any serious consideration of a physical theory must take into account the distinction between the objective reality, which is independent of any theory, and the physical concepts with which the theory operates. These concepts are intended to correspond with the objective reality, and by means of these concepts we picture this reality to ourselves".

If we accept there is an independently-existing, objective reality, and that objective truth is a perfect description of it, then how, one is entitled to ask, can we know what the objective truth is in any given case? Or, in other words, how can we be certain we know what the objective truth is? The answer is simple. We cannot. Objective truth is unknowable. Human beings cannot obtain certain knowledge of what is objectively true. In fact we can go further and say that the only thing that is absolutely certain, is that there is no absolute certainty. Objective truth is rather like being given a box which it is impossible to open. We can only make an educated guess about what is inside, we can never be absolutely sure we are right. Human knowledge will always be imperfect. However this is not the epistemic disaster it might at first appear to be. Liberated from the tyranny of certitude, our task becomes (slightly) easier. It is to assess what is most likely. Some of our guesses about what is objectively true will be more probable, and well- founded, than others. A parallel task will be for us to work out a methodology, or process, to help us identify the most probable conclusions, and discard the most implausible. Once again we must remind ourselves that we are not trying to solve the eternal riddles of metaphysics. It is not our task to prove with certainty what is objectively true. That would be to stray into ontology. Our enquiry is confined to

epistemology and our question becomes, "What is truth in the context of journalism"? Or, "What is *journalistic* truth"?

### **05.06.00 Journalistic Truth. Accuracy - the Football Model.**

I am going to argue that journalistic truth is composed of two elements; accuracy and impartiality. These two elements are approximately equivalent to the legal concepts of "telling the truth" and "telling the whole truth". I will define journalistic accuracy as what a hypothetical, ideal spectator would witness if he had been perfectly positioned to see. It is important to understand that this spectator is purely imaginary and exists only in the mind. Thus the ideal spectator can be considered as a sort of perfect "angel", the counterpoint to Descartes's "evil demon".<sup>55</sup> However, to avoid the taint of metaphysics, I will invoke a more mundane image.

Football (soccer for Americans) is a fast moving game. It is impossible for a single referee to see everything that is happening. He can't be everywhere at once, nor can he see everything at once. Consequently, without assistance, a referee may make poor decisions because what he sees may not correspond to what really (objectively) happened. For example a referee might fail to see a handball and fail to award a penalty. During the 2018 FIFA World Cup, to help referees discover the truth about what was really happening on the pitch, the Virtual Assistant Referee system (VAR) system was introduced. VAR relies on four referees sitting in a video operation room scrutinising the action from numerous camera angles. As the Radio Times reported (Gill 2018), the video referees,

"Follow the action live from the stadium on a series of TV screens. Thirty-three different cameras plus two dedicated offside cameras theoretically give them all the angles they could ever need."

Interviewed by the Radio Times, the former Premier League referee Mark Clattenburg explained that VAR provides an objective view of reality and narrows

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<sup>55</sup> Descartes famously asks readers, in his *First Meditation*, to imagine "A deceiving God or some evil demon who tricks us". My ideal spectator does precisely the opposite.

the epistemic gap between the referee's subjective belief and objective reality. In epistemological terms, VAR provides a yardstick by which the referee can measure his subjective belief about reality. VAR is a proxy for objective reality; if not exactly the same thing, then at least as close an approximation as is humanly possible. The referee's subjective belief about what happened will therefore be true to the extent that it corresponds to this proxy. Furthermore, because TV audiences can also see what the TV cameras see; subjective, inter-subjective and objective reality and truth should all (hopefully) coincide. As Clattenburg (ibid) puts it,

"VAR was brought in to stop the scandalous decisions where everybody in football goes, "That's not correct".

VAR is therefore a practical attempt to capture objective reality. However it is important to continually remind ourselves that genuine objective reality and truth are hypothetical, ideal concepts. It might be helpful to think of the ideal spectator as sitting in an imaginary video control room. At his disposal are an infinite number of high definition cameras. He can dial up any of these perfect cameras anywhere on earth and replay any moment from any angle. The objective accuracy of any given event is what the ideal spectator would see.<sup>56 57</sup>

### **05.07.00 Observation, Certainty and Reality.**

All the examples we have cited so far have concerned simple questions of observation. In the journalistic epistemology we are sketching, observation statements are foundational. This means that reality is measured and defined by

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<sup>56</sup> For thousands of years the concept of objective truth was easily understood as "what God sees". The concept of objective truth neatly fits the idea of the all seeing eye of an omniscient spiritual force. It is not mere coincidence then, that objective truth has fallen from intellectual fashion in step with the secularisation of western society.

<sup>57</sup> The Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith invoked the idea of an hypothetical impartial spectator in his 1759 book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. But Smith's spectator was a moral agent, a barometer of human actions and, "the indignation that they naturally call forth in the breast of an impartial spectator". The function of my spectator is purely epistemic. The American philosopher John Dewey also referred to the Spectator Theory of Knowledge (STK). But Dewey was writing about how children obtain "knowledge" in the classroom. Dewey, as a progressive educationalist, was opposed to Victorian, didactic teaching and argued for active, child-centred learning. Thus Dewey's context is pedagogic and different to the journalistic context outlined here. My spectator is an imaginary all-seeing witness. See; (Dewey 2012) Chapters 10, 11 and 25.

what we see and experience ourselves at first hand (under favourable conditions). This is the only possible reality for us, there is no other and there can be no other. Therefore any metaphysical discussion about a "deeper reality", or the "reality behind reality" are merely metaphors which invite confusion and linguistic slippage. Such phenomenological ambiguity may be valuable in art or religion, but is pernicious to theories of academic journalism. Nothing can be more real than reality, just as nothing can be wetter than water, or hotter than heat. As Quine puts it (Quine and Ullian 1970, p 16-17),

"Are observation sentences then infallible? Nearly, if we set aside those offered disingenuously and those uttered by speakers who have not quite learned the language. Observation sentences, after all, are the sentences for which the evidence is present whenever the sentences for which the evidence is present whenever the sentences are truly affirmed. It would strain the very meaning of the words, in such sentences, to suppose any appreciable fallibility; for the words are themselves acquired through the association of observation sentences with the observable circumstances of their utterance".

It is a common feature of attacks on philosophical realism to point to cases of dreams, hallucinations and illusions. How can we be sure, the skeptic asks, that we are not hallucinating? One reply would be that the idea we are living in a "fake reality" implies that there is a reality. The concept of dream implies the concept of being awake. Without reality there could be no unreality. For Wittgenstein (2000), the idea that reality is a dream is a pseudo-idea; a meaningless paradox which occurs "when language goes on holiday". Or as Quine (p 17) elegantly puts it,

"There is then hope of accommodating the very waywardness of those wayward observations in a theory too, a theory of psychopathology. Law may thus be sought in the apparent breaches of law".

The determined skeptic might point out the well-known paradox that it is not possible to prove (using logic and deductive reasoning) that our experiences and observations are true, or indeed that the real world exists. The sceptic would be right to point this out. But if we try to answer this we will be committing the

journalistic sin of stepping off the path of epistemology, back into the swamp of ontology. We will have allowed ourselves to be seduced into considering the nature of reality. A better answer might be to accept that the inability of human reason to validate human reason is simply a fact of human existence, and an eternal feature of the human condition. The question which is really being asked is, "How certain is certainty"?

The Austrian-American mathematician Kurt Gödel identified a class of statement that is "true but not provable". An example of such a "Gödel sentence" would be, "This logical statement is not provable". Such statements push human reason to its outer limits where reason collides with circularity and self-referentiality and dissolves into paradox. How reasonable is human reason? How logical is logic? How certain is certainty? How infinite is infinity? How real is reality? How true is truth? How ontological is ontology? How metaphysical is metaphysics?

The American philosopher Noson Yanofsky (2013, p 335-336) asks whether there are absolute limits to human reason. Are there statements which are true, but which no human being could ever prove, no matter how much ingenuity were to be applied?

"Even if such a statement did exist, we would never be able to prove or know that it was such a statement, since to prove a statement is unprovable but true would mean that we proved it is true. So an absolutely unprovable problem is a problem we can never prove, and we can never know that we can never prove."

The Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1785, p 259) made a similar point two hundred years earlier. Reid pointed out that radical skepticism is incurable because logic cannot prove experience, and experience cannot prove logic,

"To judge a demonstration a man must trust his faculties, taking for granted the very thing that is in question. Trying to prove that our reason is not deceptive by any kind of reasoning is absurd... If a sceptic builds his scepticism on the basis that all our powers of reasoning and judging are deceptive in their nature, or resolves at least to withhold assent until it is proved that they aren't deceptive, it is impossible to beat him out of this stronghold by argument, and we'll have to leave

him to enjoy his scepticism".

In summary, attempting to prove the validity of these concepts is not the proper job of academic journalism. Nor, I believe, is it possible. It is probably not coincidence that the greatest human minds have failed to solve these intractable riddles. They are doubtless insoluble. The phenomenological idealism and metaphysics of TDP certainly did not solve them. TDP merely dragged academic journalism into the ontological swamp and attempted to hold its head beneath the mire. And so we must step back onto the epistemic path and conclude that, as far as journalism is concerned, the notions of observation and reality need to be taken with an unimaginative literalness and all metaphorical and ontological speculation stubbornly resisted.<sup>58</sup> As Mill (1940) put it,

"There is no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance sufficient for the purposes of human life".

Writing in 1761, the Swiss mathematician Leonard Euler (1761 (2010) p 176), neatly summarises the realist/journalistic epistemology outlined here. And he criticises the philosophical confusion relished by TDP which, by conflating ontology with epistemology, plunges journalistic theory down the rabbit hole into a wonderland of irrealism where no knowledge is possible,

"If a peasant should take it into his head to conceive such a doubt, and should say, for example, he does not believe that his bailiff exists, though he stands in his presence, he would be taken for a madman, and with good reason; but when a philosopher advances such sentiments, he expects we should admire his knowledge and sagacity, which infinitely surpass the apprehensions of the vulgar".

#### **05.08.00 Certainty, Uncertainty, Knowledge and Ignorance.**

As we approach the end of our philosophical excursion, it will be helpful to clarify the distinction between certainty and knowledge. I will argue here that ignorance, or lack of certainty, is not a valid reason for believing something not to exist. The

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<sup>58</sup> For a good summary of the intractable technical, philosophical issues see (Haack 1995)



target once again is the oft-quoted maxim of TDP that, “There are no facts out there waiting to be discovered”. This statement, if taken literally, denies that any such thing as journalism is possible. It destroys the rationale for the entire journalistic enterprise, and reduces journalists to the authors of pointless fairy tales. It is also philosophically nonsensical and self-defeating because it claims it is a fact that there are no facts.

To avoid this, the statement can be interpreted figuratively and taken to mean, “The facts of the matter are uncertain, unclear and disputed”, or simply, “We don't know what the facts are”. Thus the statement can be taken as making a lesser epistemological claim and referring to a state of ignorance. But there is a world of difference between saying that facts are unknown, and saying that there are no facts. For example I may not know what is inside a box, but this doesn't entitle me to believe that there are no facts about what is inside the box, or that the contents of the box cannot ever be determined (e.g. by opening it). Similarly I may not know the ingredients of a soup, but this does not entitle me to claim that the soup has no ingredients, or that ingredients do not exist. There is an important distinction between “knowledge” and “certainty”. It is a feature of many philosophical arguments which support TDP that they conflate these concepts and confuse the two words. As we have already noted, using words imprecisely can quickly lead to confusion and error. Or as Thomas Reid puts it in his essay, *Principles That I Take for Granted* (1785, p 7),

“Some philosophers of mind have felt free to use them [words] very improperly, corrupting the English language and running together things that the common understanding of mankind has always led men to distinguish”.

We can also note that it is perfectly proper to talk about *degrees* of knowledge or accuracy. In other words one statement can be more accurate, or more true, than another. Accuracy, knowledge and truth therefore exist along a cline or scale; they are not binary concepts. The same applies to the notion of certainty. People can be more or less certain about a statement or belief. An important consequence of this is that we should think of human belief about what is true as always being

provisional. If our beliefs depend on observational evidence from the real world, then if the evidence changes, or if new, better evidence comes to light; then our beliefs should be updated. It would be irrational to continue to believe something in the face of contradictory evidence. As Quine (op cit, p 13) puts it, observations are always,

"The boundary conditions of a system of beliefs. By showing a prediction to have been wrong, observation demands the overhaul of a system of beliefs... When an observation shows that a system of beliefs must be overhauled, it leaves us to choose which of those interlocking beliefs to revise."

In other words, the oft-quoted maxim of TDP that, "There are no objective facts out there waiting to be discovered" arises from confusion over the meaning of the word 'fact'. Subjectivists want the word to refer to some sort of absolute certainty. They point out (rightly) that such certitude is impossible, and they conclude (wrongly) that no facts exist. From this they reason that no knowledge is possible, and all beliefs must be equally valid. But this is not what the word 'fact' means. Thus the subjectivist view is a form of straw man argument which replaces the meaning of 'fact' with a rogue, exaggerated meaning.

The realist rejects this logic and reasons that, while nothing is 100% certain, some beliefs are more justified than others. To the realist, it is perfectly reasonable to believe something if it supported by evidence. And the most powerful, foundational evidence available to us, is the evidence of our own senses, experience and direct observation.

This is therefore the fork in the road, or point of departure, between the realist and the subjectivist. The subjectivist is offended by the lack of absolute certainty and insists that nothing can ever be known. The realist, undeterred by the lack of certainty, and with due epistemic humility, arranges his facts and knowledge along a spectrum of probability, and refers to the most likely things as 'facts' which are 'true'. Confusion creeps in because things which appear very certain are often referred to as being "objectively true". But this, as we have seen, is to use words

figuratively. The realist views the subjectivist as irrational because, as the British philosopher Susan Haack (1995, p 13) puts it, to undertake any kind of rational enquiry,

"One must employ some standards of evidence, of what counts as a reason for or against a belief - standards which one takes to be an indication of truth".

It is precisely this absence of evidential standards, this epistemic relativism, which affronts the realist.

### **05.09.00 Philosophical Summary.**

In our philosophical interlude we have examined the sweeping philosophical assumptions of TDP - that reality is not real, and that facts and truth do not exist. We have found that these assumptions are unjustified and do not survive intellectual scrutiny. They arise principally through the imprecise use of language and through confusion between philosophical concepts. Most importantly we have argued that journalism must always be an applied, real-world project which assumes a realist ontology. Questioning reality is incoherent in Journalism Studies because asserting, "There are no facts out there which journalists can report" also means asserting that there are no journalists, newspapers, news reports, internet, scholars of journalism, university departments, or anything else. There are either facts or there are not. Subjectivists cannot have their cake and eat it. The philosophical skeptic who wishes to argue that the real world exists, but journalistic facts do not, is obliged to provide some epistemic criteria for distinguishing which facts exist and which do not. Failure to supply any formulation is simply intellectual hypocrisy. As Tallis notes (2000, p 34), G.E.Moore,

"Found it absurd that a man should doubt (or worse, deny) the reality of space and time while confidently planning to have his breakfast before his dinner and to eat in one place rather than another."

The acceptance of the simple fact that there is a real world, leads inevitably to the

conclusion that any statement which claims to describe the world will be necessarily either factually accurate, or factually inaccurate. Of two incompatible statements, one will necessarily be more accurate than the other. Examining what justifies our belief in one statement rather than the other, is, in a journalistic context, the business of a journalistic epistemology. As we have previously noted, all human children, in all cultures, by the age of four have a sophisticated understanding of these mechanisms which are simply the mechanisms of human reason.

The subjectivist, by denying the existence of fact and truth, attacks the legitimacy of human reason, and argues that everything should be abandoned. The realist, in reply, asks of the subjectivist, "Do you really think that every statement about the world is *equally* true"? "Do you really believe that 'it is raining' is just as true as 'it is not raining'"? "Do you really believe a cup of acid is the same as a cup of coffee"? "How can you claim to believe these things and yet function in the real world"? For the realist, this fundamental ability to distinguish between different things (what is true and what is false) is the foundation of all reason and rationality. It is a core component of cognition and human nature. Thus to deny truth is ultimately to argue that no object in the world can be distinguished from any other object. This in turn is to deny reason and plunge oneself deep into irrationality and madness. It is, in the famous words of the American psychologist William James, to argue that everything is, "one great blooming, buzzing confusion". It is this foundational relationship between truth and reason which we will briefly explore next.

## **Part Six. The Foundational Psychological Assumptions of TDP.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What are the cognitive-psychological assumptions of TDP?
- How valid are they?

*"Madness is something rare in individuals - but in groups, parties, peoples, and ages,  
it is the rule."*

Nietzsche

*"Reason and truth will prevail at last."*

Samuel Johnson.

### **06.00.00 Human Cognition and Inferential Processes.**

A striking feature of TDP is that it excludes, not only philosophy, but also cognitive psychology. TDP is hostile, not just to the concepts of reality, knowledge and truth, but also to concepts such as common sense and reason itself. The canon of TDP includes arguments which attempt to undermine the concept of common sense, as we shall presently see. Therefore, just as it has been essential to reintroduce philosophy into our discussion, so it will be helpful to reintroduce some elements of cognitive psychology. The combination of philosophy and psychology is to the truthphobia of TDP what garlic is to a vampire. It recoils in confusion and disarray. Psychology helps us understand the human need for information. This in turn leads to an understanding of journalism as a particular form of information about the world. In simple terms, philosophy and psychology reunite Journalism Studies with reality, and allow journalism to be seen, not a form of semiotic discourse, or a hegemonic endeavour, but as meaningful, informative content which claims to tell us something useful about the world.

The concepts of reality and truth, and the ability to distinguish one thing from another, are central to human cognition. Cognition is a complex, dynamic process of observation, perception, interpretation, categorization, inference, judgement and decision making. It involves logical and alogical processes, conscious reasoning and innumerable instinctive, emotional, heuristic responses. It involves

spotting patterns, identifying basic relationships of cause and effect, and predicting the future based on experience of the past. Cognition is how human beings make sense of the world and bring order to it. The French cognitive scientist Dan Sperber (Mercier and Sperber 2017, p 59-60) explains that human cognition emerges from a vast and mysterious network of interconnected psychological and neural processes,

"The inferential processes involved in perception are typically so fast - their duration is measured in milliseconds - that we are wholly unaware of them... Automatic inference in perception and deliberate inference in reasoning are at the two ends of a continuum. Between them, there is a great variety of inferential processes doing all kinds of jobs.. and reasoning? Reasoning is only one of these many mechanisms."

A detailed investigation of these cognitive processes, and how they underpin the basic human need for trustworthy journalistic information, is a suggestion for future research. For now we can simply note that human cognition depends upon, and has evolved to process, information from the external environment around us. Thus, from the moment we are born (if not before) human beings are engaged in using, developing and building knowledge, skills and expertise through processes of learning based on complex inferential processes. We cannot stop using these cognitive processes, any more than we can stop our heart beating, or stop our stomach digesting. Thus the human infant in his cot encounters and explores reality and truth long before he is able to conceptualise these things and express them verbally. All infants are therefore, in a sense, junior scientists conducting experiments about the world and reaching conclusions based on real-life observation and experience. As the American psychologist Deanna Kuhn puts it (Goswami 2014, p 498-499), children think *with* their theories, not about them,

"From their earliest years, children construct implicit theories that enable them to make sense of and organise their experience... In the early years of life, theories and theory revision are common, as children seek to make sense of a widening array of experience."<sup>59</sup>

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It is noteworthy that the contemporary understanding of childhood cognitive

It is important to understand that human cognition is therefore a *process*. It is a way of processing information from the real world and reaching conclusions. The essential distinction is that a process is not the same thing as the a *conclusion* reached by the process. For example we may speak of a mathematical process of adding up numbers. Someone adding up a list of numbers may make a mistake, but falling into error does not mean that the *process* of arithmetic is invalid. It simply means the conclusion drawn, or the inference obtained, was incorrect. The same process could be used to reveal the error. Deanna Kuhn (ibid) describes this important distinction as one between *process* and *understanding*,

"Scientific thinking is something people *do*, not something they *have*. The latter we will refer to as scientific *understanding*. When conditions are favourable, the process of scientific thinking may lead to scientific understanding as its product".

This fundamental *process* of human inferential learning, I will refer to as a "rational" process. Thus, by the age of twelve, Kuhn (p 509) reports that most children will be able to form theories based on observed evidence and then revise their theories in the light of updated evidence. In addition children understand the relationship between a theory of cause and effect and the supporting factual evidence,

"The ability to access and represent new evidence and to appreciate the relation it bears to different theoretical claims. Skilled scientific thinking always entails the coordination of theories and evidence, and this coordination requires that the two be clearly distinguished".

Kuhn concludes (p 516) that it is not that children mysteriously learn to adopt scientific thinking; it is that scientific thinking is simply one particular incarnation of a more widespread rationality. This rationality is essentially epistemic. Thus the eternal and irrepressible human hunger for the truth is a crucial part of human

development is more developed and nuanced than the earlier, rather blunt understanding of early researchers such as Jean Piaget. Piaget's constructivist ideas became highly influential during the 1960s and 1970s and are contemporaneous with the emergence of TDP. However many of his conclusions are problematic. For example see; Baillargeon, R. *How Do Infants Reason About Physical Events*. In (Goswami 2014).



nature,

"Scientific discourse asks, most importantly, 'How do you know?' or 'What is the support for your statement?' When children participate in discourse that poses these questions, they acquire the skills and values that lead them to pose the same questions to themselves. Although central to science, this critical development extends far beyond the borders of traditional scientific disciplines".

In short, cognitive psychology tells us that the concepts of reality, knowledge and truth are inseparable from the workings of human reason and cognition. Understanding this will help us understand why humans need information – including journalistic information.

#### **06.01.00 Rational Processes; Scientific, Medical, Judicial and Common Sense.**

What Deanna Kuhn's paper reveals is that, in human society, raw human reason will be formalized and codified to make it fit specific purposes. For example the much discussed "scientific method", although it may wear different clothes, is the same process that emerges spontaneously in children. As the American physicist Richard Feynmann famously explained in a 1964 lecture (1964), the scientific method is in reality, something very simple,

"If it disagrees with experiment, it's wrong. In that simple statement is the key to science. It doesn't make any difference how beautiful your guess is, it doesn't matter how smart you are who made the guess, or what his name is... If it disagrees with experiment, it's wrong. That's all there is to it".

Even the most influential of philosophers of science, Karl Popper (1959, p 3), describes the scientific method as a straightforward system of rational, evidence-based enquiry proceeding both upwards, from observation to theory; and downwards, from theory to observation,

"A scientist, whether theorist or experimenter, puts forwards statements, or systems of statements, and tests them step by step. In the field of the empirical

sciences, more particularly, he constructs hypotheses, or systems of theories and tests them against experience by observation and experiment".

In the same way, doctors refer to the "diagnostic method". The British academic Maggi Banning (2008, p 118) explains this as a formalised process to enable clinicians to choose between alternatives. But it is essentially the same process of rational, inferential learning,

"The information-processing model is rooted in medical decision making (Joseph & Patel 1990). This model uses a scientific or hypothetico-deductive approach to assist meta-cognitive reasoning that is essential to medical diagnosis (Graber 2003, Gordon & Franklin 2003)".

Or, in the realm of jurisprudence, one might speak of a "judicial process". For example the Spanish academic A. Daniel Oliver-Lalana explains (2016) that in a court of law a rational method is adopted because it would be,

"Expected to yield more rational, namely more reasoned and better grounded outcomes."

He describes (p 19) various "basic rationality requirements" for the judicial process which would include, "An adequate construction of diagnoses and prognoses (fact-finding)" and a process of balancing conflicting views. We will presently ask what is the nature of the "journalistic process", but before doing so let us consider the much contested concept of common sense. It is a concept which has been subjected to a fanatical hostility by some theorists of TDP. However I will argue that, to deny common sense, is to deny reason itself.

#### **06.02.00 Common Sense. Part One - A Generic Rational Process.**

In everyday life the same rational process we have been discussing is referred to as "common sense". It is the process of making inferences from observation and reaching conclusions. Unlike a specific professional process, common sense is a generic, general-purpose process which can be deployed to tackle a wide range of

situations and make decisions about how to behave and what to believe. Common sense therefore lines up alongside its brethren; the scientific method, the diagnostic method, the judicial method and the journalistic method. Thus we might say that advising someone to, "Use common sense" is (approximately) to say,

"Be rational, be aware of cause and effect, observe carefully, change what you do if it's not producing the desired results, proceed on the expectation that what happened last time will probably happen next time if you do the same thing. But above all keep observing, and alter what you do in the light of real world observation."

The Canadian scholar Serge Robert (2005, p 717), who researches the psychology of reasoning, refers to this process of obtaining knowledge as an interaction between the real world and "certain marvellous properties of what we call our 'minds'". Robert's formulation serves as a good description of the process of everyday common sense,

"A sensitivity to natural order and some inferential capacities, so that we can produce information about that order; memory, so that we can store the information obtained; and finally, neuronal plasticity, so that we can correct our information and adapt to the mind's environment."

In short, common sense is a process. The English mathematician and philosopher A.N.Whitehead (1967(1929) p 107) also understood common sense as a process of inference and reason based on observation of the real world,

"Neither common-sense nor science can proceed with their task of thought organisation without departing in some respect from the strict consideration of what is actual in experience".

Adding (p 108) that both common sense and science rested on the same logical processes,

"Science is essentially logical. The nexus between its concepts is a logical nexus,

and the grounds for its detailed assertions are logical grounds. King James said, "No bishops, no king." With greater confidence we can say, "No logic, no science".

For Thomas Reid, common sense was also a process of reasoning. For Reid common sense is not conscious, logical thought, but rather a process of intuitive, inductive cognition, a "faculty of the mind" and "part of the provision nature has made for the human understanding". Reid's view is remarkably similar to contemporary understanding of human cognition as a "massively modular" suite of cognitive tools. Reid (1764, p 135) speaks of these tools as,

"Part of our constitution, and all the discoveries of our reason are based on them. They make up what is called 'the common sense of mankind'; and what is plainly contrary to any of them is what we call 'absurd'. Their strength is 'good sense', which is often found in people who are not highly intelligent".

For Reid, since common sense is essentially reason itself, to deny common sense is to deny reason. In a memorable passage (ibid) he equates the rejection of common sense with madness, as when a man believes himself to be "made of glass",

"When a man allows himself to be reasoned out of the principles of common sense by metaphysical arguments, we may call this 'metaphysical lunacy'."

Or as Einstein is credited with saying,<sup>60</sup>

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results".

Given this core psychological, proto-scientific method of proceeding from observation, we can begin to appreciate the need for high-quality, up to date information. A steady stream of accurate, true information is central to our ability to make calculations; from the most trivial to the most complex. Without high quality information to feed our rational processes, we could not function in the world. We would not be able to cross a road without being run over, learn to ride a

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<sup>60</sup> The attribution is contested. See Becker (2012).

bicycle, open a door, or walk down stairs. Nor could we participate in the public sphere, decide who to vote for in an election, or make any plans for the future.

### **06.03.00 Information for Predicting the Future. Algorithms for Complexity.**

Information can be thought of as input to feed an algorithm designed to forecast the future. For example playing tennis involves a series of complex, rapidly changing probability forecasts about where the ball will be, where our opponent will be and where our racket will have to be in order to place the ball precisely where we want it to be. All of these calculations depend on a stream of constantly updated, accurate observations. Closing one's eyes, even for a fraction of a second would be disastrous.

Similar situations can be a matter of life or death, and not just for humans. For example, archer fish hunt insects by shooting jets of water at them. Detecting and successfully targetting their fast moving prey is a formidable challenge of prediction. As the German experimental biologist Saskia Wöhl explains (Wöhl and Schuster 2007),

“When a split second decides between life and death, both hunters and their prey produce distinct high-speed motor patterns at their limits of performance”.

Wöhl adds (ibid) that the archer fish displays remarkable forecasting abilities which extend beyond shooting its prey. Archerfish, like humans, are living computers,

“Once their shots have successfully dislodged aerial prey, hunting archer fish monitor the initial values of their prey’s ballistic motion and elicit an adapted rapid turning manoeuvre. This allows these fish to head straight towards the later point of catch with a speed matched to the distance to be covered”.

However human decision making often has to tackle problems that are far more complex. In daily life we find ourselves confronted by enormous uncertainty and by hosts of interconnected variables, each of which are constantly evolving and

affecting their neighbours in unpredictable ways. These processes are referred to as 'chaotic' and trying to make forecasts in the face of chaos and complexity is notoriously difficult. The French mathematician Henri Poincaré (2007) explains how complexity blurs into unfathomable processes which appear to us to be completely random,

“Small differences in the initial conditions may generate very large differences in the final phenomena. A small error in the former will lead to an enormous error in the latter. Prediction then becomes impossible, and we have a random phenomenon”.

The same insight was memorably captured by the American mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz (1972) who, in describing the sensitivity of a complex system to its initial conditions, asked,

“Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?”

Weather and climate are chaotic systems, but a vast number of situations which confront human beings on a daily basis are also chaotic. Journalism, in this context, can be seen as a series of observations, or measurements, of reality which humans can use to adjust their decision making in the face of complexity and uncertainty. Without journalism a person would be like a tennis player playing with his eyes shut. He would be deprived of vital information about reality and at a great disadvantage in the game of life. In other words every decision we make and every opinion we hold, depends on the availability of accurate, reliable information.

#### **06.04.00 Common Sense. Part Two - The Assault on Common Sense.**

It is a commonplace of TDP to attack and belittle common sense. However, if common sense is simply an everyday form of hypothetico-deductive reasoning, then how can it possibly be attacked? Would not an attack on common sense be, in effect, an attack on human reason itself? The answer lies in the fact that the phrase "common sense" has more than one meaning. The phrase can be used, not merely to refer to a *process*, but also to the *conclusions* reached by the process.

Thus although we may speak of someone *using* common sense (the process), we also speak of common sense *knowledge*, or belief. This usage refers to nuggets of practical wisdom, things which everyone within a certain community believes ought to be done. As the historian of common sense Sophia Rosenfeld (2011, p 1) explains,

"In modern parlance, we sometimes use Common Sense to mean the basic human faculty that lets us make elemental judgements about everyday matters based on everyday, real-world experience... Other times we mean the widely shared and seemingly self-evident conclusions drawn from this faculty, the truisms about which all sensible people agree without argument or even discussion."

To avoid confusion I will refer, in this section, to "COMMON SENSE" (capitalised) as the *process* of reasoning and "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS" as the nuggets of common belief. I will use "common sense" (lower case) in an imprecise and non-technical way which mimics everyday usage and is thus ambiguous. According to Rosenfeld (p 22-23), the original meaning of common sense was "COMMON SENSE". This she argues was largely what Aristotle had in mind when he referred to the common sensibilities, or *sensus communis*.<sup>61</sup> It was only during the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that common sense came to refer to "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS".

"Over the course of the early modern period, the two words that made up *sensus communis*, or *sens commun*, or common sense came to be used in less technical senses right alongside Aristotelian ones... Common Sense came also to mean, in English, those plain, self-evident truths or conventional wisdom that one needed no sophistication to grasp and proof to accept".

Thus were born the two siblings of "COMMON SENSE" and "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS". There is however an intense rivalry between them. For there is no guarantee that one's "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS" are really the legitimate product of "COMMON SENSE". There is, one might say, nothing commonsensical about

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<sup>61</sup> For a scholarly account of what Aristotle did and did not say about *αἴσθησις κοινή* and how the term may have been mistranslated and widely misunderstood, see, (Gregoric 2007)

common sense. Or as Voltaire put it, "common sense is not so common". In fact, as Rosenfeld explains (p 54-55) "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS" are, because they tend to be blindly accepted by a community, the polar opposite of "COMMON SENSE",

"Between 1690 and the end of the 1730s, an odd kind of transformation had occurred with an ancient psychological category at its centre... it simultaneously created just the opposite of what it promised."

In other words "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS" are often the product of social norms, conventions and moral or intellectual fashion, rather than of "COMMON SENSE" - the immutable process of reasoning. It is this linguistic slippage and ambiguity which enables critics of common sense to attack "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS" and achieve, through equivocation, the unmerited guilt by association of "COMMON SENSE". The tactics used by theorists to bring reason itself into disrepute, are first to assault the specific nuggets of knowledge of "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS", then fail to distinguish between the two different types of common sense, before concluding that both types are equally illegitimate.

#### **06.05.00 The Social Construction of Common Sense.**

According to the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, it was during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that the concept of common sense, along with the notions of objective reality and truth, came under intense scrutiny from a range of thinkers. Geertz (1975) argues that common sense became *the* fashionable subject of philosophy.

"Common sense, or some kindred conception, has become a central category, almost *the* central category, in a wide range of modern philosophical systems".

The assault on common sense arguably reached a peak of intensity in 1969 when the French post-modern theorist Gilles Deleuze published *The Logic of Sense* in which he attempted to equate common sense with "nonsense". Deleuze's project was to attempt to dissolve both good sense and common sense (neither of which he clearly defined) in a neo-Lacanian, Post-Structuralist acid bath. Deleuze (1990 (1969) p 78), used analogies from *Alice in Wonderland* to define the concept of



common sense, which he argued could not be separated from its antithesis nonsense. The implication of his thesis being the incomprehensible assertion that nonsense exists objectively, but sense does not. On this slender evidence he concludes that, "the principle of contradiction is applicable to the real and the possible". Common sense goes "in both directions at once". Pointing out that "The Hatter and the Hare went mad together the day they 'murdered time'", he asserts that,

"In the complementarity of good sense and common sense, the alliance between the self, the world, and God is sealed - God being the final outcome of directions and the supreme principle of identities. The paradox therefore is the simultaneous reversal of good sense and common sense... it appears as the nonsense of the lost identity and the unrecognizable".

The British academic Norman Fairclough, who writes in the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is typical of many contemporary theorists in that he sees common sense as "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS", a series of ideological and cultural "assumptions"; not "COMMON SENSE" - the process of reasoning. For Fairclough (1989, p 84) these assumptions form a site of ideological struggle in which different forces in society battle for Gramscian hegemony and domination of the masses,

"Let us correspondingly understand ideological common sense as common sense in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power."

In the vanguard of the assault on common sense were the Austrian sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann whose highly influential 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality* identifies Common Sense as the "central focus" of their project. We shall have more to say about Berger and Luckmann and social constructivism in due course, however it is very clear that their target are "COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS" rather than "COMMON SENSE (1991 (1966) p 27)",

"The sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday, non, or pre-theoretical, lives. In other words,

common-sense 'knowledge' rather than 'ideas' must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge".

Common sense was also a prominent target for Stuart Hall. Although Hall was strongly influenced by Berger and Luckmann, it was in Gramsci's formulation of common sense that he sought authority. For example, in his 2013 essay *Common-sense Neo-liberalism*, Hall, and his co-author Alan O'Shea, state in Gramscian vein that, "The battle over common sense is a central part of our political life". Hall (Hall and O'Shea 2013, p 9) answers the rhetorical question "What exactly is common sense?" by saying it is a,

"Form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection."

Hall (ibid) gives the example of one,

"Common-sense assertion that has become widely acceptable is: 'You can't solve a problem just by throwing money at it' - often aimed at Labour's 'tax and spend' policies".

Hall (1986, p 20) conflates "ideologies", "philosophies" and "conceptions of the world of the masses" into one rich, confused soup of "common sense". Into this soup Hall mixes both the *process* of thinking and the "sediment" of factual nuggets produced by the thinking,

"Why, then, is common sense important? Because it is the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed. It is the already formed and "taken for granted" terrain, on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery."

Because Hall is seeking to damn common sense in all its forms, and because he draws on the authority of Gramsci to do so, it will be fruitful to briefly check what

Gramsci himself meant by Common Sense.<sup>62</sup>

### 06.06.00 Gramsci and Common Sense.

The American cultural anthropologist Kate Crehan points out that what Gramsci refers to as common sense is not the usual English language understanding of the phrase. This is largely due to a simple question of translation. Gramsci used the Italian phrase *senso comune* which is close to our formulation of COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS. However in Italian the phrase does not carry any of the English connotations of sensible, wise behaviour. As Crehan (2011) explains,

"The Italian term has none of these positive connotations. *Senso comune* refers simply to the beliefs and opinions supposedly shared by the mass of the population".

The Chilean political sociologist Marcos González Hernando (2017) points out that Gramsci's *senso comune* refers specifically to religious and political dogma,

"It is the result of institutions and producers of knowledge which, often in a sedimentary manner, promote a particular vision of the world... Here, Gramsci is thinking especially of churches and political parties".

So what did Gramsci say himself? In a little quoted passage Gramsci specifically contrasts *senso comune* with the *process* of human reason, or 'working out with ones own brain'. Reading Gramsci's own words (Gramsci 1971, p 323–334) it becomes clear that he is not attacking reason. On the contrary he is attacking unreason. Gramsci's target is his native, rural Sardinian culture of superstition and religion and specifically the "stupid" belief in witchcraft,

"Is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by... the local priest or ageing patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old

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<sup>62</sup> John Hartley is another scholar of TDP who appeals to the authority of Gramsci to attack common sense. "Common sense seems to derive its meaning from the 'given' 'facts' of the 'natural' situations in which people find themselves... Antonio Gramsci... is the writer to whom we owe much of recent theory on the subject". (Hartley 2001, p 102).

woman who has inherited the lore of the witches... Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world".

Thus Hall is categorically not entitled to cite Gramsci as an opponent of COMMON SENSE. The opposite is true; Gramsci exhorts his readers to use their own brains to "work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world". Gramsci is advocating the use of COMMON SENSE as an antidote to social conformity, and to the uncritical acceptance of COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS.

In summary, the *process*, or algorithm of human COMMON SENSE, is something which must logically exist in any imaginable world or universe. It is impossible for us to imagine a universe where COMMON SENSE does not exist and where  $1+1$  does not equal 2. As A.N. Whitehead concludes (1967(1929) p 107),

"We may speculate, if it amuses us, of other beings in other planets who have arranged analogous experiences according to an entirely different conceptual code... But the task is too complex, too gigantic, to be revised in its main outlines. You may polish up common sense, you may contradict it in detail, you may surprise it. But ultimately your whole task is to satisfy it".

In conclusion, the hostility of TDP to common sense is a manifestation of its underlying rejection of reality and reason. However the denial of objective reality is futile, and can only be attempted by the use of widespread equivocation, by revelling in ambiguity and sophistry, and by wreaking linguistic and semantic confusion. The attempt to build a rational argument to deny rationality and COMMON SENSE must always be self-defeating and nonsensical. It is absurd to use reason to try to convince someone that reason does not exist.

#### **06.07.00 Journalistic Norms and Codes.**

Having considered common sense processes, and the codified processes of judicial and scientific reasoning, let us now consider the processes of journalistic reasoning. I will argue that journalistic codes, and norms of professional behaviour, are to journalists what the scientific method is to scientists; viz. an

epistemic process. As the American philosopher Elmer Sprague (1978, p 3) writes,

"The various special sciences, and other intellectual disciplines whose practitioners would probably not care to call themselves 'scientists' - such as historians and literary theorists - are all concerned, at least in part, with the pursuit of truth, but pursue it according to their own methods of inquiry and within their own prescribed domain".

What then are the special methods of inquiry used by journalists to pursue truth? It will be useful to remember that we are now firmly in the realm of practical journalism. We are talking about *journalistic* truth and this must not be confused with other forms of truth, such as objective, or metaphysical truth.

The Canadian-American political psychologist Philip Tetlock researched the techniques of successful decision makers and forecasters and acknowledges that any such process will necessarily be flawed. But lack of perfection does not render a process useless. Tetlock (2005, p 216) explains with admirable pragmatism that the purpose of codifying good practice into professional norms is to hold practitioners accountable to independent standards of empirical accuracy and rigour,

"Until someone comes up with something demonstrably better, these imperfect measures are reasonable approximations of an elusive construct".

Tetlock (p 238) explains that journalistic (and other) professional processes are the tools of truth,

"Deployed thoughtfully, these tools can help professionals build self-correcting epistemic communities devoted to monitoring complex events as they unfold in real time, reflecting on the implication of these events for their evolving world views, and specifying benchmarks for defining and checking biases".

Most news organisations have their own ethical codes and written guidelines spelling out how journalists should proceed. The BBC's Editorial guidelines for

example are a formidable document comprising 215 pages. In the preface (BBC) Mark Thompson the Director-General writes,

"In a perfect world the BBC Editorial Guidelines would consist of one sentence: use your own best judgement."

"What makes the Guidelines so valuable is that they are a distillation of years of... experience, common sense and values of BBC practitioners built up over many years. Not abstract or theoretical, but based on real cases ... They set out clear principles which all our content must observe, and a set of practices".

What the BBC guidelines help us see is that the professional routines of journalists are not ends in themselves, but the means to an end. The end is journalistic truth. If the guidelines are well thought-out, and if journalists follow them carefully and in good faith, then the journalist will have increased his chance of reporting the news accurately and impartially. The guidelines are epistemic tests which the story has to pass. In this epistemic laboratory, the credible is separated from the incredible. What is credible is then further distilled until the highly probable drips out.

Journalistic routines are thus similar to the pre-flight checks carried out by aircrew. The pre-flight checklist is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end. The end is safety. Following the checklist is a summary of best practice. It is an epistemic methodology codified into a procedure which professionals are obliged to follow. Without the checklist each pilot would have to work out from scratch what to check to ensure the aircraft is safe to fly. Since human beings are prone to fatigue and error, this would be inefficient and foolish. The American airline pilot and blogger Patrick Smith (2015) refers to pre-flight checks as a "choreographed set of steps" intended to achieve an important practical outcome,

"You are verifying that tasks have already been accomplished. All the switches, buttons and levers should be in the correct position... all crews are trained to perform the same manoeuvres the same way. This ensures commonality and, in turn, safety".

Hence safety is the goal of pre-flight checking, just as truth is the goal of journalistic checking.

#### **06.08.00 The Importance of Journalistic Processes. Two Case Studies.**

If one accepts the existence of objective reality, then reason, rationality and processes of causation all follow. This being the case, journalistic norms can be understood as algorithms. Applying these algorithms helps journalists distinguish between fact and fiction; they are the practical tools of epistemic vigilance. They are the maps and compasses by which journalists navigate the treacherous waters of uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, error and deceit in which they sail every day. It is when journalists abandon their epistemic navigation aids, that they are most vulnerable to professional disaster.

For example on 14th August 2014 BBC News decided to broadcast live helicopter footage of a police raid on the home of veteran pop star Sir Cliff Richard. Richard had been accused (falsely) of sexually assaulting a child thirty years earlier. He was never arrested or charged with an offence, and no evidence was ever found to substantiate the claim. Richard subsequently sued the BBC for breaching his privacy and won substantial damages. The trial revealed a catalogue of failures within BBC News; specifically the jettisoning of journalistic norms and guidelines, and failing to give Sir Cliff the opportunity to reply to the false allegation prior to the broadcast. The trial judge, Mr Justice Mann, (2018, at par 295) noted that the BBC's editorial guidelines acknowledged the requirement to give Sir Cliff the right of reply, but this was ignored because the BBC wanted to broadcast the story as quickly as possible,

"The BBC did not quite comply with what it itself saw as the ethical requirements of its journalism at that stage. The real reason for that was, in my view, because it was giving a lot of weight, in its own deliberations, to preserving the exclusivity of its own scoop."

The judge concluded, at 446, that the BBC had abandoned the goal of truth in

favour of the goal of being first to broadcast a sensational and salacious story,

"In pursuing and publishing the story it was very materially motivated by the desire to scoop its rivals, which to a degree blinded it to other relevant considerations".

Among those singled out for criticism was Fran Unsworth the BBC's Director of News and Current Affairs. The court heard she approved the disastrous broadcast after a "huddle" in the newsroom which lasted between ten to fifteen minutes. Unsworth later conceded, according to the Press Association (Irish Independent 2018), that she was keen to "learn lessons" from what happened. In an email to BBC staff she admitted euphemistically,

"The BBC would "do some things differently today"".

Sir Cliff's verdict, reported by the *Press Gazette* (Tobitt 2018), was,

"What the BBC did was an abuse because it seemed to ignore everything ever stated by Magna Carta, Leveson, the police. They took it upon themselves to be judge, jury, and executioner. That's the abuse of it".

While the former BBC Editorial Director Roger Mosey (2018) expressed horror at the way that important epistemic procedures had been entirely abandoned,

"One presenter said he had watched "aghast" when large swathes of BBC airtime were devoted to helicopter shots looking into Sir Cliff's apartment – and many rank and file producers were uneasy about what they saw as disproportionate coverage for a case where there had to be a legal presumption of innocence".

It should be stressed that the Cliff Richard affair is not simply about the importance of following guidelines to avoid legal consequences. The underlying principle is the protection of the innocent from false and malicious accusations which, if made public, would create an indelible stain on their character. Therefore, beneath the issue of the avoidance of costly litigation, lies the greater issue of



fairness and journalistic truth. Sir Cliff was innocent, therefore his reputation should have been protected from slur and innuendo. In summary, by not being sufficiently concerned with whether or not the story was true, and in disregarding its own professional guidelines, the BBC's behaviour was both unlawful and dishonest because it gave audiences the impression that Sir Cliff was guilty of something, whereas, in fact, he was not.

In the US similar journalistic disasters have resulted from the disregard of journalistic norms, checks and procedures. For example on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2014, *Rolling Stone* magazine published a sensational story about a brutal gang rape at the University of Virginia. The article, entitled "A Rape on Campus." was, in the words of ABC News (McNiff, Efron and Schneider 2015) an,

"Explosive, 9,000-word account of alleged institutional indifference to sexual assault survivors and the mishandling of sexual assaults on college campuses".

The article, written by journalist Sabrina Rubin Erdely, chronicled the story of "Jackie" who claimed she had been raped by seven men. Unfortunately for Erdely her story was untrue and *Rolling Stone* found itself on the receiving end of a multi million dollar lawsuit. A subsequent investigation by the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism (Somaiya 2015) concluded that,

"The widely discredited piece was the result of failures at every stage of the process... the magazine failed to engage in "basic, even routine journalistic practice" to verify details".

The report noted a failure to check facts and evaluate evidence. The Managing Editor of *Rolling Stone* (Coronel, Coll and Kravitz 2015) accepted that the disaster,

"Reflected both an "individual failure" and "procedural failure, an institutional failure... Every single person at every level of this thing had opportunities to pull the strings a little harder, to question things a little more deeply, and that was not done."".

The report noted (ibid) that there were journalistic procedures in place at *Rolling Stone*, but they had been jettisoned in this case,

“Coco McPherson, the fact-checking chief, said, “I one hundred percent do not think that the policies that we have in place failed. I think decisions were made around those because of the subject matter.””.

As in the BBC case, a major epistemic failure was not obtaining an opposing viewpoint; i.e. not allowing a right of reply and allowing the story to become fatally one-sided. In the *Rolling Stone* case, the university was unable to comment properly because the details given to them by Erdely were impossibly vague. The University (ibid) had only been told that,

"An individual who remains unidentified had supposedly reported to someone who supposedly reported to the University that during a party there was a sexual assault."

Perhaps most importantly, by abandoning journalistic checking procedures Erdely allowed herself to become trapped in a bubble of epistemic hubris. The report concludes (ibid) that she hadn't felt the need to check, because she felt certain she was right and couldn't imagine that she might be wrong. Indeed, she desperately wanted the story to be true because, if it were, it would confirm her pre-existing world view,

“The problem of confirmation bias – the tendency of people to be trapped by pre-existing assumptions and to select facts that support their own views while overlooking contradictory ones – is a well-established finding of social science. It seems to have been a factor here”.

Therefore in both the BBC and *Rolling Stone* cases, a salient feature of the disasters was the lack of objectivity. Objectivity in this sense means a journalist not being prejudiced, but being open-minded. It is to approach the story in a detached, unbiased way, like a judge, and allowing both sides to be heard. The process of critically weighing two contradictory accounts is a crucial part of the search for

journalistic truth, just as it is crucial in a courtroom in the search for judicial truth. Following the algorithm of objectivity is therefore a safeguard against human error and bias. In both these cases, the failure of journalists to follow established journalistic norms and procedures (particularly the norm of objectivity) can be viewed as a form of epistemic recklessness and arrogance, akin to a judge only listening to one side's evidence, or to a pilot failing to perform his pre-flight checks because he is certain there could not possibly be anything wrong with his aircraft. As the British media philosopher Matthew Kieran (1998, p 34-35) has noted, journalism's "truth-promoting practices", such as impartiality, all make sense if one recognises that reality and facts exist, and that journalism's essential goal is "aiming at the truth",

"Like science, journalism as a practice aims at truth and it is relative to this fundamental aim that we classify news reports as good or bad... A failure of impartiality in journalism is a failure to respect one of the methods required in order to fulfil the goal of journalism; getting at the truth of the matter".

Aspiring to open-mindedness and shunning prejudice, as far as is humanly possible, is therefore both an epistemic and journalistic virtue.

#### **06.09.00 The Sociological Turn #1. The Rituals of Journalism.**

Curiously, although the professional codes and routines of journalism are widely seen by journalists as important epistemic checks and balances; academics who work within TDP usually reject this view and instead see them as incomprehensible rituals. Adherents of TDP argue that because if there is no such thing as journalistic truth, then journalistic procedures cannot exist to peruse it. Consequently, they argue, the procedures must have some other function. The explanation frequently offered is that they are empty rituals or superstitions which serve to legitimise journalism's professional status. This explanation was famously expressed by the eminent American sociologist Gaye Tuchman in an influential 1972 paper entitled, *Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity* (Tuchman 1972). For Tuchman, objectivity serves no useful

purpose, other than as a fig leaf to cover journalism's nakedness,

"To journalists, like social scientists, the term "objectivity" stands as a bulwark between themselves and critics. Attacked for a controversial presentation of "facts," newspapermen invoke their objectivity almost the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits".

Tuchman's interpretation of the professional epistemic codes of journalism as "rituals" has since become a commonplace of TDP. For example, following Tuchman, the Swedish communications scholar Michael Karlsson (2010) assumes that journalism's "authoritative rituals" exist, not to help journalists distinguish what is true from what is false, but to reassure audiences in case they are "questioned or criticized". Karlsson follows Tuchman's use of a religious or superstitious metaphor describing these rituals as part of a "common faith",

"Thus for various routines to be working journalistic rituals, they must be communicated to the audience but more importantly, understood and accepted as journalistic rituals by the audience in order for the audience to separate journalism from other forms of communication."

The Dutch media theorist Mark Deuze (2005) shares these assumptions and concludes that concepts such as objectivity, impartiality and neutrality are best seen as "occupational ideologies" of legitimacy and credibility,

"There seems to be a consensus among scholars in the field of journalism studies that what typifies more or less universal similarities in journalism can be defined as a shared occupational ideology among newswriters which functions to self-legitimize their position in society."

While in a paper entitled *A Strategic Ritual for All?* the Danish scholar of journalism Morten Skovsgaard (2013, p 96) also asserts the familiar dogma of TDP that,

"It is the general understanding that a one-to-one representation of reality is not

possible, and the inevitable consequence is that objectivity needs to be defined in terms other than as a depiction of the world as it is".

Skovsgaard reasons (p 98) therefore that,

"As the world cannot be described one-to-one, journalists need standards to convince their audience that they give an accurate account of the world... Facts do not speak for themselves, and not all 'facts' can be verified".

Before concluding, without irony, (p 96) that a realistic view of the world cannot be right because it would be "unrealistic",

"The objectivity norm has been criticised for being unrealistic... since news is a construction of reality rather than a description of reality".

Despite the dominance of this view in academic journalism, I will argue that those who believe that professional journalistic processes are empty rituals have fallen into error. Instead of seeing rational processes of cause and effect, they see only the outward *appearance* of journalistic behaviour. Let us examine the doctrine in detail.

Tuchman (op cit) begins her argument by defining ritual as follows,

"A ritual is discussed here as a routine procedure which has relatively little or only tangential relevance to the end sought. Adherence to the procedure is frequently compulsive. That such a procedure may be the best known means of attaining the sought end does not detract from its characterization as a ritual".

This unfortunately is self-contradictory. Either something is a ritual or it is not. A process which is the "best known means of attaining the sought end" is not a ritual, except metaphorically. A ritual is precisely a procedure with no practical purpose. For example changing a flat car tyre is usually carried out in much the same way, and with the same tools, by motorists all over the world. But changing a flat tyre is not a ritual. As the distinguished Dutch scholar of ritual Frits Staal (1979, p 3)

explains ritual has no goal or purpose beyond the ritual itself,

“A widespread but erroneous assumption about ritual is that it consists in symbolic activities which refer to something else. It is characteristic of a ritual performance, however, that it is self-contained and self-absorbed... ritual has no meaning, goal or aim”.

Tuchman is not therefore entitled to define ritual as a procedure which is, “the best known means of attaining the sought end”. When a ritual becomes a procedure of logical, commonsensical cause and effect it ceases to be a ritual. Undeterred, Tuchman (op cit) criticises processes such as verification. She encloses the word facts in mocking scare quotes and concludes that journalistic behaviour is “sacred knowledge” used by journalists to elevate themselves into high priests of public information,

“The newsman navigates between libel and absurdity by identifying “objectivity” with “facts” which he or other newsmen observed or which may be verified. Verification entails the use of, or the possibility of using, appropriate procedures... It would appear that news judgment is the sacred knowledge, the secret ability of the newsman which differentiates him from other people”.

Tuchman then dismisses the entire notion of factual evidence, objective reality and truth in one sentence,

“Of course, it is sociological commonplace that “facts” do not speak for themselves. For instance, Shibutani (1966) demonstrates that the assessment and acceptance of “facts” is highly dependent upon social processes”.

Here Tuchman, like de Saussure and Schudson before her, is appealing to commonly held beliefs and fashionable intellectual assumptions to support her argument. However saying it is a “sociological commonplace” that there is no reality and no facts does not mean it is true. We have already noted how philosophically and psychologically naive such claims are. One is also entitled to ask what special authority sociologists have to decree that facts do not exist. If a

sociologist should assert that sociologists do not believe that facts exist, then one might reply simply that most human beings, and most journalists do. *Quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur.*

Tuchman appeals to the authority of the Japanese American sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani to substantiate her claim that facts are socially constructed, i.e. "highly dependent upon social processes". Tuchman's reference here is to Shibutani's 1966 book *Improvised News*. But Shibutani's book is not about news, it is about rumour as the full title makes clear; *Improvised News; A Sociological Study of Rumor*. In this book Shibutani contrasts rumour and gossip (which he views as unreliable), with professional news (which sees as far more reliable). For Shibutani (1966, p 32) rumour thrives in the absence of professional news,

"In disasters one of the first things that men seek, after saving themselves, is news. Sometimes they become so desperate for such information that they get careless about its source."

Far from claiming that news is socially constructed, Shibutani argues the exact opposite. His target is rumour. Professional news, he makes clear, (p 42) is trustworthy precisely *because* of the checks performed by journalists,

"In modern mass societies complex procedures have been established for the gathering, processing and dissemination of news... blatant error is easily exposed. In times of crisis people turn first to these channels, and they serve as the standard against which all other reports are checked".

Shibutani applauds the rigorous "pre-flight checks" and professional processes which journalists, especially in the US and the UK, have developed. These, he points out, (p 43) are guardians of epistemic good practice which help journalists report factually and accurately,

"Possibilities for deception are considerable, but the professional ideology of newsmen helps to maintain standards of reliability. The announced ideal in journalism is the clear, impartial, and, accurate description of significant events..."

Journalists in the United States and England take great pride in their standards of fairness and accuracy... News agencies throughout the world have standardized procedures that tend to maximise reliability".

Shibutani's book is written very much in the tradition of the Enlightenment which acknowledges objective reality and truth. For Shibutani (p 45-46) all questions of fact and truth must face the ultimate tribunal of human observation and reason,

"All communication channels, both formal and informal, are subject to repeated pragmatic tests, and their reputation for reliability depends on adequate performance... The frequent presentation of false information, however, discredits the channel... Human beings are not gullible. Once a source is defined as unreliable for certain kinds of news, it is not trusted".

It is curious that Tuchman should have sought authority for her views in Shibutani, who disagrees with her at such a fundamental level. Casting her mind back to 1972 Tuchman today accepts that Shibutani does not endorse her views. She acknowledges (Tuchman 2018) that he contradicts her. Instead she argues that he is wrong,

"The Shibutani quote about news is wrong, since his claims about methods are incorrect".

#### **06.10.00 The Cargo Cult Fallacy. Why 2+2 equals 4.**

To an uninformed observer, let us say a young child, a pilot's pre-flight checks might indeed appear a puzzling and peculiar ritual. Such an observer might even speculate that the pilot was performing a religious ceremony, or casting a magic spell to bring good luck. But that would be to confuse the external appearance, or outward form, with the substance. This sort of error is often referred to as a cargo cult fallacy. Cargo cults arose on remote Pacific islands during the Second World War when the indigenous people came into contact with the US military. The indigenous people watched the Americans build aerodromes and were then wonderstruck to see aircraft arrive laden with cargo. Reasoning that the building



of runways caused the cargo to arrive, native tribes constructed replicas complete with bamboo radio masts. However Richard Feynman (1974) explains that although the fake aerodromes look like the real ones, there is a problem – they don't work,

"No airplanes land. So I call these things Cargo Cult Science, because they follow all the apparent precepts and forms of scientific investigation, but they're missing something essential, because the planes don't land."

Similarly Tuchmanism misses "something essential". If, as Tuchmanism suggests, journalistic procedures are empty rituals, then journalists might as well slaughter a goat in the newsroom, or perform a "news dance", instead of checking facts, or following the norms of objectivity. According to Tuchmanism there would be no difference in outcomes between the two sets of empty rituals. But, as we have seen, fact checking, and being fair to both sides, is not an empty ritual. It is a proven, practical algorithm for getting closer to journalistic truth, and journalists ignore these epistemic procedures at their peril. In other words, what Tuchmanism misses is that some processes work better than others. Being objective is more likely to lead to truthful reporting than sacrificing a goat, or performing a dance. As Feynman continues (*ibid*),

"A method was discovered for separating the ideas—which was to try one to see if it worked, and if it didn't work, to eliminate it. This method became organized, of course, into science. And it developed very well, so that we are now in the scientific age".

And so for journalism. If one's goal is journalistic truth; then objectivity, accuracy and impartiality also work well. Tuchmanism then is best seen as an example of the sociological turn. This, as we have previously noted, was the replacement of philosophy and psychology with a purely sociological approach. It became fashionable in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is a core feature of TDP. But the sociological turn cannot evade epistemology, it merely shifts the question from one place to another. The sociological turn argues that "It is raining" and "It is not raining" are both narratives. But the question remains; which narrative is true? Is

it raining or isn't it? And what criteria can we use to judge? Furthermore, one is entitled to ask, "Is the assertion that all statements about the world are equally valid, subjective narratives, itself true"? What is the evidence for believing such a statement? Thus the relativism of Tuchmanism falls into the same error as other forms of naïve philosophical skepticism. It attempts to argue that it is a fact that there are no facts, and is therefore self-defeating.

In a later book entitled *Making News. A Study in the Construction of Reality* Tuchman continues her sociological assault on epistemology, memorably referring to the "web of facticity" which journalists construct out of self-supporting facts all of which are, in fact, social constructs. For Tuchman (1978, p 88), even mathematics should be seen only in the light of sociology,

"Taken by itself, a fact has no meaning. Indeed, even 'two and two equals four' is factual only within certain mathematical systems or theories. It is the imposition of a frame of other ordered facts that enables recognition of facticity and attribution of meaning".

It is hard to take seriously this ill-advised attempt to reduce mathematics to sociology. A discussion of the nature of mathematics is obviously outside the scope of the present project, however it should be noted that Tuchman is confusing *counting systems* with the underlying cognitive mechanisms which recognise quantity. For example decimal and fractional systems of counting are human conventions, but they describe objectively-existing relations between real objects in the real world. " $0.5 + 0.5 = 1$ " may be a different notation to " $1/2 + 1/2 = 1$ ", but the inescapable, objective truth is that, in any conceivable counting system, two halves equal one whole. To the question, "In what "mathematical system" does  $2+2$  not equal  $4$ ?" Tuchmanism is silent. As the Oxford University developmental psychologists Peter Bryant and Terezinha Nunes explain (Bryant and Nunes 2014, p 549), all mathematics is founded on the fact that numbers relate to objectively real quantities and quantitative relations. If this wasn't true, there would be no point learning about maths in the first place, or even learning how to count,

"Mathematics is the study of quantitative relations. Usually these relations can be expressed numerically, and numbers make it possible for people to understand and manipulate relations between quantities in powerful and precise ways... However knowing how to count is of little intellectual value to them [school children] unless they also grasp how numbers are connected to quantities and quantitative relations".

Moreover, being able to count is not an ability limited to humans. It's something animals do. The Italian cognitive psychologist Roas Rugani and her colleagues carried out experiments on three day old chicks and found they could perceive and distinguish on the basis of quantity and process information about numbers. Rugani comments (Rugani et al. 2015) that the contemporary understanding of the nature of mathematics points overwhelmingly to the fact its origins are part of our innate cognition and not, as argued by sociologists of the 1960s and 1970s, the product of social construction,

"Number knowledge and processing are fundamental to everyday life. There is now considerable empirical evidence that... numerical competence did not emerge *de novo* in linguistic humans but was probably built on a precursor non-verbal number system".

This is a finding confirmed by other researchers, such as the developmental psychologist Maria Dolores de Hevia and her colleagues, whose experiments also support the view that mathematics is not a socially constructed phenomenon, but rather something emanating from a core, and evolutionary ancient, sense of number (De Hevia et al. 2014, p 4809),

"We now know that human new-borns, and even inexperienced animals such as newly hatched chicks, are able to discriminate objects on the basis of numerosity a few hours after the start of postnatal experience".

In other words, (p 4812) mathematics describes reality, it does not construct it,

"Our findings reveal that the cognitive capacities to link the dimensions of number,

space, and time are not founded on extensive postnatal experience in an environment in which these dimensions are correlated... the sensitivity to the common structure of these dimensions might be present from birth, as part of the evolutionary endowment of human cognition".

Thus, Tuchmanism, in its denial of reality, facts and processes of cause and effect, is a doctrine of irrationalism. It is an overly narrow sociological approach which is unjustifiably hostile to the view that journalism is information about the real world. In conclusion, one is entitled to ask whether it is wise to base a theory of journalism on the premise that two plus might not always equal four?

#### **06.11.00 The Sociological Turn #2. Bourdieu; Advocacy as Journalism.**

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is another influential theorist of TDP. Like Tuchman he sees journalism through a sociological lens, however, like the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, Bourdieu is a Marxist who shares with his German near contemporaries a desire, not merely to describe, but to change the world. Bourdieu writes in the French *Marxisant* tradition and his media theory is best seen as politically motivated research which aims at disrupting the existing, capitalistic order, and replacing it with a Marxist, socialist one. As the American sociologist David Gartman puts it (2013, p 33),

"The work of Pierre Bourdieu, perhaps the most influential analyst of culture in contemporary sociology, shares many of the assumptions and intentions of the Frankfurt School's reification theory. First, Bourdieu's theory also has a critical intent - it aims not merely to understand society but also to criticize and change it."

Although Bourdieu never joined the French Communist Party, he became, in the words of the American political sociologist Dylan Riley (2017),

"The organic intellectual of the *gauche de la gauche*... Indeed the social theory that he has single-handedly created is to the contemporary intellectual left what neo-Marxism was to the students of the 1960s".

Bourdieu is therefore truthophobic because he is unconcerned with whether journalism tells the truth or not. He privileges *arete* over *aletheia* and calls for partisan journalism designed to promote Marxist narratives and suppress contrary views. Bourdieu set out his view of journalism in his 1996 book *On Television*. Bourdieu begins his argument (1998 (1996) p 52) by deploring the tabloidization of TV news which he says panders to the worst, lowest instincts of audiences. Tabloid journalism, he argues, stirs the “most primitive drives and emotions” of the mob and can therefore be considered as a form of journalistic “lynching”,

“This same search for sensational news, and hence market success, can also lead to the selection of stories that... can stir up great excitement by catering to the most primitive drives and emotions (with stories of kidnapped children and scandals likely to arouse public indignation)... aggressive enough almost to qualify as symbolic lynching”.

Bourdieu argues (p 41) that audiences are fed a diet of tabloid news because of the commercial pressures of competition which are an inevitable part of the capitalist system,

“Economic competition between networks or newspapers for viewers, readers, or for market share, takes place concretely in the form of a contest between journalists. This contest has its own, specific stakes - the scoop, the "exclusive," professional reputations, and so on.”

At first it appears that Bourdieu is arguing for a better, more accurate and truthful journalism, or at least a more high-brow one. But that is not where his argument is heading. Bourdieu reveals (p 51) that his principle objection to tabloid, human interest stories is that they are apolitical,

"Human interest stories create a political vacuum. They depoliticize and reduce what goes on in the world to the level of anecdote or scandal... In short, the focus is on those things which are apt to arouse curiosity but require no analysis, especially in the political sphere".

It is now clear that Bourdieu is arguing, not for less tabloidization, but for more overtly political content. Bourdieu is thus offering his readers a false dichotomy; a choice between either vacuous, tabloid journalism and clickbait (driven by the capitalistic competition of the marketplace), or an ill-defined, centrally planned journalism (regulated and controlled by a benevolent state bureaucracy). Bourdieu's elitist thesis rests therefore on the implausible assertion that no alternative forms of journalism exist.

Which politicians does Bourdieu wish to see on TV? Whose voices should be heard and whose silenced? Bourdieu makes it clear he is not in favour of balance, objectivity or impartiality. He explains that some voices must be suppressed. For Bourdieu this is clearly a delicate matter and he writes ambiguously and euphemistically that it is "heteronomous" voices which should not be heard. Heteronomous voices, he explains, are those which are eccentric or peripheral to the mainstream. Thus he says (p 63) a heteronomous TV guest would "have nothing in common" with the authoritative voice and should be suppressed, even if the heteronomous voice claimed to "articulate divergent or even antagonistic interests".

"It seems to me indispensable to combat these heteronomous intellectuals, it's because they constitute the Trojan horse through which heteronomy - that is, the laws of the market and the economy - is brought into the field".

Bourdieu refers to an ideological "entry fee"; a bar of political merit which must be erected to exclude the undesirable, heteronomous voices from appearing on TV. Claims that these voices might represent the legitimate views of large numbers of citizens must be resisted (p 65) in order to maintain autonomy and keep standards high,

"What I find difficult to justify is the fact that the extension of the audience is used to legitimate the lowering of the standards for entry into the field... we must work to maintain, even to raise the requirements for the right of entry - the entry fee - into the fields of production".

Bourdieu finally (p 64) provides an example of which voices are to be suppressed. They are voices which are “liable to unleash strong, often negative feelings, such as racism, chauvinism, the fear-hatred of the foreigner or, xenophobia. I am referring, of course” he says, “to the National Front”. Finally (p 55) he concludes that if the journalistic competition wrought by capitalism could be abolished, then journalists would be liberated to express their autonomy by suppressing the heteronomous voices,

“Journalists might agree to forget about audience ratings for once and refuse to open their talk shows to political leaders known for and by their xenophobia. Further, they could agree not to broadcast what these characters say”.

Thus instead of allowing audiences to hear the heteronomous voices, journalism would permit only the voices of the “guardians of collective values” (P.77). Bourdieu began by arguing that the tabloidization of news panders to the tastes of an ignorant and vulgar mob. By a series of leaps and jumps of logic he ends with the conclusion that there should be an intellectual aristocracy of “guardians” with the power to dictate which opinions are heard and which are silenced. It is a curiously regressive stance for a French intellectual as it brings to mind the autocracy and despotism of Louis XVI.<sup>63</sup> Bourdieu's call for arbitrary power does not sound entirely unlike the historian Robert Darnton's description (Darnton and Tonbridge. 1982) of French journalism under the Ancien Régime in which,

"Censorship, a monopolistic guild, and the police contained the visible publishing industry within the limits of official orthodoxies".

The British historian Roy Porter (2001, p 72) notes similarly that,

“On the eve of the Revolution more than 160 censors were on Louis XVI's thought-police's payroll; to evade their attentions, elaborate networks had been devised to smuggle contraband publications across the borders from the Netherlands and Switzerland”.

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<sup>63</sup> And of course the authoritarian French Rationalism and progressivism of Comte. It also brings to mind Plato's guardians. See Appendix A.

Bourdieu's anti-populist, elitist position is therefore far from novel. It takes the same starting point, for example, as the British government's controversial 1962 Pilkington Report into broadcasting. The Pilkington report was heavily influenced by Stuart Hall's mentor, the founder of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Richard Hoggart. Hoggart, like Bourdieu was sympathetic to the view that television was churning out popular programmes which he considered, "vapid, puerile and cheaply sensational". The committee was offended at what it considered to be the triviality of ITV (Petley 2015),

"Our own conclusion is that triviality is a natural vice of television, and that where it prevails it operates to lower general standards of enjoyment and understanding. It is, we were reminded, 'more dangerous to the soul than wickedness'."

The Pilkington Report provoked fierce controversy, and accusations of an attempt to impose cultural censorship and uniformity. For example the Sunday Times' TV critic Maurice Wiggin (ibid) railed at the authoritarian elitism proposed by Pilkington, damning it as "a cultural dictatorship",

"There is a selective switch on every set. Every man has the obligation to use it as he thinks fit. Some will opt for triviality, some for sobriety. Tastes differ. The important thing is that we should be as free as possible to please ourselves. A cultural dictatorship is absolutely unacceptable by free men... Pilkington would bring us a whole stride nearer."

There is therefore little that is radical or novel in Bourdieu's proposals for journalism. He is dealing with age-old questions of what information the common people should be permitted to hear. And he responds with patrician answers. As the Scottish social psychologist James A.C. Brown wrote in 1963 (Brown 1983 (1963) p 311), such approaches as Bourdieu's generally rest on a patronising and "ludicrous" myth. The myth is of,

"A once sturdy and self-reliant peasantry living in an 'organic' society with their genuine folk art... now perverted by a mean, money-grabbing, and ignorant elite



which has 'brainwashed' them into accepting Western films when what they 'really' want is Shakespeare and John Bunyan".

Brown (p 312) warns that whatever the faults of popular TV, there is no guarantee that the cure won't be worse than the disease. He describes as "simple minded" the belief that a media utopia would be created by cultured elites who assign to themselves the right to dictate what everyone else may, and may not, watch,

"It is not too much to say that only the most simple-minded will be ready to accept this belief; for, bad as we may suppose the existing controllers of the press, radio, television, and the cinema to be, there is no guarantee that other controllers would be any better".

In summary, Bourdieu is arguing against impartiality and in favour of partial, journalism. Reduced to its basics, he is arguing for advocacy, censorship and the suppression of dissent. Bourdieu uses the word "heteronomous" as a euphemism for "undesirable" and the phrase "guardians of collective values" to mean "those who share my political views".

Conspicuously absent from Bourdieu's essay is any exploration of the consequence of his scheme to abolish journalistic competition. Journalism which is driven by a need to please audiences and compete for market share, is compelled to offer relevant journalism. According to the competitive model, the stories supplied by news organisations are chosen to satisfy demand from the public for information that is relevant, timely and true. In this model audiences vote with their attention, and success can be measured by audience ratings, circulation, sales etc. This is demand-led journalism in which editors select stories which they judge would appeal to "the man on the Clapham omnibus"<sup>64</sup> Even publicly funded journalism, such as that of the BBC, has to compete against its commercial rivals, and BBC editors keep an anxious eye on ratings. As the Radio Times notes (Gill 2016),

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<sup>64</sup> A quaint Fleet Street phrase referring to an imaginary "typical" member of the audience. Thus editors traditionally are said to have asked themselves, "Would this story interest the man on the Clapham omnibus?"

"TV ratings are just as important for the public service broadcaster. The BBC has to show it can serve the many and varied interests of all its licence fee payers."

But if competition were abolished, then principles other than demand would have to guide editors. In Bourdieu's model these would be political principles, and "good journalism" would be defined as obedience to these political principles. The abolition of competition implies, inevitably and necessarily, the establishment of only one, homogeneous version of news and the prohibition of deviance from it. Bourdieu's journalistic utopia ("All of this is utopian, and I know it" p 55) suggests that for every news story there would be a single, agreed narrative, with agreed facts and a prescribed roster of analysts who could be relied upon not to express dissenting, heteronomous opinions. The truth or falsity of a news story for Bourdieu, as for Gramsci, is irrelevant. What matters is its function as a means to manipulate and persuade audiences to a political end.

#### **06.11.01 Bourdieu and Marxist Media Orthodoxy.**

Although his arguments are polished and have been the subject of a great deal of scholarly analysis, when the rhetorical layers are peeled back, Bourdieu's model of journalism bears a close and striking resemblance to the orthodox journalistic doctrines of the Communist Party during the era of the Soviet Union. In fact I contend that the two approaches are indistinguishable.

For example both take as their starting point a high moral tone which eschews pandering to the baser instincts of audiences. And both assert that capitalistic competition is the vice which drives journalistic prurience. Brian McNair (1991, p 65) studied journalism in the USSR and quotes the Soviet era journalist Stanislav Kondrashov, as boasting of the moral superiority of communist journalism over that of the west,

"Our reportage is not based on commercial interests which, especially at the lower end of the market, exploit people's baser instincts, and arouse the darker side of his character. This we don't have".

Bourdieu also faithfully follows orthodox communist media theory in pointing out that tabloidization implies an unwelcome depoliticization of news. In the Soviet Union this issue was solved with an approach to news values known as *narodnost* – the privileging of important political education over trivial entertainment. This approach was set out by Lenin (1918),

“While ruthlessly suppressing the thoroughly mendacious and insolently slanderous bourgeois press, we must set to work systematically to create a press that will not entertain and fool the people with political sensation and trivialities, but which will submit the questions of everyday economic life to the people’s judgement and assist in the serious study of these questions”.

Most importantly of all, journalism in the USSR was partial. The idea of impartiality, as it is understood in the West, (and in the current project) was anathema. The essential function of journalism was to *persuade* audiences of the merits of Marxist-Leninist communism and exclude heteronomous voices.

It is important to understand that the *modus operandi* of Soviet journalism was partiality. Wilful lying and falsification were as contemptible to a Soviet journalist as to his Western counterpart. For example, according to the introduction of the 1958 edition of Lenin's writings on the press (McNair 1991, p 23),

“Lenin taught that the revolutionary Marxist press... must stand on a firm foundation of facts, reflecting the events and phenomena of social life in their dialectical development, and in relation to concrete historical conditions”.

But to a Soviet journalist, impartiality was equally as abhorrent as inaccuracy. The tactic which was routinely used, was to include only certain facts and omit others so as to present a particular, pro-party, pro-state narrative. Soviet journalists were trained to tell the truth, but not the *whole* truth. Soviet journalists were advocates. Truth was understood as being accuracy without impartiality. In fact partiality, *partiinnost*, was as precious to Soviet journalists as impartiality was to their Western counterparts. As McNair (p 19) explains,

“The most important principle of Soviet journalism was, for Lenin, partiality, expressed in Russian by the terms *partiinnost* and *ideonost*... Partiality assumes that social consciousness and the means by which it is expressed, such as communication, have a class nature. There can be no neutrality in cultural production. The character of partiality – the direction of its 'bias' – is determined by class interest”.

McNair (ibid) quotes Lipovchenko's textbook for Soviet journalists as instructing students that,

“In essence this partiality is nothing other than the conscious repetition of a class view... Soviet journalism clearly and openly takes a Marxist-Leninist position”.<sup>65</sup>

Thus Soviet journalists distinguished between *pravdivost* (which I will translate at accuracy) and *obyektivnost* (impartiality). Journalism of the Soviet era was instructed to portray facts accurately (*pravdivost*), but at the same time be unapologetically partial. However where there is partiality, it is essential that journalists know which facts they must include and which they must omit, which voices they should broadcast and which they should suppress. All the facts must argue the case for the approved narrative, and contrary evidence must be excluded. Therefore to ensure, in Bourdieuan parlance, that only the narrative of the “guardians of collective values” is heard, the Soviet regime established a formidable apparatus of state control. As McNair notes (op cit, p20),

“The application of *partiinnost* [partiality] determined that Party committees “constantly direct and supervise the activity of the Soviet news media, demanding that it be in total accord with the system of norms and values accepted as prevailing in socialist society and formulated by the leadership organisations of Party and government””.

Or as Lipovchenko's textbook for Soviet journalists put it (McNair, p 21),

“Mass media are not independent, 'autonomous' elements in the political system.

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<sup>65</sup> For Lenin's re-definition of journalistic freedom, see section 02.09.03

Journalism is subordinate to the aims laid down for it by the political forces governing it”.

It is at this point that Bourdieu's model collapses. Journalistic autonomy is not threatened by journalistic competition as he suggests. Journalistic autonomy is precisely the right to compete to tell more of the truth, to reveal more of the facts, than one's competitor. And it is the insatiable public demand for truth that drives this competition. Wherever there is one, dominant narrative, journalism will spontaneously emerge in the form of dissent from the official story<sup>66</sup>. Competition for truth in journalism is a virtue not a vice. It is absence of competition which is vicious. Journalism then, in so far as it questions established narratives and seeks the truth, is the very heteronomous voice which Bourdieu is so keen to silence.

Bourdieu argues for ideologically motivated journalism on the grounds that it is good for society that audiences are presented with news which would lead them to conclude that socialism is a better system than capitalism. He argues that this goal outweighs the goal of reporting the truth impartially. But no matter how sophisticated Bourdieu's argument, it is doomed to a relentless circularity. For example if someone proclaims that social system X is better than social system Y, one is entitled to ask, "How do you know"? and "Why should I believe you"? If the reply is to present the enquirer only with an incomplete and partial set of facts, the enquirer is entitled to remain unconvinced. Partial journalism, which advocates for a particular cause by selectively omitting some facts and giving others an unmerited prominence, will always be an unreliable guide to truth. Suppressing dissenting, heteronomous voices which provide evidence for an alternative opinion, cannot be justified on the grounds that doing so is for the good of society, because what is good for society is itself a matter for debate.

Similarly, how does Bourdieu justify his intolerance of heteronomous, dissenting voices? He merely asserts that these voices do not meet an appropriately high standard. But he does not offer any criteria for assessing this standard, other than his own subjective, political opinion. Bourdieu's doctrine therefore reduces to,

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<sup>66</sup> Samizdat, unauthorised, alternative information, was clandestinely circulated in the USSR. Possessing samizdat could be grounds for arrest. See Komaromi (2004).

“opinions which I dislike should be banned”. Thus, in conclusion, does Mill (1940, Ch 2) answer Bourdieu,

“The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.”

While researching his book in the USSR, McNair found himself unexpectedly and uncomfortably, able to observe Soviet partial journalism at first hand. He was in Moscow in 1986 when the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl exploded showering radioactive debris over a large part of Europe. His experience provides a snapshot of the conflict between *arete* and *aletheia*. In this case, the goal of promoting the successes and achievements of the socialist state, clashed with the goal of telling the truth and warning citizens that they were in danger. It was the former which prevailed and so began, for McNair and millions of Russians (p 2),

“A period of ten anxious days... during which the Soviet government, through the media, kept its own citizens, foreign guests, and the international community as a whole in virtual ignorance about a nuclear catastrophe of unprecedented seriousness... While western tabloids spoke of thousands dead... one had little choice but to stock up with plentiful supplies of champagne, get therapeutically drunk, and hope for the best”.

We have examined the first dogma of TDP, that there is no objective reality, and no objective facts which journalists can report. We have found this belief is not supported by any compelling philosophical argument and that it is psychologically implausible. The next question is if, as TDP asserts, human knowledge does not derive from observation of reality, then where does it come from? TDP contends that it is socially constructed. This is the second dogma of TDP and we shall consider it next.

## **Part Seven. The Dogma of Social Constructivism.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What is social constructivism?
- How valid is the hypothesis of Berger and Luckmann?
- Should TDP be seen as an historically situated construct of the Baby Boomer Generation?

*"News is not out there, journalists do not report news, they produce news. They construct it, they construct facts, they construct statements and they construct a context in which these facts make sense. They reconstruct 'a' reality."*

Peter Vasterman.

*Habent sua fata libelli.* Books have their own destinies.

### **07.00.00 Dogma #2. The Social Construction of Reality.**

I will argue here that social constructivism<sup>67</sup> is fundamentally irrational. It argues that human decision making, learning and knowledge are shaped and informed entirely by sociological factors. However Social constructivism (henceforth SC) fails to provide any mechanism capable of explaining how this is possible. In other words, while sociological factors, such as peer group and socio-cultural pressure, are undoubtedly capable of influencing people, these processes are themselves driven by rational mechanisms. Even when people blindly follow the mob and conform to group behaviour, this herding behaviour is brittle and fragile. Fashions, intellectual and other, are subject to change, and ultimately change depends on facts, reality and reason. To put it another way, if SC constructs reality, what, one is entitled to ask, constructs SC? The answer is, as we shall see, reality.

In other words SC is parasitic on the concepts of causation and human rationality. There can be no society without individuals capable of observing, recognising, reasoning, deciding and cooperating. All sociological theories are predicated on the rationale that there exist groups of thinking, rational people who are able to influence one another. There cannot be a herd of cows without cows. It is however a peculiar feature of SC that it reverses the direction of the analysis. It sees only herds and overlooks cows.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> I will use the terms "social construction" and "social constructivism" interchangeably.

<sup>68</sup> The influential sociologist Norbert Elias, writing in 1970, observed, with approval, that the sociological turn involved the "socialization" of knowledge and a shift from seeing human beings as rational, thinking individuals. Elias considered this as inspired by the 'father of sociology' Auguste Comte, "The transition from a philosophical to a sociological theory of knowledge, which Comte



This is a perfectly reasonable approach for sociologists to take within the discipline of sociology, but it is inappropriate for the academic study of journalism. As we have noted, the dominance of SC in academic journalism is a consequence of the “sociological turn” of the 1960s and 1970s in which philosophical and psychological approaches fell out of fashion and were replaced by purely sociological analyses. Thus socio-cultural pressures from the baby-boomer generation of scholars, led to the establishment of SC as an article of intellectual faith. To put this another way, the dogma of SC is itself, ironically, socially constructed.

### **07.00.01 The Social Construction of What?**

A major obstacle to any analysis of SC is that the phrase is so widely used, by so many people, in so many situations, that its meaning is difficult to pin down. The Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking, in a book aptly entitled *The Social Construction of What?* (1999, p 2) sharply observes that the phrase is, “both obscure and overused”. He cites for example a charity worker who claimed that all human beings are social constructs,

"Individual people also qualify: at a workshop on teenage pregnancy, the overworked director of a Roman Catholic welfare agency said; "And I myself am, of course, a social construct; each of us is"

The ambiguity inherent in the charity worker's remarks are instructive. Did he mean to say that he was not a real, objectively existing, physical person? Or was he merely trying to express the view that some of his beliefs are influenced by the testimony of others, and by peer group pressure? Similarly what precisely did the Canadian writer Alexander Wilson (1991, p 12) mean when he wrote,

"Our experience of the natural world - whether touring the Canadian Rockies, watching an animal show on TV, or working in our own gardens - is always

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accomplished, is chiefly apparent in the replacement of the individual person by human society as the 'subject' of knowledge." (Elias 1978 (1970), p 38).

mediated... To speak uncritically of the natural is to ignore these social questions".

What does Wilson mean by "our experience of the natural world... is always mediated"? Does he mean that if we were to fall over a cliff and injure ourselves colliding with rocks and trees, this experience of reality would be socially constructed and not really real? Is Wilson suggesting that our pain, blood and broken bones would be an illusion, along with the rocks and trees? Or does he merely mean that some of our environmental or political beliefs about nature are influenced by, or learnt from, the testimony of others? The lack of clarity is a real problem and the British philosopher David Demeritt (2001) is right to conclude,

"Social constructionism has become a popular, catch-all term to describe a variety of quite different approaches to understanding nature, knowledge, and the world. Different critics understand the idea of nature as a social construction, and its implications, in quite different ways".

To deal with these ambiguities it is helpful to distinguish between 'hard' and 'soft' social constructivism (HSC and SSC). We will say that HSC makes *ontological* claims about the nature of reality, whereas SSC confines itself to *epistemological* claims about how our beliefs are formed.

Hacking, for example, describes a spectrum of SC ideas at the extreme end of which lies HSC, which he refers to as "universal" constructivism. This makes the ontological claim that "everything' is socially constructed 'all the way down'". Hacking notes (p 24) that universal SC is a form of philosophical idealism which suggests that reality only exists within the subjective mind and that consequently reality is a species of illusion or dream somehow caused by society,

"We require someone who claims that every object whatsoever - the earth, your feet, quarks, the aroma of coffee, grief, polar bears in the Arctic - is in some non-trivial sense socially constructed".

Hacking points out that most constructivism is not universal (HSC). Therefore, to save time, we will assume that no journalist or journalism academic subscribes to

the HSC view.<sup>69</sup> This means we can locate the discussion of SC in the real, physical world. It means we are now working on the realist assumption that there is a world of things which exists independently from human perception. We are now dealing only with epistemic issues and specifically with the question "How do we come to know something"?

I will argue here that SC ultimately refers to a way of knowing which is an heuristic approach, or a shortcut. It encapsulates the view that people believe something because they have not had the time, opportunity, means or inclination to investigate it thoroughly for themselves. Consequently their default position is to defer to the crowd. In other words they will allow themselves to be persuaded, not by the evidence of primary sources, but by secondary clues based on the beliefs and behaviours of others. Thus SC can be seen as a form of intellectual herding. It is based on the (perfectly reasonable) assumption that the majority of people who believe something, do so for a good reason. An heuristic solution to the problem of ignorance is therefore to conform to the majority view *unless there is a good reason not to*. Fifty million Frenchman, in the words of an old maxim, "can't be wrong". Unfortunately this heuristic is not foolproof. The wisdom of crowds is, as we shall see, often based on ignorance of ignorance. The fact that a crowd of people inter-subjectively believe something (e.g. that the earth is flat, or that witches exist) does not make it true. As the English philosopher and radical Thomas Paine (1987 (1776) p 65) put it,

"A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom".

### **07.01.00 Knowledges not Knowledge.**

A detailed discussion of what is meant by 'knowledge' lies outside the present project. But it is important to note that there many different things which we know which are all subsumed under the umbrella term 'knowledge'. It may be argued in

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<sup>69</sup> However, we should be alert to the fact that TDP is premised on precisely this sort of irrealism. Ay, there's the rub! As we have seen, TDP draws on 19<sup>th</sup> century German, Fichtean idealism. TDP accepts as a foundational belief that what exists, "Is not the world in which we are." (Husserl 1917(1995), p 114). Theorists of TDP commit themselves, usually unwittingly, to its suppositions.

fact that there are as many types of knowledge as there are things known. For example; George knows Annabelle, Harry knows how to ride a bike, Stan knows that  $2+2=4$ , Sarah knows that St Paul is the state capital of Minnesota, Ben knows that it will be sunny in Canterbury tomorrow, Janet knows it will be raining in Canterbury tomorrow, Pete that Labour Party policies are better than Conservative ones, Horace knows that the time is five past ten, Jemima knows how to say 'thank you' in Japanese, Rupert knows that catastrophic global warming is caused by human activity, Tammy knows that Christ Jesus is the son of God and was born by immaculate conception, Imran knows there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger, Helen knows the way from London to Brighton, Freddie knows he has toothache, the policeman knows that Derek committed the robbery, Tim knows that the Battle of Hastings was fought on October 14th 1066, Alex knows the sun always rises in the east, Charlie knows never to put off until tomorrow what he can do today, Daisy knows that all you need is love, and Donna knows there is a cup of coffee on the table in front of her.

All these things are very different. Some are facts known from direct observation, some from testimony, some are skills we have acquired, some are forecasts, some are religious beliefs based entirely on faith, some are opinions and some are complex, nested bundles of all of them. These different knowledges are acquired in different ways, yet we indiscriminately refer to them all as 'knowledge'. The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009, p 35-36) described these sort of cluster concepts as “family resemblances”. He famously used the example of the word 'game' which is used to label a family of disparate, heterogeneous activities,

“Don't think, but look! Look for example at board games with their various affinities. Now pass to card games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and other appear. When we pass to ball games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost... the upshot of these considerations is; we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; similarities in the large and in the small”.

Knowledge can therefore be seen as a cluster concept which refers to numerous

different knowledges. Confusion can easily arise from failing to see the differences between the different types of knowledge and treating them as if they were all the same. Just as, for example, it would be foolish to make a rule that everyone playing a game should wear football boots. Such a rule would not be helpful to chess or ice hockey players because there are many different things which we all label “games”. Thus Wittgenstein concludes (p 52),

“Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language”.

So, once again, we find ourselves faced with the perils of linguistic ambiguity. The significance of this to the present project is that, while it may be valid to ascribe *some* of our knowledge to social learning, herding, or the testimony of others; it will not be valid to ascribe *all* our knowledge to social learning. Much of what we believe results from direct observation, while other beliefs may result from a complex combination of both. It is however a feature of SC arguments that they carelessly, or wilfully, erase the distinction between knowledges and attempt to conclude that, if *some* things are learned through social testimony, then *everything* must be learned the same way. This, it should be noted, is the central fallacy which sustains SC.

If “socially constructed” simply means learning from other people, then this would be unobjectionable. However it would also be trivial and banal. It is obvious that a great deal of what we believe comes from history books, journalism, online encyclopaedia, or what other people tell us. For example we believe that Julius Caesar invaded Britain, that Charles I died upon the scaffold, that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1865, and that the Supermarine Spitfire first flew on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1936.<sup>70</sup> Nobody denies that many of our beliefs and opinions rest on testimony and lie outside our direct observation. As we have already noted, the degree to which we are able to learn from the experience of others (vicarious experience) is one of the things which distinguishes human beings from other

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<sup>70</sup> These are examples of commonly-known facts, but are they true? Lincoln was shot on 14<sup>th</sup> but died on 15<sup>th</sup>. According to the test pilot Jeffrey Quill, who was an eye witness, the Spitfire flew on the 6<sup>th</sup> not the 5<sup>th</sup>. His detailed log book entry appears to provide irrefutable evidence, but despite this, the commonly-held view in Wikipedia and elsewhere remains the 5<sup>th</sup>.

animals. We have also noted that testimony is neither error-proof, nor knave-proof. Our task here will be to ask what SC means in the context of academic journalism. To answer this we will narrow our focus on the seminal writings of the Berger and Luckmann.

### **07.02.00 The Social Construction of Reality.**

In 1966 the Austrian sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality* which rapidly established itself as a classic of social science literature. In 1997 members of The International Sociological Association voted it the sixth most influential book of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (ISA. 2018). While according to a 2016 study (Green 2016), it is the nineteenth most cited book in the social sciences, close behind Marx's *Capital*. In Journalism Studies, the book is widely quoted by the most eminent scholars of TDP. Stuart Hall often cites Berger and Luckmann as authority for his social constructivist philosophy. For example in his 1968 essay on hippies, Hall (1968) writes,

"As Berger, again remarks, "All socially meaningful definitions of reality must be objectivated by social processes".

We have previously noted (section 05.01.00) Schudson's assertion (1978, p 6) that SC is a well-established, taken-for-granted fact. Although Schudson did not identify his authority for this statement, in an email to the present author (2018), he described it as an "uncontroversial summary" and confirmed the influence of *The Social Construction of Reality* (Henceforth SCR) describing the book as,

"A broad, theoretical statement about the subfield of sociology called the "sociology of knowledge."

The belief that objective facts, reality and truth do not exist and are, in reality, subjective, socially constructed opinions, has become a commonly-held assumption among scholars of journalism since the 1960s. SCR is, time and again, quoted by scholars of journalism as the ultimate authority for this belief. For

example the well-known British scholar of journalism John Hartley (2001, p 12) confidently explains,

“The natural and social world does not consist of objects, forces or events which exist, independently of the observer, in a state where their identity and characteristics are intrinsic to their nature and self-evident. Nor is the world 'ready-made' sitting quietly out there waiting to be discovered”.

Hartley predictably cites SCR as authority for his subjectivist world view in which the "taken for granted" reality of the world is socially constructed. For Hartley (p 139) there is no direct experience of reality, “experience” means only experience of the testimony of others which becomes,

“'Institutionalized' primarily in the areas of family, school, work, friendship. This domain is the realm of what Berger and Luckmann (1966) call reality-maintenance... with the world outside receding in circles of ever-decreasing relevance”.

The Mexican scholar Hector Vera (2016) summarises,

“*The Social Construction* had an immediate, unforeseen, and enduring success according to all the conventional indicators including readership, sales, translations, commentary, and citations. Thus far, it has been translated into 18 languages and has never gone out of print. The vocabulary utilized and a number of the central themes of the book are seen as precursors to the theoretical outlook of what today are defined as the ‘new sociologies’ (Corcuff, 2011). It is a fixture within the catalogues of ‘major works of sociology’ (e.g. Kaesler and Vogt, 2000 39–44).”.

While, according to the American communication theorist Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, (Wendy 2016) the views of Berger and Luckmann (henceforth B&L) have become embedded in TDP and are today the taken for granted reality. She makes the important observation that many contemporary, second-generation scholars no

longer cite SCR and, in some cases, probably understand neither the origin of SC, nor why they believe what they believe,

“The origin of SC in modern times is usually dated either to 1966 in the United States or 1967 in the UK, with the publication of Berger and Luckmann... this book set the stage early for the relevance of an SC approach to multiple disciplines... However, second-generation publications frequently take Berger and Luckmann for granted and no longer even cite them”.

Luckmann went further. In a 1992 interview (Luckmann 1992) he observed that much of the influence of his book was due to “inattentive reading” and the fact that it had been widely misunderstood by those who, he suspected, had not read anything other than the provocative title,

“A goodly part of the "success" of Social Construction must have been due to inattentive reading. Occasionally I even suspected that among those who either purchased or cited the book there must have been some who only read the title, lightly skipping over the "social" part of it.”

Berger (1992, p2) went further than Luckmann, claiming that the book was hijacked by theorists of the baby boomer generation who used it inappropriately to justify a wide variety of radical stances,

"It was, of course, the orgy of ideology and utopianism that erupted all over the academic scene in the late 1960's, almost immediately after the publication of our book. Neither Luckmann nor I had any sympathy with this Zeitgeist, but even if we had been more sympathetic, our sort of sociology was not what all these putative revolutionaries were clamouring for. It is not possible to play chamber music at a rock festival."

In another interview, given shortly before he died, Luckmann strongly criticised those who, like Hall, Tuchman and Hartley, argue that reality can be constructed out of thin air by ill-defined social processes. Luckmann (Dreher and Vera 2016) said that this reading of his book was “total nonsense”,



“When Berger and I were being labelled ‘social constructivists’ we were both very much annoyed. We never thought of ourselves as constructivists. The idea that some so-called social constructivists have is that you can make houses without bricks, that this is a sort of autopoietic exercise in thin air. I consider this total nonsense... But Berger and I are not the only victims of mislabelling in the history of scholarship”.

Hector Vera (op cit) argues that rapidly after its publication SCR took on a life of its own and has been used to justify a widespread, and unintended, intellectual subjectivism and relativism,

“In the case of *The Social Construction*, one has to wonder if the legacy of the book has survived, in part, not as cash but as counterfeit currency, a falsification of what it was intended to be.”

I will argue that SCR is indeed widely misunderstood. Much of what B&L are believed to have said, they did not mean; while much of what they did mean is confused and wrong. I will argue that in no sense (other than figuratively) is reality socially constructed. Furthermore I will argue that when beliefs are shaped by socio-cultural forces, these socio-cultural forces are themselves constructed by considerations about reality, fact and truth. Reality in short is not constructed by what social groups know; what social groups know is constructed by reality. In examining the influence of SCR I will argue that never in the history of academic journalism has so much been misunderstood, by so many, from so little.

#### **07.02.01 A Divine Phenomenology – Lutheran Determinism.**

Before we examine SCR, it is important to make two preliminary points in order to correctly understand the context in which B&L wrote, and the nature of their project. Firstly, B&L were Austrian scholars and their philosophical assumptions were influenced by mainstream German idealism and phenomenology. We have previously discussed this tradition in the context of Ferdinand de Saussure. B&L shared many of the same metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality and perception. However the subjectivist dogma of German idealism reached B&L via a

different route. B&L (Berger and Luckmann 1991 (1966) p 9) make it very clear that their greatest influence was, not de Saussure, but the Austrian theorist Alfred Schütz,

"How much we owe to the late Alfred Schütz will become clear in various parts of the following treatise. However, we would like to acknowledge here the influence of Schütz's teaching and writing on our thinking".

Schütz attempted to unite sociology with German idealism and was greatly influenced by Edmund Husserl who advocated "transcendental-phenomenological-idealism". Husserl, in turn, drew heavily from his intellectual hero Fichte, upon whom he lavished high praise referring (1917 (1995), p 120) to the, "greatness and beauty of the Fichtean world-view", and the fact that, "One can say that in Fichte there is celebrated the resurrection of the glorious." Thus Schütz acts as a bridge between the work of B&L and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Fichtean German idealism.

What is noteworthy then, is that the social constructivism of B&L, and the linguistic constructivism of de Saussure, share common, philosophically unrealistic assumptions. B&L and de Saussure grow from the same Fichtean, idealist roots.

Schütz was conscious that phenomenology comes from, and leads back to, relativism and irrationalism, and he sought to moderate this with an appeal to intellectual common sense. As the Italian scholar Luigi Muzzetto explains (2016, p 250),

"In Schütz's view the idea that the world is an illusion resides naturally in the provinces of philosophy, literature, and the imagination, but can only become part of the paramount reality in extreme situations. Within the confines of the world of everyday life, this idea would be a sign of madness."

Thus did Schütz try to escape truthphobia and irrationalism; by ignoring the problem in the hope it might go away. B&L were not as prudent as their mentor. They did not want the problem to go away because they felt able to explain it. Which brings us to the second point.

B&L were both religious men. They were Lutherans who embraced theological subjectivism and mysticism. Of the two, Berger was the more conservative and traditionally religious. Indeed in 1997 (Berger 1997) he described his early religious views as “fanatical”,

"In my early youth I was sort of a neo-orthodox fanatic of a Lutheran variety. I don't think I was a fanatic in a personally disagreeable way, but intellectually I was."

Even in later life (Weber 2017), he described himself as “incurably Lutheran,”

“I usually describe myself as incurably Lutheran, but I’m very comfortable with evangelicals. And between evangelicals and mainline Protestants, I prefer evangelicals for reasons theologically.”

The British academic Linda Woodhead (2001, p 3) describes Berger as holding conservative theological views, which combined mysticism, and intense subjectivism, with scorn for modern, liberal religious praxis,

"Berger starts from the 'signals of transcendence' which he believes we can discern amid the ambiguities of everyday experience... he retains a Barthian impatience with the dilutions of transcendence which result from what he sees as liberal Christianity's misguided attempts at modernization".

Thus Berger was comfortable welcoming back the undiluted, transcendental idealism of Fichte and Schelling. As we have seen, this rejection of reality is not based on any evidence. It is simply a *belief* which is the foundational *assumption* on which all idealism and phenomenology is built. For Berger intellectual faith in the absence of evidence is not a defect; it is a virtue. Muzzetto correctly notes that Berger's project assumes from the beginning that the real world is illusory. As Muzzetto writes (op cit, p 273), Thomas Berger in particular held that,

"Belief in the reality of the world of everyday life appears to be tinged by uncertainties and fears; cracks caused by looming negative forces, night-time

forces' that threaten to destroy it."

In Berger's 1961 book *The precarious vision; A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith* (1961, p 98), Berger challenges materialist assumptions about reality in classic phenomenological fashion by appealing to the evidence that people sometimes have vivid dreams,

"It happens sometimes in the middle of the night that we wake up and can-not fall asleep again. It is in such hours that strange thoughts may come. Our own existence and identity suddenly cease to be matters of course, but highly doubtful fabrications in a world constantly threatened by nightmarish transformations... Let us not too easily dismiss the night time from the domain of the real."

Berger's aim is to assert that behind the "facades which now meet our eyes" there is a deeper reality. This reality is the Christian, Lutheran God (p 207),

"The church can be the place of truth when it stands on the ground of Jesus Christ and no other.."

Berger is therefore happy to embark on a radical undermining of material and social reality, because it clears the way for him to conclude that the only thing which can be truly known is God's grace (p 203),

"It is in this kind of encounter that the Christian faith can become liberating in the social perception and consciousness of men... Christian faith is radical because it challenges social assumptions at their very roots."

In his 1967 book, *The Sacred Canopy*,<sup>71</sup> Berger wrestles with the problem that if all reality is socially constructed (as he has argued), how can God not be? Berger is troubled by the "vertigo of relativism" in which he finds himself trapped, like a spider caught in her own web. Berger offers two possible solutions in an attempt to have his intellectual cake and eat it. First he argues that simple faith exempts one from relativism. One simply has to *believe* in God as a fundamental, underlying

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<sup>71</sup> Published in the UK as *The Social Reality of Religion*.

presupposition,

"If one can manage this, the problem disappears."

Here Berger is returning to his spiritual ancestor Fichte who argued for the pure power of human will and faith. However Berger accepts that it may be impossible to, "Hoist oneself onto an epistemologically safe platform" and grant oneself "Privileged status with regard to relativizing analyses". He therefore offers his second escape stratagem. This is to turn inwards in search of mystical, transcendental enlightenment. Berger exhorts readers to accept relativism and then turn to God to help us, "Transcend the relative character of their infrastructures." In a passage which echoes early Christian gnosticism, Berger (1967, p 335) writes that man will only find true cosmic enlightenment through prayer and revelation,

"Only after he has really grasped what it means to say that religion is a human product or projection can he begin to search, within this array of projections, for what may turn out to be signals of transcendence. I strongly suspect that such an inquiry will turn increasingly from the projections to the projector:"

Luckmann, also in 1967, published a work of metaphysics and theology entitled *The Invisible Religion*. Luckmann (1961, p 98) avoids the traditional Christianity espoused by Berger. Instead he introduces the concept of the "modern sacred cosmos". This, he argues, is a "new form of religion" which is to be found inside the self. Today therefore, God is a "highly subjective" blend of "emotions and sentiments",

"The modern sacred cosmos legitimates the retreat of the individual into the 'private sphere' and sanctifies his subjective 'autonomy'... By bestowing a sacred quality upon the increasing subjectivity of human existence it supports not only the secularization but also what we call the dehumanization of the social structure."

Luckmann (p 105) describes the modern, Godless, invisible religion as a

narcissistic,

"Loose and rather unstable hierarchy of 'opinions' legitimating the affectively determined priorities of 'private' life".

It is interesting therefore to reflect on the influence of B&L's German Lutheranism on their doctrine of social constructivism. Martin Luther preached a strong form of determinism, claiming that free will was an illusion. In the *Bondage of the Will*, published in 1525 (Luther 1823 (1525) Section 466), the reformer argued that rational decision making, based on weighing the available evidence, is impossible. What appears to be free will is, in reality determined by God,

"If we believe it to be true, that God foreknows and predestines everything; and moreover, that he can neither be mistaken nor hindered in his foreknowledge and predestination; and once more, that nothing is done outside his will (a truth which reason herself is compelled to yield) — then it follows from the testimony of this same reasoning, that there can be no such thing as Freewill in man or angel, nor in any creature."

This doctrine led Luther to argue that, since humans were not responsible for their decisions, religious salvation (grace) could only be achieved through faith - "whoever believes will be saved." It was this rejection of reason which drove Nietzsche to famously condemn Luther for reintroducing intellectual barbarism. According to Nietzsche, Luther made epistemology irrelevant. Facts became unimportant, knowledge became unimportant, behaviour became unimportant; all that mattered was purity of faith. According to Nietzsche, Luther had replaced the rationality of the renaissance with religious and magical ways of knowing. Luther had liberated individuals from personal responsibility, and instituted a regime in which people were powerless creatures at the mercy of cosmic forces beyond their control. The distinguished German scholar of Luther, Heinz Bluhm (1956, p 78), notes that Nietzsche was mightily offended by the consequences of Luther's irrationalism,

"Nietzsche charges all men of faith, including Martin Luther, with a total collapse of

their rational faculties: they end, whether they are fully aware of it or not, by espousing Tertullian's well-known principle of *credo quia absurdum*<sup>72</sup> (xxi, 151). Faith is a dangerous shortcut, a procedure not permissible to rational minds eager for truth. "*Der Glaube ist eine Eselsbrücke*"<sup>73</sup> (xvni, 142). Mature men would not be seen on it. They prefer their longer and more circuitous road to truth."

Nietzsche also accused Luther of moral hypocrisy, arguing that all manner of cruelty becomes permissible once human agency and moral responsibility are abolished. Bluhm points out (op cit, p79) that blaming everything on the will of God, or Satan, can become a convenient, self-serving doctrine,

"This, Nietzsche insists, was but a cloak, a curtain, behind which Luther's unbridled passions continued their dominion over him... Luther the man of faith emerges as the man who was really and fundamentally without good works. Faith with him did not lead to good works; it merely covered up for their conspicuous absence in Luther's life, a life characterized by uncontrolled and uncontrollable passions."

One of the things that is striking about B&L's doctrine of social construction, is that it produces very similar intellectual results. B&L's thesis is that knowledge does not depend on facts. Indeed facts are unnecessary because knowledge is redefined in purely sociological terms. B&L's project is therefore a rejection of a realist, evidence-based epistemology. A consequence of this is to open the door to a religious, or theological, way of knowing. This is a way of knowing based on intuition, deeply held feelings, emotions, or faith. This way of knowing, when translated into secular terms, makes it possible to know what is ethically, or politically, good without factual evidence. It is, it may be charged, equally a way of knowing based on ignorance, superstition and prejudice.

B&L's, perhaps unintended, legacy was to legitimise the concept of knowledge based on irrational faith, and delegitimise the concept of evidence-based knowledge. In doing so, B&L turn the intellectual clock back, not merely to the German Counter-Enlightenment of the 19th century, but, arguably, to a pre-

<sup>72</sup> I believe it because it is absurd.

<sup>73</sup> Literally, faith is a bridge for donkeys.

renaissance age. The parallel with Luther, and the main relevance to journalism, is therefore that B&L made respectable the (essentially religious) view that it is possible to have knowledge without considering facts, and that people are not responsible for what they know. Instead what counts is virtue in the form of ethical, or political, faith. Berger was well aware that the modern way of knowing is, in its truthphobia, subjectivism and certitude, essentially religious (Weber 2017),

"The problem with modernity is not that God is dead, as some people hoped and other people feared. There are too many gods, which is a challenge, but a different one."

In summary, it is important to note that the vast majority of modern scholars who admire B&L, either ignore their deeply held religious faith, and pass over it in embarrassed silence, or are completely unaware of it. Nevertheless one will miss the entire point of SCR if one fails to understand that underpinning it is a blend of metaphysics and theology, which combines elements of Christian mysticism with German idealist phenomenology and Lutheran subjectivism. B&L are truthphobic because they believe that what we will refer to in this project as journalistic truth, is merely a "profane", inadequate form of truth which pales into insignificance beside the profound, eternal truths of transcendence, and of God's grace. Journalistic truth is, for B&L, an earthen vessel. B&L may argue that reality is constructed by man, but they also argue that man is constructed by God. As Husserl (1917 (1995),p 119) wrote of Fichteian theology,

"This is what we actually find in Fichte. God is the moral world-order; God alone can be it. On the other hand, this God is completely immanent to the absolute I. He is no external substance, no reality outside of the I which would work from without to within."

Having noted these foundational points, let us move on to examine SCR in detail.



### 07.02.02 The Sociology of Knowledge; Intellectual Fashion.

It can be argued that Luckmann's accusation of inattentive reading extends to inattentive reading of the book title itself. The full title of the book is, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. The book is therefore not about knowledge *per se*, but about the *sociology* of knowledge.

B&L explain that they will be examining only a narrow area of knowledge and are at pains to point out that they will not be considering epistemological questions. In other words, in considering how belief is formed, they are not interested in the role of truth and evidence. At the same time however, B&L acknowledge that epistemological questions are extremely important. They discuss various epistemological questions and the bigger question about "how can one know these things"? They freely admit (Berger and Luckmann 1991 (1966), p 15) that sociologists have little or nothing to contribute to any such discussion,

"The sociologist is in no position to supply answers to these questions. What he can do, however, is to ask how it is that the notion of 'freedom' has come to be taken for granted in one society and not in another."

In other words, the sociology of knowledge is the study of intellectual fashion. Why do certain ideas gain traction within certain societies at certain times? Why do they become dominant? And why, after a period of time, do they become unfashionable and find themselves replaced by other ideas? B&L (ibid) continue their explanation of the sociology of knowledge,

"Sociological interest in questions of 'reality' and 'knowledge' is thus initially justified by the fact of their social relativity. What is 'real' to a Tibetan monk may not be 'real' to an American businessman".

B&L's choice of example here is instructive. They refer to religious faith. They say that the religious beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism (e.g. reincarnation) are different to those of a modern, urban American businessman. Religious faith can be described as a type of 'knowledge' which precisely does *not* depend on factual, real world

evidence. It appears therefore that B&L are focussing on one particular type, among many knowledges. Could it be that B&L are using the words reality and knowledge eccentrically and in a peculiar manner? If so, we would be entitled to conclude that B&L, when they say “reality” do not mean reality, and when they say “knowledge”, do not mean knowledge. The answer to this is unequivocally 'yes'. B&L (p 13-14) make it abundantly clear that they are not using the words 'reality' and 'knowledge' in the way they are used by either “the man in the street”, by philosophers, or by journalists,

“It is, therefore, important that we clarify at the beginning the sense in which we use these terms in the context of sociology, and that we immediately disclaim any pretension to the effect that sociology has an answer to these ancient philosophical preoccupations.

If we were going to be meticulous in the ensuing argument, we would put quotation marks around the two aforementioned terms every time we used them, but this would be stylistically awkward. To speak of quotation marks, however, may give a clue to the peculiar manner in which these terms appear in a sociological context”.

This paragraph cannot be over-emphasised. B&L are not suggesting that reality or knowledge are socially constructed. They make this crystal clear. They are instead arguing that some of our beliefs about certain things, are sometimes influenced by socio-cultural factors more than others. Unfortunately B&L, by choosing such ambiguous terminology, and in spurning the use of quotation marks, have created a recipe for disastrous confusion. Into this mixture of ambiguity they plunge head-first by erasing any distinction between different types of knowledge. All knowledges, they assume, are the same. Religious faith is no different, they assume, to knowing how to ride a bike, or the knowledge that it is raining, or knowing that  $2+2=4$  (p 15),

“In so far as all human 'knowledge' is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the processes by which this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted 'reality'

congeals for the man in the street. In other words, we contend that *the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality*".

It is hard to have much sympathy with B&L's later complaints that they were misunderstood and, "very much annoyed" to be labelled social constructivists. B&L are the authors of their own mislabelling and of their own misfortune.

### **07.02.03 Sociological and Truthophobic Turns.**

B&L's *modus operandi* is to redefine words such as "knowledge", "reality" and "truth" and hence to redefine the entire discipline of the study of knowledge. Questions of truth have been arbitrarily excluded and the debate has been confined within the narrow bounds of sociology. This is the moment of the sociological turn; the dogma that knowledge does not depend upon information gained from observation of the world. The sociological turn asserts that we can have knowledge without considering facts or reality. It asserts that there are other, sociological, ways of knowing. It is the moment when the concept of truth was told it was no longer required and shown the door. The sociological turn is therefore the truthophobic turn. B&L (op cit, p 27) are under no illusion that, by excluding questions of truth, they are suggesting something very controversial,

"What we are suggesting here is a far-reaching redefinition of the scope of the sociology of knowledge, much wider than what has hitherto been understood as this discipline".

B&L are now arguing that people will believe anything, regardless of whether it is true or false, because of socio-cultural fashion. They have erased epistemology (the study of knowledge) from the study of knowledge and replaced it with pure sociology. This is something they do wilfully. There is a pivotal moment in their text where they plead for the exclusion of epistemological factors. They accept the "validity and importance" of "epistemological questions", and they acknowledge that earlier theorists have found it impossible to exclude these questions. But, undeterred, they assert that (p 25-26),

“To include epistemological questions concerning the validity of sociological knowledge in the sociology of knowledge is somewhat like trying to push a bus in which one is riding... We therefore exclude from the sociology of knowledge the epistemological and methodological problems that bothered both of its major originators”.

But earlier theorists balked at doing this for good reasons. It is like trying to argue that man walks by only using his left leg and pretending the right leg does not exist. It simply won't do. Human belief and decision making is a highly complex process and it is a serious error to exclude epistemology. People may believe things because they learned them in a social setting (for example at school, from TV news, from a university lecturer, or from their parents), but they only believe them because they *believe* them to be true. Truth cannot be removed from the matrix. If talking about truth is like “pushing the bus one is riding” in a sociological context; then talking about sociology is like “pushing the bus one is riding” in an epistemic context. The word truth means “what is true”. It does not mean “what is untrue, but what some social groups may believe”. B&L have redefined the word and erased the vital distinction between truth and belief. In the context of journalism it is irrational and mischievous to uncritically adopt B&L's sociological redefinition of truth. Yet that is precisely what scholars of TDP do.

Changing the meaning of words so they confusingly mean something else (or even the opposite of what they have previously meant), is not just intellectually and philosophically mischievous, it is also a powerful political tool. For example Lenin changed the meaning of the phrase journalistic freedom in his 1905 essay, *Party Organisation and Party Literature*. Lenin argued that what journalists had traditionally thought of as freedom was, in fact, slavery to capitalistic, bourgeois interests. Lenin (Lenin 1967 (1905) p 26) redefined journalistic freedom as the freedom to be free from the old freedom. Attacking old freedom he insisted,

"Your talk about absolute 'freedom' is sheer hypocrisy. There can be no real and effective 'freedom' in a society based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful of rich live like

parasites."

It is noteworthy how Lenin places the word freedom in inverted commas to indicate that the old freedom is fake freedom. Lenin (ibid) then introduces the new, genuine freedom which, liberated from its bourgeois shackles, is the freedom to serve the interests of Marxism,

"It will be a free literature, because the idea of socialism and sympathy with the working people, and not greed or careerism, will bring ever new forces to its ranks... It will be a free literature, enriching the last word in the revolutionary thought of mankind with the experience and living work of the socialist proletariat."

This Orwellian process of changing the meaning of words, is a feature which the Anglo-Austrian philosopher Friedrich Hayek noted is frequently employed by totalitarian regimes. Hayek, who witnessed the rise of Hitler and Stalin during the 1930s, noted how the technique despoils language so that words become "empty shells deprived of any definite meaning, as capable of denoting one thing as its opposite" (Hayek 2001 (1944 p 162-163)),

"Few traits of totalitarian regimes are at the same time so confusing to the superficial observer and yet so characteristic of the whole intellectual climate as the complete perversion of language... the confusion which it causes, and the barriers to any rational discussion which it creates."

This is not to argue that B&L endorse political totalitarianism, merely to reveal the truthophobic and rhetorical techniques which B&L rely on to persuade their readers.

#### **07.02.04 Man Produces Himself. Habitualization and Objectivization.**

Having redefined key words and concepts, and having written truth out of the equation, B&L go on to describe the process of how human beings come to have knowledge and make decisions. B&L explain their foundational assumption is that

human beings are born in a blank state. This idea is traditionally referred to as the *tabula rasa* hypothesis; the idea that human babies are like a smooth or blank wax tablet upon which experience and social conditioning imprint everything. B&L (op cit, p 66-67) assert it is an “ethnological commonplace” that,

“There is no human nature in the sense of a biologically fixed substratum... Man constructs his own nature, or more simply, that man produces himself”.

This is an extraordinary foundation for B&L's thesis. B&L are setting out to prove that all human knowledge about reality is socially constructed and they base their argument on the assertion, unsupported by any evidence, that all man's knowledge about reality is socially constructed. Worse, they simply assert that this is already a “commonplace”. This is a vivid example of circular reasoning; presenting the statement to be proved as evidence for the statement to be proved. B&L conclude that “man constructs his own nature” because “there is no human nature” other than what he constructs. We will challenge this foundational assumption presently. For now let us briefly follow B&L's tower of logic as it climbs from this sandy, insubstantial foundation.

B&L explain that the origin of all human knowledge, action and decision making is habit. They stress that this habitualization is not a rational process. On the contrary habit is described as a blind, ritualistic process which is the antithesis of rational decision making (op cit, p 70-71),

“All human activity is subject to habitualization. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern... This frees the individual from the burden of 'all those decisions', providing a psychological relief that has its basis in man's undirected institutional structure. Habitualization provides the direction and the specialization of activity that is lacking in man's biological equipment”.

It is important to note that B&L are arguing that habit is the well spring of all human behaviour which makes up for the lack of any pre-existing biological factors. Human nature is habit. Despite this however B&L, somewhat confusingly, hint that habitualization is itself founded on man's mysterious “institutional

structure". Brushing this intriguing inconsistency aside and, having insisted that all human activity and decision making is founded on habit, B&L then argue (p 72) that what begins as habit becomes institutionalized. These institutionalized habits control all future behaviour. B&L illustrate this unthinking, robotic habitualization with the example of an executioner who chops off people's heads. B&L (ibid) argue that the executioner's behaviour is determined solely by his slavish adherence to ritual, convention, habit and tradition,

"For example the institution of the law posits that heads shall be chopped off in specific ways under specific circumstances, and that specific types of individuals shall do the chopping (executioners say, or members of an impure caste, or virgins under a certain age, or those who have been designated by an oracle)".<sup>74</sup>

B&L's choice of example is again illuminating. It is facile and mocking in tone. It ridicules any traditional process by associating it with a barbaric and wholly unrealistic procedure. It implies that anyone who follows the traditional way of doing things, or who complies with a legally prescribed process, is akin to a barbarian who chops off people's heads and believes irrationally in the magic of oracles. It is noteworthy that when B&L wrote this, capital punishment was a burning issue, especially in the UK. Hanging was, after much public debate, suspended in 1965.<sup>75</sup> Progressive thought was very much on the side of abolition, and so B&L's argument would have appeared particularly seductive at that time, if not for its logic, then for its rhetorical and political force. What is significant is the weakness of B&L's argument and the fact they need to resort to ridicule to make their point. We will parse this specific example in detail presently.

Once blind human habit has become irrationally institutionalized, the final stage, B&L argue is for this procedure to become objectified. This occurs when new generations are born who see the institution and believe it is the only possible way of doing something (p 77),

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<sup>74</sup> B&L fail to distinguish between an activity and the *goal* of the activity. Conflating these different things helps them obscure why people follow well established procedures in pursuit of specific goals. For example in journalism, journalistic truth is the goal of journalism. Journalism is the process used to pursue journalistic truth. See section 08.03.00

<sup>75</sup> The Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act received royal assent on 8th November 1965.

“In other words, the institutions are now experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact... For the children, especially in the early phase of their socialization into it, it becomes *the world*”.

B&L explain that these “historical and objective facticities, confront the individual as undeniable facts” (p78). This they say becomes a form of brain-washing, or “institutional programming” in which purely subjective, irrational habits become objective facts and “objectively valid truth” (p84). This truth then becomes common sense, the “sum total of what everybody knows” (p83). B&L conclude (p 84),

“The same body of knowledge is transmitted to the next generation. It is learned as objective truth in the course of socialization and thus internalized as subjective reality. This reality in turn has power to shape the individual. It will produce a specific type of person”.

B&L have travelled a long way since the early pages of their book. They began (p 14) by “disclaiming any pretension” to be able to,

“Differentiate between valid and invalid assertions about the world. This the sociologist cannot possibly do”.

Eighty pages later however they conclude that what people consider to be “objective truth” is in reality socially constructed subjective opinion objectified by habit. By page 97 they have concluded that, “*all* solutions” to all social problems are “socially objectivated and *all* social actions are institutionalized”. While in the final pages of the book, B&L conclude that blind obedience to habit and tradition leads ultimately to sinister forms of oppressive social control. B&L explain (p 202) that society even determines how long people will live. This determination is,

“Institutionally programmed in the operation of social controls, as in the institution of law. Society can main and kill. Indeed, it is in its power over life and death that it



manifests its ultimate control over the individual”.<sup>76</sup>

### 07.03.00 Nurture and its Discontents.

The English inventor, and grandfather of the computer, Charles Babbage once remarked,

“On two occasions I have been asked, 'Pray, Mr. Babbage, if you put into the machine wrong figures, will the right answers come out?' I am not able rightly to apprehend the kind of confusion of ideas that could provoke such a question”.

In like manner we are entitled to ask, if B&L's initial assumptions are faulty, how much reliance, if any, should be placed in their conclusions? Let us consider some of B&L's basic assumptions starting with the assertion that there is no such thing as human nature and “man produces himself”. This view, although a commonplace during the 1960s when B&L were writing, is a commonplace no longer. The Canadian-American cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker (2004) points out that during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century it was intellectually fashionable to believe that there was no such thing as human nature and that man was a *tabula rasa*,

"During much of the twentieth century, a common position in this debate was to deny that human nature existed at all—to aver, with José Ortega y Gasset, that “Man has no nature; what he has is history.” The doctrine that the mind is a blank slate was not only a cornerstone of behaviourism in psychology and social constructionism in the social sciences, but also extended widely into mainstream intellectual life”.

Elsewhere Pinker writes (2002, p 119) that the belief that SC is responsible for all human belief, knowledge and behaviour has become a sacred dogma of the baby-

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<sup>76</sup> It is noteworthy how heavily Tuchman draws on the authority of B&L. In her book *Making News* (1978, p 211), she explains how facts are “constructed” by journalists and transformed into objective facts. Her writing echoes B&L, “News organisations and news workers wed themselves to specific beats and bureaus. Those sites are then objectified as the legitimate and legitimating sources of both information and governance. Through naïve empiricism, that information is transformed into objective facts – facts as normal, natural, taken-for-granted description and constitution of a state of affairs. And through the sources identified with facts, news workers create and control controversy; they contain dissent”.

boomer generation of intellectuals. This unhappy polarization, he says, has produced a false dichotomy and obscured the reality that human beings are a complex, nuanced mixture of nature *and* nurture,

“Only such black and white thinking could lead people to convert the idea that *some* aspects of behaviour are innate, into the idea that all aspects of behaviour are innate, or convert the proposal that genetic traits *influence* human affairs into the idea that they *determine* human affairs”.

Pinker (ibid) adds that the SC view is no longer intellectually tenable in the face of swathes of modern research in fields such as cognitive neuroscience, developmental psychology and behavioural genetics. These disciplines have revealed a much richer picture than was available to theorists of the 1960s and 1970s,

"Cognitive science has shown that there must be complex innate mechanisms for learning and culture to be possible in the first place... These discoveries not only have shown that the innate organization of the brain cannot be ignored, but have also helped to reframe our very conception of nature and nurture".

Pinker concludes (2013) that human nature is the ability to reason,

“Humans evolved to fill the “cognitive niche,” a mode of survival characterized by manipulating the environment through causal reasoning and social cooperation”.

This is today a widely held view supported by empirical, scientific evidence. A detailed discussion of what distinguishes homo sapiens from his ancestors is far outside the scope of the present project. But contemporary scholarship suggests that something recognisably human emerged approximately 50,000 years ago. This change is referred to variously as the 'human revolution', the 'cognitive revolution' and the 'great leap forward'. It is thought it coincided with the beginning of the replacement of Neanderthals by homo sapiens.<sup>77</sup> In the words of the American intellectual historian Carl Becker (1949, p 42), humans, “Learned to

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<sup>77</sup> For a discussion of the human revolution see Watts (2010).

distinguish and to infer.”

The Israeli-American scientist and philosopher Judea Pearl and the mathematician and writer Dana Mackenzie describe (Pearl and Mackenzie 2018) how human nature is believed to have crystallised around this time. They argue that what emerged was rationality and the ability to reason,

“Very early in our evolution, humans came to realize that the world is not made up only of dry facts (what we might call data today), but that these facts are glued together by an intricate web of cause-effect relationships. Second, that causal explanations, not dry facts, make up the bulk of our knowledge”.

Pearl and Mackenzie (ibid) paint an historically and psychologically plausible account of the evolution of knowledge based on causal intuition,

““Knowledge” stands for traces of experience the reasoning agent has had in the past, including past observations, past actions, education, and cultural mores, that are deemed relevant to the query of interest”.

The idea that human rationality *is* human nature is today a busy area of research. For example the philosopher Stephen Mumford and causation scientist Rani Lill Anjum argue (Mumford and Anjum 2013, p 89) that an advanced ability to recognise the process of cause and effect is a the root of human cognition and human nature. Without this basic rationality there would be no science, no way to work out how to open a door, or drive a car, or walk down a street without colliding with other people, nor indeed any journalism. All would be a meaningless confusion and paralysis,

“That there are causal connections between distinct natural phenomena is the best interpretation we have of the regularity of the world... And if there is no causation responsible for producing the apparent degree of order in our world, then what else does? The relative orderliness of the world would be mysterious. And without that order - without those causal connections - science could not offer us predictions, explanations, or technology”.

In summary, modern scholarship rescues and reintroduces, not merely nature as opposed to nurture in an age-old debate, but also the central importance of human rationality and reason. As we have previously noted, these concepts imply the primacy of objective reality, objective fact and the notion of truth. The ability to recognise, categorise and distinguish one thing from another, as seen in the algorithm of common sense, are core components of human rationality and thus core components of human nature. Any attempt, as per SCR, to deny human nature and attribute all human behaviour to SC, must be seen as at best naïve and ill-informed, and at worst plain wrong.<sup>78</sup>

### **07.03.01 The Truth About Chopping Off Heads.**

Let us return to B&L's example of the executioner. B&L use this example to argue that habits are unthinking, robotic processes and tradition is an oppressive ritual. But their argument does not bear scrutiny. Instead of B&L's fairy tale executioner who consults oracles, let us consider a real executioner, for example Britain's last hangman Albert Pierrepoint. Pierrepoint hanged 433 men and 17 women and he carefully followed procedures which were not the random product of superstition and habitualization which B&L would have us believe. His routines were the culmination of many years of sombre experience and scientific calculation. Its purpose was to minimise the suffering of the condemned and dispatch him as humanely and efficiently as possible. For example the drop, the distance the prisoner was to fall was carefully calculated according to the weight and height of the prisoner. In his autobiography (Forman 1974, p 185), Pierrepoint explains that another important process was to position the knot in a precise way so as to break the neck and avoid the prisoner dying of strangulation,

“The knot is the secret of it, really. We have to put it on the left lower jaw and if we have it on that side, when he falls it finishes under the chin and throws the chin back; but if the knot is on the right hand side, it would finish up behind his neck and throw his neck forward, which would be strangulation”.

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<sup>78</sup> In view of B&L's theological convictions, it is possible to read 'social construction' as a synonym for 'God'. This formulation would allow SCR to be read as 'The Divine Construction of Reality'.

Thus it was reason and rationality that dictated the executioner's craft, not B&L's inexplicable habitualization. Pierrepoint clung to the traditional way of doing things because they worked and were the best way he knew of carrying out his macabre public duty.<sup>79</sup>

#### **07.04.00 But are Socially Constructed Beliefs True or False?**

In summary, reality is not socially constructed, other than in a purely metaphorical, or figurative, sense. The fault of B&L was to construct an ambiguous and misleading metaphor; the fault of their many followers has been to confuse the figurative and literal meanings of the analogy they created.

However, to argue that reality, knowledge and truth are not socially constructed, is not to say that human beings are not influenced by the information supplied to them via the testimony of others. On the contrary, people do make decisions and form opinions all the time based on what they believe to be true. Much of that information comes from society; i.e. from other people. In addition people are greatly influenced by observing the behaviour and opinions of others, especially when there is uncertainty, or when information is absent or unreliable. But, I will argue here, social influence of that sort is fundamentally rational. This, it may be argued, is the central point of departure between the SC point of view and the realist, or folk, point of view.

The social constructivist argues that people are trapped in a pre-determined loop of knowledge and cannot escape their socialization. The SC view is that everything which people know is socially learned and not subject to any higher tribunal. Thus all "facts" are merely narratives or opinions. The Folk Theory acknowledges that people frequently follow the herd, but argues that they can escape the tyranny of social knowledge by thinking for themselves, by examining the facts and distinguishing what is true from what is false. The Folk Theory therefore distinguishes between the *origin* of a belief, and whether the belief is true or false. For example one group of people might have the "socially constructed" belief that

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<sup>79</sup> Pierrepoint concluded that "executions solve nothing" and argued for their discontinuance. Op cit p 210.

good engineering and safety procedures lead to safe air travel. Another group might have the “socially constructed” belief that slaughtering a goat leads to safe air travel. To those who subscribe to the Folk Theory, the fact that both beliefs were “socially constructed” is irrelevant. The important question is which belief is true? Which process really does lead to safer air travel?<sup>80</sup> These arguments have already been discussed in the context of cargo cult science and the efficacy of journalistic norms, so we need not rehearse them here. In summary, the proper study of SC, in the context of journalism, is the study of peer-group influence, groupthink and group conformity.

#### **07.05.00 The Reality of Social Construction. Conformity to Group Norms.**

A detailed investigation of how humans co-operate and the role of conformity to group norms would be a daunting task and far outside the scope of the present project. The British developmental psychologist Luke McGuire and his colleagues (McGuire et al. 2018) point out that when discussing these issues we are entering a world of great complexity,

"Children, adolescents, and adults take competitive and cooperative norms into consideration when navigating their complex social world, and group norms (i.e., expectations about what group members should do) concerning competition and cooperation are important factors involved in evaluating peers within social groups."

McGuire goes on to explain (ibid) that it is extremely unwise to make generalisations about "peers", "groups" and "norms", because groups are highly heterogeneous and may have very different goals and priorities. As with Wittgenstein's cluster concept, one size does not fit all. One is entitled to observe therefore that B&L's sweeping generalisations about how and why people conform to habituated processes, are both highly speculative and unsupported by any evidence. Let us briefly consider one or two robust findings from the literature of cognitive science.

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<sup>80</sup> The Director of Engineering at Pakistan International Airlines and his staff slaughtered a black goat on the tarmac in December 2016 amid fears that its fleet of ATR aircraft were not airworthy. (Khan 2016).

One of the most celebrated researchers in the field of group conformity was the Polish-American social psychologist Solomon Asch. Beginning in 1952 Asch carried out a series of social pressure experiments. The experiment proceeded as follows. A participant was presented with two pieces of card. On card A was a drawing of a line. On card B there were three lines of different lengths. One of the lines on B was obviously the same length as the line on A. The participant was shown into a room where other people were waiting. Unbeknown to the participant, the others were stooges who had been told what to say. The experimenter asked each of the stooges which of the lines on B was the same length as the line on A. Each stooge confidently gave the same, incorrect answer. The test was designed to discover if the participant would conform to the group norm and give the wrong answer, or deviate and say what he truly believed based on the evidence of his own eyes. The results showed that while a significant minority conformed and gave the wrong answer, most participants resisted peer group pressure and gave the right answer.<sup>81</sup> As the American psychologist Richard Griggs (2015) explains,

“Most of the time, most of the participants responded independently (gave correct answers) on critical trials... In addition, Asch reported that 25% of the participants never conformed, and only 5% conformed on all critical trials. Thus, 5 times as many participants were consistently independent as were consistently conforming.”

According to the American sociologist David N. Smith (2014), Asch was motivated by a desire to dispel the widespread, and banal assumption, "that people submit uncritically and painlessly to external manipulation". This is precisely the, entirely unfounded, assumption upon which B&L build their entire thesis. What Asch showed was that "personality matters"; social man is not a somnambulist,

“Asch found "startling individual differences" in behaviour that reflected deeply rooted differences in personality: "The performances of individuals in this

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<sup>81</sup> A puzzling legacy of Asch's experiments is that they are often cited as evidence that people are *unable* to resist peer-group pressure. This is the opposite conclusion to that drawn by Asch himself. "Introductory psychology and social psychology textbook authors have continued to minimize the role of independence and exaggerate the power of conformity in their discussions of Asch's social pressure experiments". Griggs op cit.

experiment tend to be highly consistent. Those who strike out on the path of independence do not, as a rule, succumb to the majority, even over an extended series of trials, while those who choose the path of compliance are unable to free themselves as the ordeal is prolonged." In short, personality matters."

#### **07.06.00 Threshold Models and the Limits of Sociology.**

It is an Achilles heel of sociological theory that it is blind to the role of individuals. Sociological approaches, it may be argued, suffer from a myopia and see social groups without seeing people. Yet there are no social groups without people. An inevitable consequence of this is to deny agency to human beings who are seen as acting non-rationally, driven by socio-cultural forces which arise *ex nihilo*.

To fill this lacuna in traditional sociology, a theoretical approach has been developed to explore the complex relationship between individuals and groups and between small groupuscules and larger tribes. This scholarly approach is referred to as the study of threshold models. The American sociologist Mark Granovetter (1978) explains that threshold models try to correct the "crude psychologizing" to which sociological models are prone, and which naively and implausibly treat human beings as unreasoning automata,

"These [sociological] models treat the aggregation of individual preferences; they do not consider how individuals happen to have the preferences they do".

Granovetter explains (ibid) that threshold models investigate the twilight zone between individuals and groups and points out that much sociology wrongly and naively assumes,

"A simple relation between collective results and individual motives: that if most members of a group make the same behavioural decision - to join a riot, for example - we can infer from this that most ended up sharing the same norm or belief about the situation, whether or not they did so at the beginning".

The significance of this to the present project is that the dominance of sociology-



based approaches to journalism studies (i.e. TDP), carries with it the implicit assumption that the function of news cannot possibly be to inform individual decision making and opinion forming. This is partly because these sociological approaches assume that decision making only takes place at the group level and are insensitive to the ability of individuals to make rational decisions based on evidence. In the context of journalism studies, the prevalence and dominance of these sociological models has become pernicious because they are based on a false premise. Threshold models are consequently relevant to journalism studies as a necessary and overdue corrective to the sociological turn which underpins TDP. In other words a more psychologically plausible view of how human beings form opinions and make decisions (and of the role of reliable information in this process) is essential to a proper understanding of journalism. This rebalancing calls for examination of individual and group decision making in a wide variety of contexts. We will therefore look briefly at the work of some threshold modellers. More detailed consideration is suggested as a fertile area for future research.

#### **07.07.00 Individual and Group Decision Making. Information Cascades.**

The American economist Ivo Welch coined the phrase "cascade effect", to describe a herding phenomenon in which financial investors look to see what others are doing and abandon their own individual assessments to follow the crowd. Welch's cascade threshold model provides an explanation of the complex relationship between individual and group decision making. It links rational, evidence-based decision making to group influence, and explains the latter in terms of the former. Welch (1992) describes the cascade phenomenon as the, not unreasonable, expectation that what happens to early investors will happen to those who follow,

"Later potential investors can learn from the purchasing decisions of earlier investors. This can lead rapidly to "cascades" in which subsequent investors optimally ignore their private information and imitate earlier investors."

The American economist David Hirshleifer, building on the work of Welch, has developed a psychologically plausible threshold model to explain why people often

defer to the wisdom the herd. Hirshleifer's insight is that social influence is not an irrational madness of crowds. On the contrary it is a rational, heuristic short cut founded on the assumption that other people in the crowd are themselves behaving rationally. Hirschleifer uses the example of a tourist who has to choose between two similar restaurants. One of the restaurants is empty, the other is busy. Hirschleifer (1993, p 4) argues that, even if the tourist has prior information that the empty restaurant is better, it is perfectly rational for him to abandon his belief and assume that his information is wrong, based on the evidence of what other diners are doing,

“If there are many individuals, then we show that with virtual certainty a point in the chain of decisions will be reached where an individual ignores his private information and bases his decision solely upon what he sees predecessors do. (He's not ignoring his information *foolishly*; it's just that the accumulated evidence from many previous individuals dominates even when his private information points in the opposite direction).”

The insight here is that that it is not foolish, but perfectly rational to behave like this. It is simply not practical for everyone to exhaustively research everything for themselves. Many people lack the time, ability, desire, or opportunity to do so and therefore trusting the vicarious experience and knowledge of others is a reasonable, heuristic short cut. As Hirshleifer (ibid) puts it,

"People very quickly start to do the same thing, which is quite often a mistake. The initial cascade forms based on very little information... Information is costly to acquire; it's cheaper to rely on the cheap information conveyed by the decisions of others".

Thus Hirshleifer (ibid) points out that people can be manipulated by seeding the cascade with misleading information,

"New restaurants sometimes employ people to hang out and eat long meals to make their establishments look popular".

The importance of this insight is that people may well be influenced by social forces, but the power of these social forces comes from the assumption that they are well-founded and rational. B&L's hypothesis is therefore flawed because it assumes that social knowledge is based on socio-cultural influence, while failing to appreciate that socio-cultural influence is, in its turn, based on evidence-based processes of reasoning. Reality and knowledge are not socially constructed. On the contrary, "socially constructed" knowledge is based on information, or the lack of it. One lesson of information cascades is that when information is scarce and uncertain, people are more likely to defer to the wisdom of the crowd, and give the benefit of the doubt to the assumption that other people are better informed than themselves.

A consequence of this insight is that social knowledge may be very influential, but it is also very brittle. According to Hirshleifer (op cit, p 5) fads and fashions (including intellectual fashions) may seem well established, but have in reality only reached a point of "precarious stability". In this state, individuals only grudgingly trust the herd, despite their own inner misgivings,

"At that point, if the next individual is similar, he is also *just barely*, willing to ignore his own information signal, i.e. he is in a cascade... In this situation, a very small shock to the system - such as new public information - can affect the behaviour of many people. Owing to information cascades, society often lands precariously close to the borderline, like a car teetering at the edge of a cliff".

The relevance of this model to journalism is that it reveals the importance of information in the construction of social reality. It is information which both creates and destroys social knowledge. Hirshleifer explains (p 26) that, "Even a minor public information release can shatter a cascade" before concluding,

"Cascades start readily based on very small amounts of information... A small shock, such as a public information disclosure, a value change, or even the possibility of such a change, can lead to an abrupt shift".

For example it was widely known in the UK during the 1980s that the Ratner chain

of jewellers sold good quality jewellery at low prices. However this socially constructed knowledge was vaporised overnight because of new information supplied (unwisely) by the company CEO Gerald Ratner. Asked how he could sell one of his products at such a low price, Ratner told an audience at the Institute of Directors (Cope 2002), "Because it's total crap". This led to the rapid creation of newly socially constructed knowledge that Ratners sold inferior goods, which in turn led to the collapse of the entire business.

There is therefore a strong motivation for interested parties to control the spread of news. Doing so can enable new cascades to be formed and existing ones to be either preserved, or shattered as required. But what is most noteworthy in the context of SC, is the insight that social knowledge is constructed by, and dependent upon, information. Social knowledge does not spring into the world *ex nihilo* as if by magic.

#### **07.08.00 Group Decision Making or Groupthink?**

Human decision-making is highly complex and can be influenced by both group factors and by individual reasoning, reflection and emotion. There are many examples which suggest that collaborative working is a beneficial way of pooling the knowledge, skills and experience of many individuals. Thus juries are widely considered to produce fairer, more rounded judgements than individuals. As the American scholar of organizational behaviour Stephen P Robbins observes (Robbins and Judge 2006, p 241),

"Groups usually produce more and better solutions to problems than do individuals working alone... groups bring more complete information and knowledge to a decision, so they generate more ideas".

But there are some important caveats. According to Robbins, group decision making is only effective if there is diversity of opinion among members and if members are able to express their ideas freely and openly without hostility or intimidation. If these conditions are not met, group decision making loses its

efficacy and can lead to disastrous decisions being made. The absence of these conditions is often referred to as group-think. This Orwellian sounding word was coined by the American psychologist Irving L. Janis in a famous 1972 paper. According to Janis group-think is a tribal phenomenon which occurs when group members come to value the goal of the prestige and success of the group above all else. The Dutch political scientist Paul't Hart (1991) summarises,

"To preserve the clubby atmosphere, group members suppress personal doubts, silence dissenters, and follow the group leader's suggestions. They have a strong belief in the inherent morality of the group, combined with a decidedly evil picture of the group's opponents. The results are devastating: a distorted view of reality, excessive optimism producing hasty and reckless policies, and a neglect of ethical issues".

According to Robbins (op cit, p 242) symptoms of group-think are when,

"Group members rationalise any resistance to the assumptions they have made. No matter how strongly the evidence may contradict their basic assumptions... Those members who have doubts or hold differing points of view seek to avoid deviating from what appears to be group consensus by keeping silent about misgivings."

In other words a decision made by a group (whether a socio-cultural group, or otherwise) is not good simply by virtue of the fact that it has been produced collaboratively. But neither is it bad. In fact saying that a particular belief has arisen from a particular group tells us nothing about whether that belief is true or false, prudent or foolish. To attempt to undermine a belief, or criticise it, because it is "socially constructed" is to confuse the origin of a belief with its truth. This, as we have seen, was acknowledged (and then ignored) by B&L in their introduction when they admitted that, "The sociologist is in no position to supply answers to these questions".

Decisions can be made, opinions formed and beliefs held, either as a result of group or individual processes (and often by both). However *how* they are formed is immaterial to whether the opinions and beliefs are well-founded. Thus a socio-

cultural group may believe inter-subjectively that a particular narrative is true. But all narratives are not equal. As far as journalism is concerned, the products of the factory of social construction are ultimately obliged to face the quality control of epistemology. What is the antidote to group-think? Robbins (p 243) states that managers should,

“Encourage group leaders to play an impartial role. Leaders should actively seek input from all members and avoid expressing their own opinions, especially in the early stages of deliberation.”

The relevance of this to journalism is to bring into focus the fundamental difference between the Folk Theory and TDP. The Folk Theory holds that objective facts and objective truth exist, but are unknown. The task of journalism is therefore to attempt to discover and report them, like a detective attempting to solve a mystery. However any such knowledge will always be provisional and fallible. To avoid the pitfalls of prejudice and group-think, journalists should follow Robbins advice, seek diverse points of view, be impartial and “offer divergent perspectives”. Thus the Folk Theory welcomes dissenting voices as essential to the process of discovering truth.

The Folk Theory also acknowledges that not every perspective will be equally true. Some will be more true than others and better supported by factual evidence. Some indeed will be wilful attempts to mislead and manipulate. A great advantage of the Folk Theory is that it allows audiences to reach a conclusion about what is true, even if the conclusion will be necessarily tentative and fragile. It also allows conflicting accounts to be judged according to journalistic, quasi-scientific or quasi-judicial, criteria. Ultimately the Folk Theory offers the possibility of conflict resolution based on measuring what is asserted, against the yardstick of what is true.

TDP, on the other hand, holds that there are no objective facts, no objective truth and that everyone is at liberty to construct their own truth and reality. SC holds that these “realities” are real and certain for those who subjectively hold them.

TDP offers no means by which to judge which “reality” is real. Thus TDP offers no solution to conflict, other than (in the final analysis) through coercion and the brutal triumph of one subjective narrative over another. In journalistic terms TDP leads to the silencing of dissenting voices because they are “wrong” and debate is thus futile and pointless. Bertrand Russell (1965) made the same distinction which he described as the difference between a liberal and illiberal outlook,

"The former regards all questions as open to discussion and all opinions as open to a greater or lesser measure of doubt, while the latter holds in advance that certain opinions are absolutely unquestionable, and that no argument against them must be allowed be heard... This point of view cannot be accepted by any man who wishes reason rather than prejudice to govern human action".

### **07.09.00 Knowledge is Socially Constructed and Milk Comes From the Shop.**

The greatest objection to the reasoning of Berger and Luckmann is that it does not go far enough. It stops at an intermediate stage. It claims human thought and activity are the result of habit, but it does not ask what gave rise to the habit. B&L's thesis is like explaining to a child at a railway station that the train on the platform came from “the previous station”. Where, the child might wonder, did it come from before that? Or, it is like explaining the origin of milk by telling a child that it “comes from the shop”. In other words our accustomed ways of doing things, and accepted ways of thinking, are not created *ex nihilo* by habituation. They emerged because they worked well, and have survived on merit. This does not, of course, render a habit immune to evolution or obsolescence in the light of new information and changed circumstances.<sup>82</sup>

It is incoherent of B&L to criticise habitualization. Habits can be good or bad. It is foolish to attack the *process* of habituation without considering *what* is being habituated. We might laugh at someone who does something inefficiently or

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<sup>82</sup> The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the word meme to refer to this sort of idea. "Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation". (Dawkins 1989, p 192).

foolishly when there is a better, easier way of doing it. And we might observe that they are stuck in a bad habit. But it is not the *habit* that's the problem. If all habits were equally wrong, then we would be obliged to laugh at those who have adopted the habit of doing something well. In other words, behind habituation is a process of common-sense reasoning, and human cognition about cause and effect. People generally try to get into good habits, not just habits.

Another important function of habits, and tradition (overlooked by B&L), is to serve as a corrective to faulty reasoning. This is because there is an ever-present danger of discarding something which works, prematurely for an unproven innovation. Thus the innate conservatism of habit and tradition serves as an important safeguard to reckless innovation and folly. Blind servitude to novelty, without consideration of the consequences, is no less dangerous than blind obedience to tradition. In fact it is arguably more injurious. Thus the doctrine of *primum non nocere* is a maxim of medical ethics and can be summed up as the view that it may be better *not* to do something, or even do nothing, rather than to risk making the situation worse.

B&L's disdain of habituation is problematic because it takes a one sided and unbalanced view of the concept of tradition. The American anthropologist Eugenia Shanklin points out that the concept of tradition became unfashionable among sociologists during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However Shanklin argues (1981, p 72) that sociologists have tended to confuse two different concepts inherent in the word 'tradition'. One concept, the focus of theorists such as Durkheim, Marx and Weber, views tradition as a passive, stultifying force which inhibits innovation and creativity and leads to stagnation. The other, favoured by anthropologists, sees instead an active, rational process of learning which cements good practice. Shanklin sees the dominance of the sociological model as a failure to recognise this distinction. She argues this has led to "serious omissions that are engendered by an unreflective use of the term" and notes that,

"In the writings of social science theorists, tradition was seen as ... a passive, stultifying force that engendered and enforced cultural homogeneity".



Shanklin (p 75) traces the origin of this trend to the influence of Marx who, "believed tradition to be a stultifying device for enslaving people". However she points out that this is merely one of several possible views of tradition, not that favoured by anthropologists,

"At the same time that social science theorists were specifying the theoretical attributes of tradition, anthropologists were noting its indigenous, active uses... In its active sense as recorded by ethnographers, tradition serves instead to evaluate current circumstances, to explain why things are as they are".

Shanklin (ibid) quotes the distinguished anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski who wrote with approval how tradition and legends serve to glorify reason, celebrate successful ways of doing things and bestow esteem upon exemplars deemed worthy of emulation. Thus tradition records,

"Singularly great achievements in all important pursuits, they rebound to the credit of some individual and his descendants or of a whole community; and hence they are kept alive by the ambition of those whose ancestry they glorify" (Malinowski 1948. 107)".

In conclusion B&L's thesis is inadequate in that it considers all human action and decision making (as well as journalistic fact checking processes) to be the product of stultifying habit, tradition and ritual. Thus all human knowledge, and generations of experience, is wrongly seen as equivalent to a form of pointless prejudice with no validity. But the key epistemic questions remain; What is the best way to solve a particular problem? Which solutions work best? Which habits are better than others? Or, in journalistic terms, which sources of news should audiences trust? These are questions which the relativism and truthphobia of SC is unable to answer.

Reality is therefore not socially constructed, nor could it possibly be. SC is best seen as metaphor for how individuals allow their beliefs to be influenced by group beliefs, when they believe the belief of the group to be well-founded, and in the absence of any reason to believe otherwise. But in any discussion of SC it must be

constantly called to mind that in the real world, reality is indifferent to, and untroubled by, what humans believe.

#### **07.10.00 The Social Construction of TDP.**

The American sociologist Robert Wuthnow has studied the relationship between ideas and social change and in particular how new ideologies arise to serve the interests of vigorous new groups. Wuthnow notes how, as new socio-economic groups seek power and challenge the existing status-quo; they attack the old ways of thinking which they deem oppressive. Thus new groups favour new ideas which serve their own interests and undermine the interests of their predecessors. Ideology, Wuthnow (1993, p 10) argues, becomes a weapon during periods of demographic and social change, and during the process of realignment among ruling elites,

"Certain schools of thought become dominant in place of others; the ideas and influence of certain leaders flourish more than others; new forms of thought replace older forms; some of these variations seem to gain more favourable hearings in certain social contexts than in others."

Following Wuthnow one might ask, to what extent should TDP be seen as the ideological scaffolding of the baby-boomer generation? To what extent was it a self-serving rearrangement of the intellectual furniture which took place between approximately 1965 and 1995?

The British historian Ronald Fraser argues that "a unique constellation of conditions" created a "student generation in revolt" during the late 1960s. According to Fraser, the emergence of this new generation was driven by important structural changes to the economies of the West. De-industrialisation and the dawn of globalisation meant less demand for unskilled manual labourers and higher demand for white collar jobs. This Fraser argues (1988, p 2) explains the,

“Dramatic growth in higher education, its expansion responding also to the demographic growth and pressure from those social classes whose children had traditionally been denied access to the university... Unlike their parents, the young who came of age in the 1960s had known neither the Depression of the 1930s nor World War II. The deferred gratifications that bourgeois society traditionally demanded of adolescents no longer seemed relevant at a time of relative prosperity; they did not have to 'play it safe' like their parents”.

Fraser (p 317) observes that the baby-boomer generation wanted to tear down the ideological scaffolding which seemed irrelevant and inimical to its own interests. It was a generation which was conscious that,

“These structures were blocking its development and would continue to do so for as long as they were defended by those whom they served”.

Writing in 1988, Fraser surveyed 175 people who had been active members of the “1968 generation” and noted that, twenty years later, there were over-represented in teaching, “both secondary and tertiary” (p. 328). Thus, according to Fraser's analysis, it can be argued that the generation which spawned TDP never left the academy. Many remained in higher education to form an intellectual community in which their ideas could incubate in isolation from the wider world. In journalistic terms, this dynamic might perhaps explain the ideological gulf which separates TDP from the Folk Theory. In this view, TDP is best seen as an historically contingent attempt to delegitimise traditional intellectual approaches *regardless of* whether or not they are correct.

For example the radical British academic Terence Hawkes, writing the preface to a 1978 media textbook, sounds less like he is introducing a scholarly enquiry, and more like he is declaring generational and ideological war. Hawkes proclaims (Fiske and Hartley 1978, p 9), “We are living in a time of rapid and radical social change” and argues that literary, media and communication academics are in the vanguard of attempts to “shape” society,

“The erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary

disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation".

Warming to his theme, Hawkes (p 10) announces that each volume in the Routledge *New Accents* series will,

"Seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change... The disturbing re-alignment of values which this involves, and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about, both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore".

However the Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton, writing just five years later (2008, p 142), sees TDP less as a revolution, and more as a form of intellectual sulking arising from the ashes of 1968. For Eagleton, radical media theory is best seen as a consolation prize,

"A product of that blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968. Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language. Nobody, at least, was likely to beat you over the head for doing so".

The American philosopher Richard J. Bernstein took part in the ideological carnival of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1971 he wrote the influential book *Praxis and Action* which explored aspects of Marxism and Existentialism. However by 1983 he was able to look back and reflect that the driving force of the era was, largely, a generational desire to destroy the established intellectual order (Bernstein 1983, p ix),

"It was the common negative stance of contemporary philosophers that most forcefully struck me... it is a common characteristic of many contemporary philosophers that they have sought to overthrow and dethrone the father".

Bernstein (p 3) notes that the destructive intellectual weapon of choice was relativism. In all disciplines the same dogma rapidly became fashionable; subjectivism and SC. It was an era, he recalled when,

"We hear voices telling us that there are no hard "facts of the matter" and that almost "anything goes".

However he (p 9) points out that, despite its appeal to the radicals of the baby-boomer generation as an intellectual quick fix, relativism is ultimately a dangerous instrument. Nothing is safe from relativism; not even relativism,

"Ever since Plato, objectivists have argued that relativism, whenever it is clearly stated, is self-referentially inconsistent and paradoxical. For implicitly or explicitly, the relativist claims that his or her position is true, yet the relativist also insists that since truth is relative, what is taken to be true may also be false. Consequently, relativism itself may be true and false. One cannot consistently state the case for relativism without undermining it".

In his book *Discovering the News; A Social History of American Newspapers*, Michael Schudson also sees the emergence of TDP as a generational construct. Schudson observes that the *zeitgeist* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of increasing doubt and scepticism towards authority. This arose from the debris of the First World War and gathered pace in response to a growing disillusion with man's apparent self-destructiveness, and the mendacity of ruling elites. By the late 1960s it had become fashionable among the baby-boomer generation to ridicule basic concepts such as the belief in objective reality and reason itself. Journalism and journalistic theory, Schudson writes (1978, p 161), formed the front line in the battle between rival, generational world views,

"The conflict of generations as it was seen in American journalism in the late sixties – a conflict between the old defending objectivity and the young attacking it, between those who had fought in World War II and those born to the affluence and anxiety of the cold war".

Schudson (p 177) notes the emergence in the 1960s of a generational “adversary culture” fuelled by the rapid and dramatic expansion of higher education and the appearance of the student generation,

“When the children of the postwar baby boom entered colleges in the middle sixties, more people were being offered 'a ground and vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise' than ever before”.

Schudson (p 162) concludes that the rival world views within academia and journalism which surfaced in the 1960s were generationally self-serving. He notes that different generations of journalists and journalism academics have,

“Different interests to protect, and different ambitions to serve; younger journalists and older journalists are at different points in their careers and have different concerns. That these differences should yield correspondingly different attitudes towards reporting the news is not surprising”.

#### **07.11.00 TDP – Constructed by the Baby Boomer Generation.**

Following Schudson, one is entitled to ask to what extent TDP should be seen as the legacy of a single generation of baby-boomer scholars. It is outside the scope of the present project to discuss the socio-cultural factors which led to the rise and dominance of TDP, however I offer the following suggestions for future research. Answers to the following questions might be sought in intellectual historical research;

- What was the impact of the demographic changes which followed the Second World War on the establishment of TDP? Specifically, to what extent is TDP a product of the Baby Boomer generation of scholars? To what extent did TDP serve the socio-economic and socio-political interests of this group? To what extent were the dogmas of TDP particularly attractive to young people? Specifically the interest in social constructivism and the doctrine that young people are “enslaved” by tradition? Similarly the interest in ontology and the nature of reality, plus a desire to change the

world?

- What was the impact of the unprecedented affluence of the 1960s to the TDP? How were the changed social conditions conducive to the rise of activism and utopianism?
- How significant was the rise in student numbers during the 1960s and 1970s to the establishment of TDP? To what extent was TDP a result of demand for new fields of academic study rising out of the rapid growth of higher education and the emergence of the New Universities? To what extent was TDP conditioned by the need to supply fields of study which were distinct from those offered by the older universities?
- To what extent is TDP a negative tradition geared towards subverting and undermining existing orthodoxy? To what extent did TDP support political rebellion of the 1960s? Specifically for example the unrest of 1968?
- To what extent was TDP a reaction to the empirical certainties of the old world order which was perceived as responsible for a blood-soaked 20<sup>th</sup> century? What is the relationship between the rise of TDP and the loss of confidence in established authority following the First and Second World Wars, the industrial slaughter of the Nazi death camps and fears of nuclear Armageddon? Specifically to what extent was the irrationalism of TDP a reaction against scientific progress which was perceived to be responsible for the horrors of 20th century, scientific warfare?
- In summary, to what extent was TDP a product of its time? To what extent are its dogma historically and culturally situated? To what extent are they still useful today, and to what extent are they inappropriate and obsolete?

## **Part Eight. Truth Theory.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What is Truth Theory?
- What is journalistic truth?
- What is journalistic impartiality?
- What are news narratives?



*"There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil."*

Walter Lippmann

*"We are here as on a darkling plain,  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night."*

Matthew Arnold.

### **08.00.00 Truth Theory. An Alternative Paradigm.**

Tom Kuhn asserted (Kuhn 1970, p 79) that it is not sufficient to merely shoot a wounded paradigm. It is necessary to offer an alternative,

*"To reject one paradigm without simultaneously substituting another is to reject science itself. That act reflects not on the paradigm but on the man. Inevitably it will be seen by his colleagues as 'the carpenter who blames his tools'."*

In this paper we have reviewed the conceptual foundations of TDP and found them to be a set of rarely examined, intellectually invalid assumptions on which no reliance should be placed. If, as I have argued, TDP is an exhausted paradigm; with what should it be replaced? I have previously referred to the Folk Theory of journalism. I will now attempt to codify this framework and will refer to it henceforth as Truth Theory. I will attempt to define journalistic truth, and sketch a "manifesto" for Truth Theory together with some ideas for future research and analysis. I will then introduce the concept of the "news narrative", explain its importance to a truth-theoretical understanding of journalism, and illustrate with a case study from recent journalistic praxis.

### 08.01.00 Journalistic Truth. The Truth Theory Manifesto.

Truth Theory (henceforth TT) holds that truth is best seen as correspondence with reality. TT distinguishes between belief about what is true and objective truth. Objective truth is always unknowable. Belief is always uncertain and fallible. In many cases there will be competing beliefs about what is true. But this does not indicate that all beliefs are equally true, rather it indicates ignorance. Some people will be more ignorant of the evidence than others. Moreover, some people will be more ignorant of their ignorance than others.

It is important to stress that, in the context of journalism, we are confining our discussion to journalistic truth. Journalistic truth is not the same thing as objective truth, religious truth, metaphysical truth, inner truth, or indeed any other sort of truth. The obvious parallel is with legal, or judicial truth. In England, for example, there are two flavours of judicial truth. There is civil truth, what is considered to be true “on the balance of probabilities”; and there is criminal truth, what is considered to be true “beyond reasonable doubt”. In both cases truth can be seen as an expression of likelihood, or probability, i.e. the likely guilt or innocence of the person on trial. Thus judicial truth should be seen as a technical concept and distinct to objective, or absolute, truth. For example someone may be found guilty of a crime which he did not really commit. This apparent contradiction is neatly captured in a line from Terence Rattigan's play *The Winslow Boy*,

“Catherine: Many people believed him innocent, you know.

Sir Robert: So I understand. (A faint pause.) As it happens, however, he was guilty.”

In this example each character is using the words “innocent” and “guilty” in slightly different ways. Catherine uses “innocent” to mean objectively/absolutely innocent, whereas Sir Robert uses “guilty” to mean merely that the accused received a fair trial and was *found*, or technically judged to be, guilty.

Journalistic truth should be considered in a similar way. Journalistic truth is not the same thing as objective or absolute truth (which is a hypothetical concept and

always unknowable). Journalistic truth is a verdict. It is an informed judgement, or basis for belief, based on the best available evidence which has been examined, tested and scrutinised by journalists whose goal is the pursuit of truth. Having passed through a rigorous process of journalistic quality control, it is information which is, for the time being, warranted to be true, trustworthy and reliable. It is information which has received a fair trial. The philosopher Michael Ryan (2001, p 5) summarises,

"Objective journalists believe a real world exists and that one can produce a reasonably accurate description of that world. They do not guarantee their descriptions are accurate in every respect, only that they have followed a process that allows them to produce a description that is more accurate than any other process allows, and that allows society to move closer to an understanding of the real world."

It is noteworthy here that Ryan grounds his description of journalistic truth on a foundational belief in the existence of the real world. TT is able to talk about journalistic truth because TT is a rational project based on the philosophical assumptions of rationalism and realism. However the concept of journalistic truth is not readily available to TDP, because, as we have seen, TDP rejects the existence of objective reality. A consequence of this, and a difficulty for TDP, is that this leaves journalism hanging in the air as an orphaned, if not pointless, activity. In order to fill the conceptual vacuum which it has created, TDP is compelled to assert that, in the absence of truth, the goal of journalism must be something else; such as achieving power and domination. This is the truthophobic, sociological, Gramscian, Hallist and Foucauldian approach. As we have seen, it reduces journalism (and for that matter the study of history and science) to species of propaganda. But journalism is not the same thing as propaganda - although TDP is at a loss to explain why not. The British scholar, and former journalist, David Loyn (2007, p 3) explains this truthophobic logic, and the dilemma of TDP, with unmatched brevity,

"The pursuit of truth is impossible if there is no truth to pursue."

As the nature of journalistic truth, as a purely technical concept, comes into focus, it can be observed that the *modus operandi* of TDP, between the 1960s and 1990s, was to undermine the concept of journalistic truth by creating a straw man argument. Advocates of TDP slyly conflated journalistic truth with objective truth, and then proceeded to attack the former by claiming that the latter is unknowable and uncertain. But no journalist has ever claimed, or would want to claim, that journalistic truth is the same thing as objective truth.

TT recognises that journalistic truth is fragile and provisional. It is uncertain and prone to error in a volatile world of vast, unfathomable complexity. It is, to return to our metaphor of choice, a raft which must be ceaselessly rebuilt, one plank at a time, while on the open sea. The Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist Walter Lippmann (1920, p 13) described the modern world as so impossibly complex that audiences can only learn about it through accounts that arrive filtered, stretched and deformed. Yet it is on these highly vulnerable accounts that populations base their opinions and decisions,

“News comes from a distance; it comes helter-skelter, in inconceivable confusion; it deals with matters that are not easily understood; it arrives and is assimilated by busy and tired people who must take what is given to them.”

Key imponderables will always remain therefore such as; 'How much evidence is enough?', 'At what point does a belief become irrational and absurd?', 'At what point should one change ones belief?', 'How strongly should a belief be held?', 'How trustworthy is the evidence for the evidence?' Different people will answer these questions differently, and make different judgements about what they believe to be true. TT holds that some will be more justified in doing so than others.

TT holds that conflict about what is true is inevitable, and usually desirable. It is best resolved through collective enterprise, through the sharing of information and evidence, and through debate and dialogue. TT holds that certitude and infallibility are dangerous illusions. TT holds that closing down debate,

suppressing inconvenient evidence, or silencing dissenting opinion, is dangerous because it replaces journalistic truth, with willed ignorance. It replaces imperfect knowledge with something far worse. As Voltaire remarked, "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is worse." TT thus holds that *aletheia* trumps *arete*; that the goal of searching for the truth always trumps the goal of doing what is deemed ethically, or politically, good.

TT holds that clarity about the precise meaning of the question being asked is of great importance. TT holds that many, deceptively simple, questions are in fact complex and confusing bundles of nested predictions, opinions, assumptions, claims, ambiguities and forecasts. Apparently simple problems are invariably not singular; but turn out to be mosaics of issues – so called 'wicked problems'. In many cases therefore the answer to important questions will be neither yes nor no.

#### **08.02.00 Journalistic Impartiality – The Whole Truth.**

In practical terms, journalistic truth should be seen as a combination of accuracy (presenting facts accurately), and impartiality (not concealing facts, or improperly promoting them, so as to create a misleading, one-sided impression). Thus journalistic truth can be seen as a quasi-judicial notion of telling the truth, and the whole truth. The process of journalism, according to TT, involves playing the roles of different, opposing advocates. To work effectively, this process must present the evidence both for and against. Journalism exists then, to present a balanced mixture of accurate evidence on which the audience can, like a judge or jury, draw its own conclusion about where truth lies.

The importance of impartiality as a component of journalistic truth was explained memorably by the Hutchins Commission on the Freedom of the Press.<sup>83</sup> The report pointed out (Hutchins and et 1947, p 22) that accuracy without impartiality is a recipe for deceit, not a recipe for truth,

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<sup>83</sup> *A Free and Responsible Press* was published by the independent, Chicago-based Hutchins Commission in 1947. The commission asked rhetorically, "Is the freedom of the press in danger? Its answer to the question is: Yes."

"The account of an isolated fact, however accurate in itself, may be misleading and, in effect, untrue... It is no longer enough to report *the fact* truthfully. It is now necessary to report *the truth about the fact*."

The report explained that stripping a factual account of its context is a crime against truth. In an oft-quoted sentence, the report condemned the sin of telling only the partial truth and not the whole, a process which produces "factually correct but substantially untrue accounts". Thus, the report warned (p 23), facts can be used selectively to manipulate opinion and construct narratives of hatred and prejudice,

"The country has many groups which are partially insulated from one another and which need to be interpreted to one another. Factually correct but substantially untrue accounts of the behaviour of members of one of these social islands can intensify the antagonisms of others toward them."

Because, in practice, it is so hard to achieve journalistic impartiality, TT holds that the ideal truth-gathering function of journalism is generally more honoured in the breach than the observance.

### **08.03.00 Journalism as Process, Truth as Goal.**

TT draws an important distinction between the *goal* of journalism and the *practice*, or methodology, of journalism. Every activity has a goal, or purpose, and TT holds that the goal of journalism is journalistic truth. The method by which this goal is obtained is journalism. The Roman jurist Publius Iuventius Celsus is said to have coined the phrase, *Ius est ars boni et aequi* (Law is the technique of justice). In this respect there is a compelling analogy between jurisprudence and journalism - which is why TT can be considered as a quasi-judicial theory of journalism. For example the words of the American legal scholar Max Radin (1951, p 3-4) refer equally to Journalism Studies as to legal studies,

"What we must be careful about is confusing the operation of law with one of its elements, which is what we call "legal procedure." In this there is a succession of

connected acts culminating in a result called a judgment. There is certainly nothing more legal than a judgment, but neither the judgment nor the procedure which results in it, is identical with the law. If we must attempt to describe the law - and we can describe it without defining it - we can say it is a complex of ideas, or a complex process of intellectual operations and that in this complex, in one way or another, the notion of justice must enter."

In the same way, TT holds that journalism is a complex process out of which journalistic truth can emerge. TT holds that considerable confusion is caused when academics fail to recognise this distinction. For example consider the sentence (Ryan op cit),

"Journalism has not escaped the influence of the relativists... who argue that absolutes do not exist in knowledge, morals, or values; that objectivity is not achievable; and that objectivity is not a useful goal."

This sentence obviously invites a discussion about whether objectivity is an achievable and useful journalistic goal. But objectivity is not the *goal* of journalism, it is one of the *techniques* journalists use as part of their methodological toolkit. Hence, without severe qualification, the entire conversation is doomed to hopeless confusion. In contrast, Loyn (op cit, p 4) correctly observes,

"While truth (or truthfulness) may be a goal, objectivity is a tool to reach it, and an essential one."

TT acknowledges that, in the real world, there are advantages to be gained by deliberately manipulating the beliefs and behaviours of others. Consequently there will often be a strong motive, for some people or groups of people, to deceive by misrepresenting the evidence in self-serving ways. This manipulation may often be highly sophisticated. Also, to be effective this deception must be invisible and well-camouflaged. Lies have no power if no-one believes them. Deception will therefore frequently be presented disguised behind a mask of selflessness and altruism.

But it is not all bad news. The ever-present threats of error and deceit can be mitigated, at least to some extent, by epistemic vigilance. Epistemic vigilance refers to a suite of cognitive tools which people use, often intuitively, to detect fraud, insincerity, and deception. Epistemic vigilance is a just and healthy scepticism applied to a wide range of testimony, including the testimony of journalism. Epistemic vigilance can be applied, not merely to matters of fact, but also to understanding *why* things happen. This involves scrutiny of complex processes of cause and effect, and attributions of moral praise, blame and responsibility. It is these issues, in a journalistic context, to which we shall now turn.

#### **08.04.00 The Search for Explanation. Volcanoes and Human Behaviour.**

The American philosopher Stephen Grimm observes that human beings are naturally curious about the world. Grimm notes that this “puzzlement” drives scientific enquiry. This same puzzlement drives our hunger for information, news and journalism.

We have previously noted that journalism does not merely supply a list of facts, it also seeks to explain them. Thus journalism does not merely answer the classic questions of news; Who? What? Where? When? And How? It also seeks to answer an entirely different sort of question; *Why?* A crucial insight, one which is frequently overlooked in academic discourse, is that asking *why* something happened is to step over a bridge into a different realm of enquiry altogether. It is to recognise that human understanding does not merely crave factual information, it also craves *explanation*. As the American philosopher Jonathan Lear puts it (Grimm 2008, p3),

“It is a remarkable fact about us that we cannot simply observe phenomena: we want to know why they occur. We can imagine beings who simply watched the sun set and the moon rise in the heavens: they might come to expect regular transitions, but they would lack curiosity as to why the changes occur. We are not like that. The heavenly motions cry out for explanation.”



It is important to understand the difference between the truthful reporting of matters of fact, and reporting *why* something happened. This is because *why* something happened will usually be unknowable, or at least of a vastly different order of certitude, compared to knowing *what* happened. For example I may know that someone committed suicide, but that does not mean I can know *why* they did so. The difficulty of correctly identifying a single thread of causality from among many, means that explanation will always be an imprecise art and subject to debate. Why something happened should therefore be treated as opinion – as speculative theorising. C.P. Scott, the celebrated editor of the *Guardian*, expressed this distinction in his famous journalistic manifesto of 1921. Scott wrote that the "unclouded face of truth" must not suffer wrong and he distinguished between facts and comment. Facts (i.e. an account of what happened) Scott said were "sacred". Comment, on the other hand, he said, was a matter of interpretation. Because interpretation was so uncertain, Scott said a wide variety of diverse comment should always be welcomed. Comment, he proclaimed, was "free". The primary function of journalism, Scott (2018 (1921)) said was,

"The gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted. Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of presentation must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong. Comment is free, but facts are sacred. "Propaganda", so called, by this means is hateful. The voice of opponents no less than that of friends has a right to be heard."

In contemporary journalism this traditional distinction is often erased, and its significance commonly overlooked by theorists who, following TDP, feel that fact and opinion are one and the same. For example, under the headline, "Isn't it time we ditched the newspaper leader writers?" the *Guardian's* Jeff Jarvis argued in 2006 that it was time to abolish C.P. Scott's famous distinction altogether. Jarvis (2006) opined that pure commentary was "outmoded" as a form of journalism and that commentators should,

"Join their colleagues in the newsroom in a radical re-examination of their roles in journalism."

Jarvis was only arguing for the abolition of "opinion" and its merger with news. But in so doing he failed to appreciate that he was in fact arguing for the abolition of both. It is as if, to save cupboard space, someone were to pour a bottle of vinegar into a bottle of wine. He would be deluded in thinking he had only got rid of one, while somehow preserving the other. What is noteworthy then, is the contemporary trend towards merging fact and opinion.

In another, arguably more significant merger, the former BBC producer Robin Aitken (Aitken 2007, p 30) recalls how the corporation largely extinguished this important distinction during the reign of John Birt who was Director General during the 1990s,

“Traditionally BBC news bulletins restricted themselves to factual narrative; answering the question 'Why?' was not seen as the job of news... Birt had no sympathy with that type of journalism. The 'mission to explain' meant that an old distinction... was at first blurred and then lost altogether.”

It was, says Aitken (p 33) regretfully, a change for the worse,

“The change put under further strain the BBC ideal of impartiality for, whereas the factual record of events can often be agreed by all sides, 'context' is a slippery and malleable thing. Over the next decade, as the changes worked their way through the system, it became clear just how corrosive these new ideas were to prove.”

In considering the difference between fact and opinion, it is helpful to further distinguish between different types of explanation. For example asking why a volcano erupts is different to asking why a murderer committed a murder. The former is a matter for scientific evaluation and may consider factors relating to the density and pressure of magma and the laws of physics. The latter may have numerous complex, perhaps contested, explanations. Grimm (2016) describes this as the distinction between understanding chains of physical causation on the one hand, and what causes human beings to behave in certain ways on the other,

"When it comes to human beings, the thought seems to be, our goal is not simply to

explain or predict their behaviour, as we might explain or predict the behaviour of rocks or stars. Rather, our goal is to understand why people act the way they do, and in order to understand their actions we need to adopt a different stance — a different methodology — than we find in the natural sciences.”<sup>84</sup>

The American cognitive psychologist Bertram Malle explains that there are additional important distinctions to be made; for example understanding the distinction between intentional and unintentional behaviour. Thus, if Tom were to trip George, George might react very differently depending on whether he perceived Tom’s behaviour to be deliberate, or accidental. Psychologists discuss these approaches under the label of Theory of Mind and Attribution Theory. According to Malle, (Malle 2004, p 9), whether a behaviour is perceived to be intentional or accidental, largely determines our reaction to it,

“The intentionality distinction plays an essential role in the interpretation and social control of behaviour and in the evaluation of morality”.

A detailed account of Attribution Theory is outside the scope of this paper. We will simply note that there is a rich literature across a number of disciplines which explores the psychological mechanisms involved in the intentionality concept, and which supports the view that the two classes of behaviour should not be confused, and should always be dealt with separately. The importance of the intentionality concept can hardly be overstated. As Malle explains it (Malle 2011, p 305),

“Separates the entire realm of behaviour into intentional and unintentional events, guides perceptual and cognitive processes (such as inference and explanation) and influences judgements of praise, blame and moral responsibility... Many linguists count the concept of intentionality as fundamental to the way humans see the world, and linguistic forms of this concept have been found across all known languages”.

In journalistic terms we will acknowledge that a key driver of the need for news, is

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<sup>84</sup> Grimm further distinguishes between different levels of understanding of human behaviour which, in the interests of brevity, need not detain us here.

not merely a need for a list of events and behaviour,<sup>85</sup> but also a need for explanation. This need to dispel puzzlement is often colloquially referred to as a desire to “make sense of the world”. The German philosopher Carl Hempel (Hempel 1965) summarises that this desire is rooted in,

“Sheer intellectual curiosity, in [our] deep and persistent desire to know and to understand [ourselves] and [our] world. So strong, indeed, is this urge that in the absence of more reliable knowledge, myths are often invoked to fill the gap.”

It is important to recognise then, that the human need for information and explanation is not an abstract, intellectual desire. It is an innate, evolved instinct with implications for survival. Understanding why people behave as they do allows us to predict unfamiliar behaviour, and to make interventions to influence, control, or force others to behave - or refrain from behaving - in ways we judge undesirable, dangerous or anti-social. A more detailed discussion of the psychocognitive need for journalism is suggested as an area for future research. Let us simply observe for now that to be satisfying, audiences require journalism that helps them understand how the world works. I will refer to this sort of explanation, when it occurs in journalism, as a news narrative.

The news narrative is the junction at which many of the different conceptual strands we have discussed in this paper meet. By presenting some facts prominently and suppressing others, by simultaneously supplying and withholding information, journalism can shape what audiences believe, and how they understand the world in terms of cause and effect. This in turn will shape what opinions they hold and what decisions they are likely to make.

The news narrative is thus important to a truth-theoretical understanding of journalism. In a sense it lies at the heart of journalism. It is a window concept which allows us to peer inside at other concepts such as; fact, opinion, accuracy, impartiality, human reason and decision making, advocacy, propaganda, deception and manipulation. The news narrative is the instrument on which the melodies of

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<sup>85</sup> Dry facts, randomly assembled and lacking the power to explain, would become the notorious “hyperfactualism” widely scorned (and widely misunderstood) by theorists of TDP.

journalistic truth, and untruth, are played. It is central to our understanding of news and fake news. For these reasons we will consider the news narrative next.

#### **08.05.00 News Narratives. Reviewing the Literature.**

Before proceeding, we should note that TT understands the news narrative quite differently to how it is understood by scholars of TDP. In the literature of academic journalism, the concept of the news narrative is, in fact, curiously understudied. This may largely be because the word “narrative” is fuzzy and used by different academics in different ways. The American journalism scholar Jay Rosen (2018) explains that the concept of the news narrative has been transplanted from literary criticism and has a ghostly, elusive meaning,

"Borrowed from Lit Crit, the term "master narrative" has come into use in journalism here and there. What is it? The story that generates all the other stories... This ghostly matter — of a master narrative instructing the news machine — is not debated in newsrooms the way the day's top stories are. It is not examined at conferences. The ombudsmen do not write columns about it. The pundits don't kick it around."

There is an obvious conceptual peril associated with uncritically transplanting a concept from one discipline to another. As the Israeli political scientist Shaul Shenhav (2006, p 247) rightly cautions, doing so is to invite ambiguity and confusion,

"When a concept is borrowed and transferred from one field to another, the result is usually both the obfuscation of its original meaning and the illumination of previously unseen aspects. This seems to have happened with "narrative," a term that over the years has taken on various meaning."

In other words, TDP is insufficiently sensitive to the distinction between journalistic fact and literary fiction. The truthphobia of TDP allows it to uncritically, and effortlessly, switch between fictive and factual writing. But to TT, doing so is conceptually catastrophic. For example the American writer Edgar

Doctorow (2015) believes,

"There is really no fiction or non-fiction; there is only narrative... one mode of perception has no greater claim on truth than the other."

Here the word narrative being used to mean "one person's version of events". Thus a lie is the same as the truth, and fake news is the same as real news. "It is raining" and "It is not raining" are merely rival narratives, equally devoid of truth value. Using the word this way is to turn it into a tool of aggressive relativism. As Shenhav (2006) observes,

"Following the role of the concept of narrative in postmodern thinking (Lyotard, 1984), it is frequently assumed that narrative methods contain extreme relativist assumptions. These assumptions take on a special importance when it comes to the study of political narratives, because of the implications that radical relativism holds for basic values and ideological axioms."

This is therefore how the word narrative is often used by theorists of TDP.<sup>86</sup> According to this truthophobic usage, the word confers the freedom to offer an unfounded opinion, and the right to have it accepted as fact without the need for any supporting evidence. This is because TDP assumes that there is no such thing as objective reality. As the American theorist Jerome Bruner put it (1991, p 21), there is only,

"A world of "reality" constructed according to narrative principles."

Thus TDP, which is rooted in irrealism, tends to understand the narrative as something which *constructs* reality. TT, which is rooted in realism, sees the narrative as an attempt to *explain* reality. Although there are superficial similarities between the two approaches, there are also, upon closer inspection, like dolphins and sharks, and mushrooms and toadstools, important differences.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> There are connections between the idea of the news narrative and the triptych of ideas referred to by media scholars as; agenda setting, frame analysis and priming. This trio of ideas overlap and are sometimes considered as an ensemble. See; (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007) and (Entman 1993).

<sup>87</sup> For a discussion of the issues see James Aucoin. Aucoin invokes the familiar pieties of truthphobia

### 08.05.01 News Narratives. Current Affairs Fables with Takeaway Messages.

TT holds that a news narrative is a world view which simplifies complex events into easily understood chains of cause and effect. The prime function of the news narrative is to explain fragmented facts, and assemble them into a coherent pattern of cause and effect. It allows audiences to understand *why* something has happened, who is responsible, who is blameworthy and who is innocent. The narrative constructs patterns of oppression and explains who is oppressor and who is oppressed. The narrative simplifies complex events into easily digestible stories about which actors are good and which bad, who is friend and who is foe, who is trustworthy and who is not. The news narrative allows audiences to understand the world and predict what is likely to happen next. It is a working hypothesis about the world. The news narrative is therefore similar to the Greek-British sociologist Yiannis Gabriel's account of it as a "plastic" framework. This framework (Gabriel 2015, p 281) connects diverse incidents, frames events and selects facts in order to explain them,

"The same incident (for example, an accidental fire) may be narrated in such ways that to some it offers evidence of management neglect, to others it indicates organizational resilience in the face of adversity, to yet others it points to worker cunning, and to others it demonstrates bureaucratic stupidity. It is hardly surprising, then, that different storylines frequently compete for ascendancy or acceptance and may find ways of uncomfortably coexisting with each other in the narrative spaces of organizations."

Gabriel's insight is that different news narratives, by choosing their facts selectively, can explain the same incident in different ways. Different narratives present different facts as evidence for different conclusions. It is rather like two doctors arguing for two different diagnoses by pointing to certain symptoms and ignoring others. Or like two advocates in court selectively drawing the jury's

and relativism to argue that non-fiction is no different to fiction, because reality and truth do not exist, "It ignores the mounting evidence from science and philosophy that denies the existence of a verifiable reality that can be described through logical-positivist empiricism and affirms that reality is socially and culturally constructed (Kvale, 1995: 19; Rorty, in Anderson, 1995: 100–6; Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Anderson, 1995: 110–16). Second, it fails to reflect the voluminous evidence that journalism constructs a truth that is based on culturally accepted conventions." (Aucoin 2001). Aucoin, a stranger to irony, cites the "mounting evidence" that there is no such thing as evidence.

attention to different pieces of evidence in order to lead it to different verdicts. To borrow from the American literary theorist Kenneth Burke (Burke 1941, p 296), who was writing about proverbs, news narratives point to the "general behind the particular". The world of the news narrative is a world in which "everything is medicine" – i.e. a diagnosis of what is wrong,

"Here there is no 'realism for its own sake.' There is realism for promise, admonition, solace, vengeance, foretelling, instruction, charting, all for the direct bearing that such acts have upon matters of welfare".

This is where the idea of the news narrative does indeed overlap with literary theory. Here the underlying news narrative begins to resemble a fable with a moral. As the Norwegian academic Roy Krøvel puts it (Krøvel 2011, p92),

"Journalists tend to embed their stories within culturally-bound narratives, recognisable to the audience, so that new information is formulated as new episodes in a longer and familiar story".

It may also be fruitful to consider the news narrative in terms of an advertising message. For example a TV commercial may be highly entertaining and not attempt a "hard sell". Nevertheless it will contain an underlying takeaway message. The message may be that happy, successful, popular and beautiful people are those who use a certain product. Although the message may not be explicitly stated, the audience is subtly prompted to *infer* that they could be happy, successful, popular and beautiful if they used the same product. The advert therefore triggers a process of causal reasoning which suggests *why* the people in the advert are happy and beautiful. The Canadian journalist Monita Rajpal (2010), has described a world in which audiences are bombarded with these underlying messages,

"That is the power of advertising. A good advertisement tells us we need something even before we think we do. It offers us a look into the ideal life, the ideal body, the ideal mate, all wrapped in an ideal world."



Rajpal (ibid) quotes the Director of Strategy at the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, Richard Huntington as saying that good advertising begins with clarity about the takeaway message, and exactly what it is the advertiser wants the audience to think, feel and do,

"Be clear, be straightforward, be believable... You need to know exactly what it is you want people to do".

The news narrative mirrors this process and levers the same psychological mechanisms. Reading a certain news story may subtly prompt the audience to infer processes of cause and effect even when the intended takeaway narrative is not explicitly stated. Thus the news narrative dovetails neatly with the idea of journalistic truth as being comprised of accuracy and impartiality. Impartiality, it will be remembered, is telling the whole truth, and not selectively using facts to mislead and create a false impression. It is therefore often journalistic *partiality* which drives the choice of news narrative.<sup>88</sup>

#### **08.06.00 Evidence-based Opinion, or Opinion-based Evidence?**

If an opinion is founded on information which is journalistically true, then we will say it is an evidence-based opinion. Or, if the evidence points to a particular narrative, then we will say this is an evidence-based narrative.

However when the direction of the chain of inferential reasoning is reversed, then the result is not evidence-based narrative, but narrative-based evidence. In other words, if a news organisation has a prior agenda, or ulterior motive, then it will begin with its favoured narrative, and only report information which supports it. Conflicting evidence will be suppressed. This is the very essence of journalistic partiality and bias. We are now looking into the dark heart of journalism and the mechanisms of fake news. Narrative-based evidence-based is not impartial

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<sup>88</sup> Another way of thinking about the news narrative is in terms of questions and answers. The significance of asking the right journalistic questions, relative to a given problem and a given set of goals, is suggested as a topic for future research. As is the significance of not asking them, or being encouraged to ask different questions. For a discussion of the psychological mechanisms at work (Information Requesting Mechanisms - IRM) see; (Chouinard 2007)

journalism. It is, to a greater or lesser degree, advocacy, prejudice, deception and manipulation.

This process will often be invisible and undetectable to audiences who confine themselves to a single source of news, or to a cartel of like-minded, self-reinforcing sources. Audiences will have no way of knowing what they have not been told. They will be ignorant of their own ignorance. Furthermore, once persuaded by what they have been told, they will remain wedded to this world view and become highly resistant to alternative points of view. Not only will audiences become closed-minded and hostile to dissenting voices, they will actively seek out only information that supports the narrative they believe is correct. This phenomenon is referred to by cognitive psychologists as confirmation bias, and an awareness of it is important to a truth-theoretical understanding how journalism works.

We have hitherto based much of this paper on the, not unreasonable, assumption that the goal of audiences is to seek the truth. But the insight provided by analysis of news narratives and confirmation bias, presents an entirely different, and potentially unsettling, possibility; viz. That audiences do not always seek truth, but instead information to confirm their existing prejudices.

#### **08.07.00 Confirmation Bias. Searching for Truth, or Confirming Prejudice?**

A detailed discussion of cognitive biases lies outside the scope of the paper. We will limit ourselves here to a very brief account of confirmation bias. The American psychologist Raymond Nickerson (1998) neatly explains confirmation bias as being based on the,

“Obvious difference between impartially evaluating evidence in order to come to an unbiased conclusion and building a case to justify a conclusion already drawn. In the first instance one seeks evidence on all sides of a question, evaluates it as objectively as one can, and draws the conclusion that the evidence, in the aggregate, seems to dictate. In the second, one selectively gathers, or gives undue weight to, evidence that supports one's position while neglecting to gather, or discounting, evidence that would tell against it.”

According to Nickerson (ibid), research shows people seek out information which confirms their existing viewpoint, and avoid information which might contradict it,

“People tend to seek information that they consider supportive of favoured hypotheses or existing beliefs and to interpret information in ways that are partial to those hypotheses or beliefs.”

The American psychologist Jonathan Baron describes confirmation bias, and a related predisposition known as “myside bias”, as examples of “irrational belief persistence”. These Baron writes (Baron 2000, p 195), are a “major source of human folly”,

“People tend not to look for evidence against what they favour, and, when they find it anyway, they tend to ignore it... As a result of these biases, incorrect beliefs are slow to change, and they can even become stronger when they ought to become weaker.”

Confirmation and myside biases have long been recognised as serious human frailties. For example Francis Bacon writing in 1690 observed (Bacon 1863 (1690)),

“The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects.”

In a journalistic context this means producing information to reinforce a pre-existing point of view. As Lippmann cynically, but accurately, observed (1920, p 14), what's important about a lie is not that its a lie, but that it's the lie the audience wants to hear,

"If I lie in a lawsuit involving the fate of my neighbour's cow, I can go to jail. But if I lie to a million readers in a matter involving war and peace, I can lie my head off, and, if I choose the right series of lies... the more popular I should be".

Recent research indicates that cognitive biases have little, if anything, to do with intelligence. The Canadian psychologist Keith Stanovich distinguishes between rational thinking and intelligence, and points out the disconcerting fact that even highly intelligent people may find themselves thinking irrationally, driven by instinct and emotion, rather than by cold, hard logic (Stanovich, West and Toplak 2013, p 263),

"Intelligence tests measure many important things about thinking, but they do not directly assess the degree of rationality of thought. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that intelligence is quite weakly related to at least some aspects of rational thought. Myside bias turns out to be an aspect of rational thought that, compared with others, is particularly unrelated to intelligence."

#### **08.08.00 The Death and Rebirth of the News Narrative.**

One reason for the dearth of academic literature on news narratives is that the truthphobia of TDP shuns the framework of rationality which supports it. For example, the influential French thinker Jean-François Lyotard, specifically targetted the notion of narratives in his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard correctly understood narratives to be the children of processes of rational cause and effect. In other words, a narrative is the explanatory conclusion drawn from the available evidence in any given case. Lyotard's book inveighed against reason, rationality and truth asserting they were merely "the Enlightenment narrative", and, as such, were now obsolete (Lyotard 1984, p3),

"Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the post-industrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age. This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s."

Lyotard wrote that reason, reality and truth were historically contingent products of the modern age which had invented them as,

"A discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status".

Lyotard claimed that the modern age was now over, and a new postmodern era had begun. Therefore reason, reality and truth no longer applied. It followed logically from this that narratives, which were the fruits of reason, also no longer applied and should be cast onto the scrapheap of intellectual history (op cit, p xxv),

"I define postmodern as incredulity toward meta-narratives... where after the meta-narratives, can legitimacy reside? The operativity criterion is technological; it has no relevance for judging what is true or just."

Lyotard (p 37-38) reasoned that if there were neither any facts, nor any process of reasoning; then, logically, there could be no explanation of cause and effect. He concluded that,

"The grand narrative has lost its credibility... Anytime we go searching for causes in this way we are bound to be disappointed."

A detailed analysis of Lyotard's polemic is not possible here. We will content ourselves with repeating the observation that there is something deliciously self-defeating and intellectually pointless in any attempt to construct a rational argument to support the view that rational arguments are invalid. In attempting this feat Lyotard immediately condemns his own arguments. He saws off the branch on which he is sitting by arguing that his own argument is illegitimate. Lyotard's later verdict on own book was commendably candid. He admitted (Davis 2003, p66),

"It's simply the worst of my books, they're almost all bad, but that one's the worst".

Adding gloomily (ibid),

"I made up stories, I referred to a quantity of books I'd never read, apparently it impressed people, it's all a bit of a parody".

Despite its hoaxical origins, Lyotard's *Post Modern Condition* established itself as a much-cited, canonical text of TDP. The noteworthy point in the context of academic journalism, is that news narratives, viewed from the perspective of TDP, are unfashionable and thus a neglected field of study. TT restores the concept of the narrative as an explanatory device with the power to reveal patterns of causation, and explain why things happen. Because of these insights, TT can be used as a methodology for content analysis. It is the practical application of TT as a methodological approach which we will consider next.

#### **08.08.01 Truth Theory as a Micro Research Methodology.**

As we have seen, TDP privileges theory over observation of reality, and assumes that audiences are strongly influenced by media content. It is deterministic, and asserts that people's beliefs are constructed for them by social forces. TDP resists the view that audiences consist of autonomous, rational individuals who are able to respond thoughtfully to media content. TDP is truthophobic and rejects epistemic considerations. It rejects the view that audiences are seeking reliable, true information on which to base their opinions and decisions. It looks only for a sociological explanation of the function of news, and finds it in theories of political propaganda.

Because of these assumptions, TDP tends to be unenthusiastic about audience research. Instead, media researchers of TDP favour methodologies such as critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA examines media texts with the aim of finding evidence to confirm pre-existing ideological assumptions. Furthermore, even when not explicitly stated, the underlying linguistic assumptions of CDA are those of Saussurean semiotics which are founded on an obsolete, code-based misunderstanding of linguistics. The American scholar Klaus Krippendorff (2004, p 17) describes the research methodologies of TDP as involving,

"The re-articulation (interpretation) of given texts into new (analytical, deconstructive, emancipatory, or critical) narratives that are accepted within particular scholarly communities".

In other words the research methodologies of TDP tend to be forms of ideologically motivate research (IMR). This, it may be argued, has led to a stagnation in audience research over the last sixty years. Although some researchers in Journalism Studies continue to operate outside of the TDP and use empirical quantitative and qualitative methodologies,<sup>89</sup> what was once a vibrant, empirical research field is today usually confined within a limited set of content analysis and ethnographic approaches.

TT challenges the research assumptions of TDP. Drawing on modern cognitive psychology, TT holds that human decision making and opinion forming is highly complex. TT asserts that different people make different decisions at different times, in different situations and depending on numerous rational and a-rational criteria. However, underpinning everything, is the availability of trustworthy information. Hence TT acknowledges mechanisms of deception and manipulation, and the epistemic concept that information may be true or untrue. TT sees decision making as an imperfect task in the face of uncertainty.

If there has been methodological stagnation within Journalism Studies, inspiration may perhaps be found in other disciplines. For example researchers in the field of marketing have developed new qualitative approaches which the industry refers to as the Barcelona Principles. The Barcelona Principles acknowledge that human beings are not homogeneous and robotic, and that communication is subtle and nuanced. In the words of the psychologist Bertram Malle (2019, p 19) that,

"In many situations people make graded, sophisticated judgments".

This acknowledgement of complexity suggests that media research methodologies

<sup>89</sup> For an example see a recent study of BBC Radio 5 Live's news output by Tim Luckhurst, Ben Cocking and their colleagues (Luckhurst et al, 2019).

should be equally flexible and responsive. It is an error to think that one size fits all. This common sense approach was suggested by the German media theorist Siegfried Kracauer (1952) who pointed out that human communication is organic; neither qualitative nor quantitative, but both,

"It should be emphasized that the terms "qualitative analysis" and "quantitative analysis" do not refer to radically different approaches. Quantitative analysis includes qualitative aspects, for it both originates and culminates in qualitative considerations. On the other hand, qualitative analysis proper often requires quantification in the interest of exhaustive treatment. Far from being strict alternatives the two approaches actually overlap."

Irving Janis, and his colleague Raymond Fadner (Janis & Fadner 1943), also proposed an approach to evaluation of media bias based on fusing qualitative and quantitative indicators into a single "coefficient of imbalance". This involved qualitative assessment of whether coverage was positive, negative or neutral, combined with a statistical measurement of which predominated. It should be noted that these empirical, analytical tools are unavailable to TDP because of its unrealistic and truthophobic assumptions. The realism of TT permits the return of positivistic, common-sense methodologies, and allows media researchers to escape the stagnation imposed by the dogmas of TDP.

We should note that in employing these non-doctrinaire, pragmatic approaches, the Barcelona Principles are therefore principles, not methodologies. They allow great flexibility and choice in choosing methodologies either singly, or in combination. Another insight from the Barcelona Principles is the distinction between measurement of journalistic output, and the *evaluation* of impact, or outcome. This is for example the distinction between what a news organisation reports, and how audiences react to the report. While output is usually measurable, outcomes may, or may not, be. As the marketing analyst Ann Feeney (Feeney, 2014) explains,

"Outcomes can be either beliefs, such as a positive perception of a person or organization, or actions, such as purchasing, advocating, contributing, or voting."



However while actions, such as voting, may be measurable, the formation, or modification of beliefs is more elusive. Surveys of public opinion, though valuable, are expensive and error prone. Fortunately the flexibility afforded by the Barcelona Principles frees media researchers from the daunting task of measuring audience belief. Instead, where it is appropriate, researchers can simply try to evaluate it. As Feeney (ibid) points out,

"We can't yet get into the public's collective head and see what's going on there between the moments somebody is exposed to a message and an opinion is shaped, reinforced, revised, or discarded."

The consequence of these insights is to allow the development of informal, micro methodologies tailored to specific tasks. For example, in the present case, the methodology adopted will be content analysis of the most prominent news coverage produced by *The Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* relating to a single news story over a period of a few days. It will not be, nor is it intended to be, a meticulous statistical survey of every word and sentence printed. The aim is to attempt to detect if news narratives are present. This can be done by simply reading the journalism and making a reasonable judgement.

The importance of the judgement being reasonable is key. It is this "disciplined subjectivity" which Kracauer rightly observes is a safeguard to subjective lawlessness and bias. This is not to suggest that this micro methodology is better than any other, it is merely to defend the use of an informal, impressionistic approach in this case. As Kracauer explains (p 640) audiences respond impressionistically to journalistic texts and are sensitive to the way journalism vibrates with "indefinite effects". Thus it is not wrong for media researchers to respond in the same way,

"Qualitative analysis is frankly and resolutely impressionistic. And it is precisely because of its resolute impressionism, that qualitative analysis may attain to an accuracy which quantitative techniques, with their undercurrent of impressionistic short cuts, cannot hope to achieve."

In other words, journalism affects the minds and emotions of audiences by constructing news narratives which identify patterns of cause and effect, and explain them. The narratives, explicitly or otherwise, lead their audiences to conclusions about motive, morality and human behaviour. The existence of these subterranean narratives can be revealed by comparing how different news organisations construct different news narratives. In summary, audiences react impressionistically and subjectively to journalism. It is therefore not illegitimate for media researchers to place themselves in the shoes of the audience and attempt to detect, qualitatively, the main takeaway messages; i.e. the news narratives which the output triggers.<sup>90</sup>

This then is the methodological approach which will be employed here. It is a Truth Theoretical methodology. It is intended to reveal the news narratives - the explanations of cause and effect and of human behaviour - which accompany factual news reporting. It is a methodology which rescues the concept of human agency and intentionality. It is therefore eminently psychologically plausible. As Malle notes (2004, p 26),

"Through behaviour explanations, people find meaning in social behaviour, form impressions, and influence other people's impressions; through behaviour explanations, they blame and praise... through these explanations, they tie together social events into narratives."

Let us now consider a case study from recent journalism praxis. We will attempt to illustrate how TT can help scholars and audiences understand how journalism works and where journalistic truth lies. While TDP sees all narratives as epistemically equal, TT does not. TT offers a micro methodology for arranging narratives into a hierarchy of credibility.

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<sup>90</sup> The German communications theorists Jörg Matthes and Matthias Kohring (2008) provide a useful discussion of methodologies used in analysing media frames. They are troubled by the problem of subjectivity and advise caution.

### **08.09.00 Case Study. News Narratives in Practice. The Pittsburgh Massacre.**

On the morning of 27<sup>th</sup> October 2018, 46 year old Robert Bowers walked into the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and opened fire with a self-loading rifle and three pistols. He killed eleven people and wounded six in the deadliest attack on Jews in the history of the United States. The fact that the massacre took place just ten days before the US congressional mid-term elections ensured that it rapidly became politicised.

The fifth estate of social media quickly erupted into a frenzy of inter-tribal hustling and manoeuvring, as commentators sought to take control of the narrative, show cause and effect, apportion and deflect blame to suit their ideological and political positions. These patterns were largely replicated by the mainstream media. Two main, competing news narratives quickly appeared.<sup>91</sup> Nested within these narratives it is possible to detect other, imbricating, sub-narratives. The two main narratives were;

#### **Narrative A. Hate, Intolerance and Anti-Semitism are caused by right-wing views.**

Narrative A states that the murders were a consequence of President Trump's rhetoric. Trump is responsible for dividing American society and fuelling hate. Trump, and those who share his abhorrent views, have encouraged anti-Semitism, white supremacism, and far right extremism. It is the right-wing world view leads to hate and, ultimately, to violence. This explains why the massacre occurred.

#### **Example of Narrative A.**

*The Guardian* (Smith 2018) summarised Narrative A in an article on 29<sup>th</sup> October,

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<sup>91</sup> Describing these narratives is an art not a science. Because of the qualitative, impressionistic methodology employed, readers are at liberty to make their own judgements based on the evidence. It is certainly possible to identify other minor sub-narratives in the media coverage, such as attributing blame to the availability of firearms, or, alternatively, to the lack of armed guards at the synagogue. These minor sub-narratives will not be considered here.

"Donald Trump has fuelled a climate of hatred in general and anti-Semitism in particular, with the Republican party acting as his enabler, experts warned on Monday."

**Narrative B. Hate, Intolerance and Anti-Semitism are caused by left-wing and Islamist views.**

Narrative B states that the murders were a consequence of an unholy alliance of fashionable, left-wing and Islamist views. In this view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is re-written as a morality play in which righteous Palestinian victims are oppressed by their Jewish tormentors. This biased view calls for the destruction of Israel, and promotes anti-Semitism thinly disguised as anti-Zionism. It is the modern face of an ancient tribal hatred which demonises Jews. It fuels anti-Semitism on both the left and the right. This explains why the massacre occurred.

**Example of Narrative B.**

The Conservative blog site *Liberty Unyielding* (Dyer 2018) described Narrative B in a post on 28<sup>th</sup> October, accusing those who promote Narrative A of hypocrisy,

"According to attitudes adopted in many cases at the institutional level (especially in academia and the media), Robert Bowers is a vicious anti-Semite when he expresses hatred of Jews, but radical Islamists and Palestinian Arabs are not, when they express the same sentiments. The institutions - government, academia, the media - aren't united against hate at all. The institutions treat the same hatreds differently depending on where they are coming from, and who is expressing them. Indeed, hatred against certain groups is in some cases lauded as the proper response to things we don't like."

A number of sub-narratives also emerged such as;

### **Sub-narrative C. Blaming the Victims for the Crime.<sup>92</sup>**

Sub-narrative C states that the murders were a consequence of Israel's unjust treatment of the Palestinians. Zionism is a form of oppression and Jews are racists. It is not surprising therefore that there is widespread anti-Semitism. The Jews are responsible for their own persecution. This explains why the massacre occurred.

**Example of Sub-Narrative C.** The former Liberal-Democrat MP, Baroness Jenny Tonge (Forrest 2018) expressed Narrative C when she posted on Facebook saying,

“Absolutely appalling and a criminal act, but does it ever occur to Bibi and the present Israeli government that it’s [sic] actions against Palestinians may be reigniting antisemitism?”

### **Sub-narrative D. Lethal Journalism.**

Sub-narrative D (which overlaps with B, and is the opposite of C) states that the murders were a consequence of the media's long-running anti-Israel rhetoric. The mainstream media is responsible for fuelling anti-Semitism disguised as “anti-Zionism”. This toxic and biased journalism misleads by routinely reporting legitimate Israeli as oppression. Thus biased journalism drives anti-Semitism on both the left and the right. This explains why the massacre occurred.

### **Example of Sub-narrative D.**

The concept of “lethal journalism”<sup>93</sup> has been explained by the American academic and commentator Richard Landes (2017) who writes,

“The Times here has committed a classic case of what I call “lethal journalism,” running Palestinian war propaganda — a projection of their own society’s evils

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<sup>92</sup> Sub-narrative C is the narrative criticised by Narrative B.

<sup>93</sup> For an example of lethal journalism, see the *Guardian's* editorial, "Killing with Impunity, Lying without Consequence?" (Guardian Killing 2019), and the fact-checking response from UK Media Watch (Levick 2019) which accuses The Guardian Media Group of a "fanatical hostility towards Israel."

onto the Israelis in order to mobilize hatred and desire for revenge — as credible news... What we get is “own-goal” journalism of the most deranged kind: running jihadi propaganda as news to the infidel audiences the jihadis target. Surely that’s not the way a free and responsible press should behave.”<sup>94</sup>

Having catalogued the main news narratives, let us see how two major UK newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, covered the story. We will examine to what extent coverage was driven by evidence or narrative.

### **08.09.01 The Battle of the Narratives. Case Study.**

On 29<sup>th</sup> October, *The Guardian* (print edition) mentioned the story on its front page, and then devoted the whole of page 4 to it. In contrast the Telegraph did not mention the story on its front page and ran the story only on page 15 in its 'world news' section where it devoted two thirds of the page to it. There are various editorial reasons why a newspaper might chose to give, or withhold, prominence to a story. A truth-theoretical approach will note that the disparity might suggest that *The Guardian* sees the story as a useful opportunity to promote a friendly narrative, whereas *The Telegraph* does not. Conversely, the decision to “bury the lede”<sup>95</sup> might be seen as evidence that a particular story contradicts, or embarrasses a preferred narrative. Both papers reported the main facts about what happened, for example both papers reported that after his arrest Bowers explained to police, “They’re committing genocide to my people. I just want to kill Jews.”

### **08.09.02 The Guardian. Promoting Narrative A.**

While both newspapers reported the salient facts of the massacre, *The Guardian* included in its main news report opinion disguised as factual reporting. The opinion explicitly implied a chain of cause and effect linking “physical violence” and “racial division” to President Trump. Quoting anonymous “critics of Trump”,

<sup>94</sup> Landes was writing prior to the Pittsburgh massacre.

<sup>95</sup> Hiding a news story so it receives the minimum of attention. It allows a news organisation to claim it is not ignoring the story, while at the same time sending a message to audiences that the story is unimportant. It is a technique by which information is journalistically suppressed.

the newspaper's main report (Durkin and Gentile 2018) told its readers,

“Critics of Trump have accused the president of stoking racial division and nationalism, as well as praising physical violence”.

The newspaper (ibid) also reported the opinion of worshippers,

“Stephen Cohen, co-president of New Light Congregation, blamed the political climate for the shooting. 'When you spew hate speech, people act on it. Very simple. And this is the result. A lot of people dead. Senselessly'. Critics of Trump have accused the president of stoking racial division and nationalism, as well as praising physical violence”.

Here *The Guardian*, by reporting other peoples' opinion as fact, and by placing this in the midst of its factual reporting, is producing a confusing mosaic of fact and opinion, or pseudo-fact.<sup>96</sup> From a semantic point of view, these passages function as discourse markers. They are “stage directions” which tell readers how they should understand the news story. Discourse markers help spell-out the take-away message, or underlying news narrative. The *Guardian's* use of discourse markers does considerable violence to C.P. Scott's doctrine of not polluting the supply of fact with opinion. A truth-theorist will be alert to the appearance of psuedo-fact in the middle of a factual news report. For the truth theorist, discourse markers are a sign that the purveyor of the information has a partisan motive.

Placed prominently alongside its main news report, *The Guardian* also printed an op ed 'analysis' by Harriet Sherwood (Sherwood 2018). This left readers in no doubt that the *Guardian's* narrative is that anti-Semitism is an evil which comes only from the right-wing of politics and is nurtured, and nourished by the Trump presidency. Under the headline,

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<sup>96</sup> I will use the term “pseudo-fact” to refer to presenting opinions as fact. Thus, for example, a survey might find that 75% of respondents believe Brand X is best. These opinions could then be reported as fact. A headline might, for example read “Revealed; Brand X is best”. The pseudo-fact is therefore a logical fallacy which blurs the distinction between what people believe to be true, and the truth of what they believe.

“Deadly assault reflects changing US culture, but also mirrors global rise of antisemitism”.

Sherwood (ibid) cited factual, statistical evidence from the Anti-Defamation League to support Narrative A,

“Some blame the rise in hate speech and hate crime on a culture under Donald Trump’s leadership in which people are emboldened to express prejudice and hatred... The number of anti-Semitic incidents across the US as a whole rose 57% in 2017, according to an audit by the Anti-Defamation League.”

What is noteworthy is the juxtaposition of “Donald Trump’s leadership”, with the statistics showing a 57% rise in anti-Semitic incidents. The obvious implication being that there is a *causal relationship* between the Trump presidency and anti-Semitic “incidents”. *The Guardian* does not mention, or consider, any alternative cause of anti-Semitism. Only a single explanatory narrative is offered; Narrative A.

TT holds that journalistic accuracy can be assessed by fact-checking; i.e. scrutinising the evidence to establish whether what is being reported corresponds to, or misrepresents, reality. How accurately then, has the *Guardian* reported the facts, and in particular the statistical evidence?

A corrective to the *Guardian's* interpretation of the statistics was published the following day in an article by the legal scholar David Bernstein, in the Jewish news magazine *Tablet*. According to Bernstein, an attentive reading of the ADL statistics does not support the view that violent anti-Semitism is worsening under the Trump presidency. According to Bernstein (Bernstein 2018) it is decreasing. Nor do the statistics support the view of Narrative A, that anti-Semitism comes only from the political right. Bernstein (Bernstein 2018) writes,

“Despite showing a 57 percent increase in incidents overall, from 1,267 to 1,986, the ADL study shows a 47 percent decrease in physical assaults, from 37 to 19. This is obviously inconsistent with the meme that 2017 saw a surge in violent anti-Semitism. Physical assaults are also the most objective sort of incident to



document, which adds to concerns about the robustness of the rest of the data.

Bernstein's conclusion (ibid) is that much reporting of the massacre has been partisan and an exercise in selectively using facts in a misleading way,

"I have no desire to let Trump off the hook for his very real flaws, and I am not nor have I been a Trump supporter or apologist. But the Jewish community's assessment of the dangers of anti-Semitism should be based on documented facts, not ideology, emotion, partisanship, or panic."

Bernstein's analysis (ibid) is also noteworthy in that it draws attention to the near doubling of anti-Semitic incidents "in schools and on college campuses". However Bernstein pertinently asks how many of these incidents were the product of "leftist anti-Israel activism". *The Guardian* pointedly does not ask this question.

For good measure, Sherwood ends her op-Ed with another, damning statistical salvo sourced from ADL statistics,

"An ADL poll last year found that a third of respondents thought the US president held antisemitic views. Almost two-thirds thought he was anti-Muslim, and just over half that he was anti-Latino. A similar percentage thought he was racist."

Here *The Guardian* is seamlessly switching from fact to pseudo-fact. It presents survey results as evidence for the narrative that anti-Semitism is merely one form of racism indistinguishable from Islamophobia and anti-Latino prejudice, and that all of these racisms are encouraged by Donald Trump and his white supremacist supporters. However, once again, fact-checking reveals a more nuanced picture. *The Guardian* is referring here to poll data from additional research carried out during (but not contained in) the *ADL Global 100 Survey* (ADL. 2018). What is revealing is that the survey contains strong evidence which undermines Narrative A, and in fact supports Narrative B.

The ADL survey does not support Narrative A's view that "Muslims, migrants and Jews" share a cohesive comradeship in which they are "interchangeably"

oppressed by pervasive structures of white oppression. On the contrary, the survey (ibid) points out that,

“Muslims are more likely to harbour anti-Semitic views than members of other religions.”

The survey found that globally, 49% of Muslims were likely to hate Jews, compared to 24% of Christians. The survey also noted that Middle Eastern/North African Countries (MENA) are by far the most anti-Semitic, with 74% of the MENA population holding anti Jewish views compared to 19% in USA. The figures for American Muslims' attitudes also revealed substantial racial prejudice. However the ADL press release explained, in mitigation, that American Muslims were less likely to hold racist views than their European co-religionists (ADL. 2017),

"Thirty-four (34) percent of American Muslims hold anti-Semitic views, but that is far lower than Muslims in Europe, where 55 percent hold these views, and the Middle East/North Africa, where 75 percent hold anti-Semitic views."

And there is further uncomfortable evidence, hostile to Narrative A, prominently presented by the ADL that in the US, Hispanics and African Americans are are *more* likely to hold anti-Semitic views than white people. *The Guardian* chose not to report ADL figures which suggest 31% of Hispanics, and 23% of African-Americans (as opposed to 14% of the general population) hold such views. The ADL report (ADL and Marttila Strategies. 2016) also noted that these demographic segments are the fastest growing in the USA. The report's executive summary flagged this as a particular anxiety,

"This population increase of the most anti -Semitic cohorts also means that it will be an ongoing challenge to reduce overall anti-Semitic propensities"

Obviously no news organisation can report everything and *The Guardian* is obliged to make editorial decisions. However it is hard to avoid the conclusion that *The Guardian*, in this case, is selectively reporting ADL statistics which support Narrative A, while wilfully omitting important statistics which would undermine

Narrative A and support Narrative B.

Perhaps the single most striking characteristic of *The Guardian's* reporting is the amount of space it devotes to the results of the survey. Surveys of opinion do not represent anything factual; other than the fact that people hold opinions. The survey data is then, merely a form of rumour or hearsay. The survey results tell us nothing at all about the events of October 27th. They do not, nor can they, answer any of the five great questions of journalism; who? what? where? when? and how? The reporting of the survey results is intended to answer only the question *why?*

From a truth-theoretical perspective then, *The Guardian's* reporting appears to be heavily narrative-led. It does not report facts impartially. There is strong evidence to suggest that *The Guardian*, on this occasion, has selectively quoted statistics to bolster Narrative A. *The Guardian* has also freely mixed fact and opinion – to manufacture pseudo-facts. From a truth-theoretical perspective the *Guardian's* news coverage, on this occasion, exhibits clear signs of advocacy and partiality.

However we should be mindful that there is no obligation for newspapers in the UK to be impartial. Indeed the whole point of the *Guardian*, it may be argued, is that it is *not* impartial. Readers turn to *The Guardian* for a left-leaning world view, and for evidence to confirm their political convictions. *The Guardian* is thus supplying what its customers demand; a selective reading of events and a news narrative which justifies their pre-existing position. Thus, it may be argued, the goal *The Guardian* aspires to, is not journalistic truth, but to satisfy the commercial demand for left-leaning, ideologically-driven news and advocacy.

### **08.09.03 The Daily Telegraph. Impartially in favour of Narrative B.**

Let us turn to *The Daily Telegraph*. We have already noted that the *Telegraph's* coverage was less extensive and more muted, with the story appearing only on page 15 in the World News section. The main news story was written by Rob Crilly and largely confined itself to factual reporting. It is difficult to discern any obvious narrative, which, for a truth-theoretical approach is a virtue. For example *The*

*Telegraph* (Crilly 2018) does report parishioner's opinions and concerns, but does so in a neutral, ambiguous way,

“What’s my country coming to,” asked one local, who asked to remain anonymous so she could speak more freely. “There’s something about the climate now. “Maybe there were always people like this but there’s something allowing them to act out.”

It is not clear from this interview *why* the political climate may have changed. Readers are therefore free to interpret this as evidence for Narrative A, or Evidence B, or neither. *The Telegraph* (ibid) also includes some factual context,

“The attack came a day after a man was arrested on suspicion of sending bombs in the mail to mostly Democrats, including former President Barack Obama and George Soros, the billionaire philanthropist, ahead of next week’s divisive congressional elections”.

The phrase “came a day after” is a discourse marker which journalists frequently use to imply a chain of cause and effect, or the existence of a pattern. Although its literal meaning is to explain the chronological order in which events occurred, its connotative meaning is to imply that events are connected and did not occur randomly. It is an expression of the well-known logical fallacy known as the *Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc*, or *Post Hoc* fallacy which suggest that, because X follows Y, X was *caused* by Y. When a news report identifies a chain of causation in this way it can be indicative of the presence of a news narrative. Here *The Telegraph*, is pointing out that two different people with extreme right wing views have recently engaged in politically, or racially-inspired, violence. This might be evidence for Narrative A, or a version of it. However *The Telegraph* stops short of drawing any explicit conclusion. It is difficult therefore, on the evidence, to argue that *The Telegraph* is promoting any particular narrative. It seems more accurate to say that *The Telegraph* is reporting in a balanced way, allowing the facts to speak for themselves, and allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. This is not to say that *The Telegraph* does not wish to promote a narrative, only that it has been scrupulous in keeping the narrative out of its factual news reporting.

It is in an op-Ed that *The Telegraph* reveals its narrative, editorial, stance. The op-Ed is printed, not on a news page, but on the paper's leader/letters page. It is a degree of separation of which C.P. Scott would approve. Under the headline, "Banning guns would not make American safer", Charles Moore (Moore 2018) opined,

"There are few places in the world where Jews feel absolutely secure from attack either from hard-Right anti-Semites or - more commonly - from Islamist fanatics".

Here Moore is introducing a version of Narrative B, the view that anti-Jewish hatred is not the sole preserve of the political right. Regular *Telegraph* readers will be aware that Moore is an outspoken critic of militant Islamism, writing for example in 2016 (Moore 2016),

"Islamism is a most clear and determined attack on our civilisation, so this must be recognised, not evaded. Its adherents declaredly hate freedom, democracy, women's rights, Judaism and Christianity. They entirely deny the rights of anyone (not least fellow Muslims) who do not share their views. They recognise no law except sharia."

Is it possible to fact-check Moore's assertion that,

"There are few places in the world where Jews feel absolutely secure from attack either from hard-Right anti-Semites or - more commonly - from Islamist fanatics".

The answer is no. Because Moore's op-Ed does not purport to be a simple statement of fact. Moore's carefully worded claim is what grammarians refer to as a compound-complex sentence, and it is not necessarily either true or false. Moore's claim is therefore an opinion. And the correct response to an opinion, should one wish to do so, is simply to disagree with it. If one is not content to agree to disagree, then the next stage would be to attempt to persuade Moore to alter his opinion. This is of course not the same thing as attempting to persuade Moore to alter his facts.<sup>97</sup> TT holds that this is best done through reasoned

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<sup>97</sup> There is a rich literature within cognitive psychology relating to the mechanics of belief change,

argument supported by evidence. By demonstrating that Moore's reasoning is either invalid, or based on false premises, (or both), TT holds it will be possible to rebut Moore's arguments. The person seeking to do this will, of course, also have to defend their own opinion using the same tools and techniques. It is during the course of this dialectic process that, according to TT, truth is most likely to reveal itself.

Because *The Telegraph's* coverage of 29<sup>th</sup> October was so brief, let us continue also consider its coverage on the following day. It was on 30<sup>th</sup> October that *The Telegraph* began to show more appetite for pushing Narrative B. In its print edition (Daily Telegraph Reporter. 2018) the paper reported that in Britain a,

“Jewish peer's grandchildren go to school with a guard.”

The Telegraph (ibid) linked this fear of racial violence in Britain to events in Pittsburgh. Lord Winston, the paper explained,

“Stressed the need to tackle hate speech as peers condemned the attack that killed eight men and three women in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on Saturday”.

Here *The Telegraph*, by using the connective discourse marker “as”, is suggesting that lethal anti-Jewish violence is caused by “hate speech”. Thus far the paper seems to be in agreement with the *Guardian*. However *The Telegraph* then draws attention to a detail which *the Guardian* chooses not to. This is the gunman's own explanation for his behaviour. *The Telegraph* (ibid) reports that Bowers explained his motive was to punish Jews for “committing genocide” and that he had,

“Allegedly told officers that Jews were committing genocide and he wanted them all to die”.

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attitude change and persuasion. Understanding journalism in this context is suggested as a possible future areas of research. The American psychologist Michael B Wolfe summarises, "Research on belief change after reading argumentative texts suggests that change is inconsistent and not fully understood. People do sometimes change beliefs after reading belief inconsistent texts... Other studies show no evidence of belief change and suggest that people engage in a variety of strategies to maintain their current beliefs." (Wolfe and Williams 2018)

*The Telegraph* follows this immediately (ibid) with the following,

“There was also criticism in the House of Lords of Baroness Tonge, who has been accused of anti-Semitism after a social media post in which she suggested the actions of the Israeli government were to blame for the synagogue massacre”.<sup>98</sup>

By juxtaposing Baroness Tonge's accusation with Bower's accusation of genocide, *The Telegraph* has reached its point of departure from Narrative A. The paper is now implying that the hate speech responsible for the massacre is left-wing/Islamic hate speech, not hate speech of the political right. This is Narrative B. Although the paper has stated its narrative very subtly, regular readers of the *Telegraph* might recall an August 2018 article (Yorke 2018) in which the paper reported that Labour's shadow chancellor John McDonnell had accused Israel of genocide,

"John McDonnell claimed Israel was attempting to carry out “genocide” against the Palestinians and he shared a platform with a woman who described Jews as the “chief financiers” of the slave trade... a previously unseen video emerged in which he accused the Israeli government of ethnic cleansing."

In this earlier article, Narrative B is more clearly stated. It is the “wild claims” of the political left that stirs anti-Jewish hatred. According to Narrative B, anti-Semitism is not merely one of many interchangeable racisms caused by capitalism, and white supremacism, it is a unique hatred echoing down the ages which has reinvented itself and today found respectability in modern, Western democracies in the form of the demonisation and libelling of the state of Israel. It is possible to fact-check the accusation of genocide. According to the website of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2017), the Palestinian population increased from 2,783,084 in 1997, to 4,733,357 in 2017. Whatever the rights, wrongs, and inhumanities of the long-running Arab-Israeli conflict, there is therefore no evidence that the Israelis are committing, or attempting to commit, genocide. As the *Spectator* put it (Daisley 2018),

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<sup>98</sup> As previously noted, Baroness Tonge had written on Facebook, “Absolutely appalling and a criminal act, but does it ever occur to Bibi and the present Israeli government that it’s actions against Palestinians may be reigniting antisemitism?” She later deleted her post.

"If the Israelis are pursuing a Palestinian genocide, they are not very good at it... If anything, Zionism has contributed to the sustainability of a Palestinian population in the territories by delivering in Israel an economic powerhouse whose benefits have spread far beyond the Jewish people."

*The Telegraph* is of course not suggesting that the Pittsburgh gunman was directly inspired by the words of John McDonnell or Baroness Tonge, merely that it is this *type* of fashionable left-wing, anti-Israel rhetoric in the mainstream media that is culpable.

#### **08.10.00 TT vs TDP. Journalistic Truth vs Advocacy Journalism.**

What then is the verdict of TT on our case study? TT defines journalistic truth as a combination of accuracy and impartiality. Both newspapers appear to have reported the facts accurately in equal measure. However there is ample evidence to suggest that, in this case, *The Guardian* has performed less well than the *Daily Telegraph* in terms of impartiality. Therefore, according to the criteria of TT, we are entitled to conclude that, on this occasion, the *Telegraph's* journalism is *better* than *The Guardian's*. It is better because it is more journalistically truthful. *The Guardian's* evident desire to promote Narrative A, as revealed by our truth-theoretical methodology, has intruded into its factual reporting in ways that *The Telegraph's* desire to promote Narrative B has not.<sup>99</sup>

It is noteworthy that the verdict of TDP would be the exact opposite of that reached via a truth-theoretical approach. TDP privileges *arete* over *aletheia* – doing what is politically and ethically good over searching for truth. For example the German media academic Christian Fuchs, writing in 2018 within TDP and the tradition of critical theory, argues that capitalism is in crisis. Fuchs (Fuchs 2018) notes that, "Ideologies are semiotic structures that justify domination" and argues that the role of good journalism is to, "contest, oppose and struggle against [anti-socialist] ideologies".

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<sup>99</sup> I am not suggesting that this case study indicates a general pattern. It is a brief analysis of a single case and no inference should be drawn about whether *The Guardian* is generally more or less truthful than *The Daily Telegraph*. For evidence of narrative-driven coverage at *The Daily Telegraph*, see Appendix B.



"The strengthening of right-wing extremism has resulted in various forms of far-right ideology and nationalism online... only social struggles can develop potentials of communications and society that communalise both society and the media so that social media and society can become truly social."

Thus for TDP, partiality is a virtue. Consequently the verdict of TDP on our case study would be that the *Guardian's* journalism is better than the *Telegraph's* precisely because it is less impartial, and because it wilfully intrudes Narrative A into its factual reporting. This is one way of seeing the difference between TT and TDP. For TT the point of journalism is to describe the world and help audiences understand it. For TDP the point is not to describe the world, but to change it. For TDP good journalism is advocacy journalism. Advocacy journalism, in the words of the American activist Dave Berman (2004) should abandon any pretence of impartiality because it is an outdated principle,

"The classic tenets of journalism call for objectivity and neutrality. These are antiquated principles no longer universally observed... We must absolutely not feel bound by them. If we are ever to create meaningful change, advocacy journalism will be the single most crucial element to enable the necessary organizing."

Unlike TDP, TT rejects this inversion of goals. Consequently TT sees advocacy journalism as a pseudo-journalism. Advocacy journalism brings to mind the scathing verdict of the American writer Dwight Macdonald (Macdonald 1965) who criticised the "new journalism" of the 1960s.<sup>100</sup> New journalism's salacious mix of fact and fiction was not, said Macdonald, journalism at all,

"A new kind of journalism is being born, or spawned. It might be called "parajournalism"... in which rational forms are used to express delusions. Parajournalism seems to be journalism - "the collection and dissemination of current news" - but the appearance is deceptive. It is a bastard form, having it both ways, exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction."

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<sup>100</sup> For a discussion of the New Journalism of the 1960s and 70s, see; (Wolfe, Johnson, E. W. (Edward Warren), 1941- editor. and Johnson 1975)

As far as TT is concerned, advocacy journalism, disconnected from the pursuit of truth, is propaganda. Advocacy is advocacy, and journalism is journalism. In advocacy journalism, the suffix journalism is unearned, unjustified and disingenuous. TT holds that it is essential to recognise the distinction between fact and fiction for reasons we will now summarise.

## **Part Nine. Journalism's Power to Inform, or Misinform.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- How does Truth Theory understand the concept of power?
- How does this compare with the Foucauldian account?

*"Make all round ignorant motherfuckers afraid again. Afraid to espouse their beliefs.  
BECAUSE WE WILL MAKE THEM WISH THEY WERE NEVER BORN."*

*Seen on Twitter, January 2019.*

*"I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."*

Oliver Cromwell, 1650.

*"In our reasonings concerning matter of fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance, from the highest certainly to the lowest... A wise man therefore proportions his belief to the evidence."*

David Hume, 1748.

### **09.00.00 Reasonable Belief vs Religious Faith.**

TT provides a reason for believing one thing rather than another. TT holds that it is reasonable to believe an assertion which is supported by evidence and which has survived the scrutiny of epistemic tests. TT holds that it is more reasonable to believe a news report which reports facts accurately and impartially, than to believe one which does not. TT holds that, if one's goal is *aletheia*, it is irrational to believe a news report which contains a high percentage of pseudo-facts, and which is driven by a political narrative. Thus TT holds that epistemic vigilance towards our sources of information is a virtue, and that gullibility is not. As Quine puts it (Quine and Ullian 1970),

"Credulity, in more than modest measure, is neither admirable nor prudent...  
People disguise the truth in certain situations."

In contrast to TT, TDP holds that all narratives are equally valid. The only reason for preferring one narrative to the other is its political, or ethical, usefulness, i.e. its

value as propaganda. However, as we have previously observed, this pre-supposes knowledge of what is politically, or ethically good. It assumes knowledge of who is good and who is evil, who is oppressed and who is oppressor, who is powerful and who is powerless. But TDP provides no means of judging these matters. As Habermas put it (1971, p 63),

"Political action cannot rationally justify its own premises. Instead, a decision is made between competing value orders and convictions, which escape compelling arguments and remain inaccessible to cogent discussion."

According to TT, to say "I have my truth and you have yours", or "different truths are always located within a framework of power" is a misleading abuse of language. It is to speak metaphorically. To such claims TT always replies, "Yes, but which is true? What entitles you to an epistemologically privileged position?" At this point TDP has either to engage in reasoned argument supported by factual evidence (i.e. it has to abandon its entire truthophobic approach), or it can retreat into a bubble of self-righteous certitude based on emotion, and seek the suppression of contrary views on the grounds that they are hateful. Therefore, despite its progressive pretensions, TDP, in its truthophobia and rejection of rationalism, signals a return to pre-enlightenment approaches. These are fundamentally religious, magical and tribal in character because they derive certitude, not from reason, evidence and debate, but from moral intuition, emotion and faith.<sup>101</sup>

By "religious" I am referring to a religious-style way of knowing unencumbered by the need for facts and factual evidence. The English philosopher Roger Scruton describes this way of knowing as "theological". For Scruton (Scruton 2012, p 170) it is marked by the "passionate intensity" of certainty. It is an epistemology bolstered by a canon of holy texts written in a "vatic style in which words are cast as spells rather than used in arguments",

"The purpose of theology has been to generate experts about a topic concerning

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<sup>101</sup> For a discussion about the psychology of magical thinking, see, Paul Harris's *On Not Falling Down to Earth: Children's Metaphysical Questions*, in (Rosengren, Johnson and Harris 2000)

which there are no experts, namely God. Built into every version of theology are the foregone conclusions of a faith; conclusions that are not to be questioned but only surrounded with fictitious scholarship and secured against disproof".

Yung made a similar distinction between logical (or scientific) ways of reasoning, and religious (or "alchemical") ways. Logical beliefs are supported by evidence, whereas alchemical beliefs rest on feeling, intuition and faith. Yung (1993 (1944), p 14) argued that while, "The religious-minded man is free to accept whatever metaphysical explanations he pleases", the rational person, "must keep strictly to the principles of scientific interpretation and avoid trespassing beyond the bounds of what can be known". The journalist then, is like Yung's rational thinker. He is a,

"Scrupulous worker, he cannot take heaven by storm. Should he allow himself to be seduced into such an extravagance he would be sawing off the branch on which he sits".

The difference then, between TT and TDP is the difference between reason and unreason, between truth and truthophobia.

### **09.01.00 Truth Theory and Power.**

There are several consequences for academic journalism of rescuing the concept of the news narrative and restoring it to academic respectability. For example, exposing the narrative lays bare hidden structures of power. This is because identification of the narrative begs the question, "Who would want the audience to believe the narrative, and why"? As with advertising, audiences would be wise to ask, "Who stands to benefit from manipulating people's beliefs, emotions and opinions in one direction rather than another"? Translated into sociological or ethnographic terms, the question can be rephrased as, "Which groups in society stand to benefit from this manipulation"? At this point, it may seem that TT is about to join hands with Foucauldian power theory. Let us therefore now move our discussion into a social setting, in order to examine the points of similarity, and difference between the truth-theoretical understanding of power, and that of TDP. In doing so we will analyse the work of the last, and perhaps most influential, of

the canonical theorists of TDP, Michel Foucault.

### **09.02.00 Truth Theory, Social Groups and Power.**

According to the American political scientist Harold Lasswell, politics is how humans decide "who gets what, when, and how." However this sort of political manoeuvring is not limited to homo sapiens, it is common among mammals. The Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal, who has studied chimpanzees, sees in their complex, competitive and devious social behaviour, the same broad patterns that exist in human society. De Waal argues that in both cases there is a ceaseless jostling for advantage, domination and power. For de Waal (2007 (1982) p 208) the only difference is that humans are far better at manipulation, deception and self-deception. In particular, humans are better at disguising their true motives,

"If we broadly define politics as social manipulation to secure and maintain influential positions, then politics involves every one of us... These daily dabblings in politics are not always recognised as such, however, because people are past masters in camouflaging their true intentions... Chimpanzees, on the other hand, are quite blatant about their 'baser' motives. Their interest in power is not greater than that of humanity, it is just more obvious."

Much of our discussion so far has intentionally focused on journalism as information which individuals use for rational decision making and opinion forming. However this is not to deny the obvious fact that human beings are social creatures as well as individuals. A sociological account of the complex relationships between groups and groupuscules lies far outside the scope of the present project. The American social psychologists Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif state the sociological truism (Sherif and Sherif 1965),

"Social relations among individuals may be patterned in many different ways".

To which one might add that political relations among social *groups* are also patterned in many, complex, interdependent ways. We will content ourselves with the general observation that human society is essentially tribal, which is simply to

say that groups form various alliances and clusters of alliances. The British zoologist Matt Ridley observes that humankind “has always fragmented into hostile and competitive tribes” which seek to promote their own interests, and the interests of their allies, often in highly sophisticated ways. *Homo Sapiens* is thus also *Homo Politicus*, a species with myriad intersecting personal and group interests. As Ridley puts it (Ridley 1996, p 167),

“We form second-order alliances. Indeed, a diagnostic feature of many human societies, including most spectacularly the Western one I inhabit, is that they are 'segmented'. We live in small clans, which come together to form tribes, which come together to form alliances and so on. Clans may bicker and fight, but an external threat causes them to close ranks.”

Or, as the Marxist political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe put it (Ernesto and Mouffe 1981), modern society is,

"A vast system of alliances that are continuously redefined and renegotiated... a complex field, crossed by a diversity of political struggles."

The significance of this to journalism is to recognise that it will sometimes be to the advantage of one alliance to misinform, and thus manipulate, the opinions and behaviour of another. In journalistic terms, as we have seen, this may involve partial reporting; i.e. promoting a particular narrative by stressing some facts and omitting others. Thus narratives function at the social level to serve the interests of social groups. To make this advocacy convincing it will camouflage itself behind a mask of altruism and public virtue.

Because of the complexity of modern society, the sophistication of socio-economic-political relationships, and the importance of disguising selfish tribal motives behind masks of selfless public-spiritedness, it can be extremely difficult to identify the power relationships of contemporary democracy, and bring into plain view who is attempting to manipulate whom and for what purpose. In a book aptly entitled *Power; Where is it?* the Canadian political economist Donald Savoie (2010, p 174-175) speaks of a “cacophony of forces trying to shape public policies



and government decisions” which have “muddied the waters in locating power and influence”. Savoie observes correctly that,

“It is not always possible to establish clearly who influenced whom or what, which makes the location of power and influence more difficult”.

For example, the American writer Anand Giridharadas argues (2018, p 9) that in modern western societies there is a caste of clerisy which preaches a doctrine of social justice. But Giridharadas suggests this is a self-serving deception. For Giridharadas the anti-capitalist vocabulary of radical politics is a charade. In reality he believes,

"The people with the most to lose from genuine social change have placed themselves in charge of social change."

Giridharadas (p 11-12) sees fashionable, *bien pensant* social and political views as convenient myths created to protect the status quo. Myths that have,

"Allowed the elite's private, partial, and self-preservational deeds to pass for real change... that put a gloss of selflessness on the protection of one's privileges."

Leo Tolstoy (1886 (1942) p 54) memorably captured the same social hypocrisy, admitting that he belonged to a tribe which employed the "most complex cunning and cruel devices" to superficially champion social reform, while at the same time, benefiting from lack of real change,

"I imagine that I pity people and wish to help them. I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to ease his lot by all possible means - except by getting off his back."

Lenin (Lenin 1913 (1977)) made the same point, that artfully camouflaged tribal interests often masquerade as something else. Lenin advised that one should ignore the rhetoric of social justice and oppression, and focus instead on the

factual evidence of who in reality benefits most from any given policy,

"There is a Latin tag *cui prodest?* meaning "who stands to gain?" When it is not immediately apparent which political or social groups, forces or alignments advocate certain proposals, measures, etc., one should always ask: "Who stands to gain?""

It is partly via this sort of model that Truth Theory explains the everyday phenomenon whereby two news organisations might report the same story in different ways, or choose to report quite different news agendas. In such cases editorial decisions – what to put in, what to leave out, what to make prominent, what to obscure – can be seen, at least in part, as attempts to promote narratives which favour the perceived political interests of one set of tribal alliances at the expense of another. This form of journalistic advocacy can be seen therefore as a form of subtle, and sustained, deception which places in the hands of journalists the power, not merely to inform, but also to misinform.

Some readers may, at this point, consider that Truth Theory overlaps with Foucauldian power theory, as both appear to suggest that journalism functions as a tool to achieve social hegemony. It may be fruitful therefore to pause to briefly consider what the two approaches have in common and in difference. I will argue that, notwithstanding the apparent similarities, Foucauldian power theory is fundamentally different to, and incompatible with, Truth Theory. The two approaches are thus like the branches of two separate trees that rub against one another. To the observer on the ground it may be hard to see which branch belongs to which tree, but each is separate nevertheless.

### **09.03.00 The Power to Expose, or Conceal, the Corruption of Power.**

TT sees power as a practical, real-world thing. Power is the power to do something. It is the power to influence, persuade and shape the opinions and behaviours of others. Power is thus always political, whether at the level of office, or family, politics, or at the level of inter-governmental, negotiation. This view of power, as a

concrete applied thing, is found in the thinking of numerous theorists such as Jeremy Bentham, Lord Acton, Bertrand Russell and, more recently, the British political and social theorist Steven Lukes. Lukes, in his 1977 book *Power: A Radical View* (PRV), (Lukes 2003, p 12) describes power as the power to manipulate,

"Power over another or others and, more specifically still, power as domination. PRV focuses on this and asks: how do the powerful secure the compliance of those they dominate and, more specifically, how do they secure their willing compliance?"

Thus journalists, in their ability to control information, and construct explanatory narratives, possess power. Lukes (op cit, p 149) refers to this sort of power, which derives from the manipulation of information, as,

"The power to mislead. It takes many forms... from straight forward censorship and disinformation to the various institutionalized and personal ways there are of infantilizing judgment, and the promotion and sustenance of all kinds of failures of rationality and illusory thinking."

TT holds that journalism can either; seek the truth honestly and attempt to report it in good faith – in which case it serves to expose deception, corruption and unfairness. Or, bend the truth through partiality and advocacy – in which case it serves to maintain and reinforce the camouflaged interests of certain social groups and alliances. In other words, the politico-epistemic power of journalism is either to reveal unfairness and injustice, or to conceal it. As Carl Becker explained (1945, p 44),

"The dishonest, undercover promotion of selfish interests on the part of the intelligent and the informed few thrives on the ignorance and gullibility of the many, and both are intimately related to the means by which information and misinformation can be communicated."

TT holds that there is nothing obnoxious about power *per se*. For example a

doctor's power to heal is beneficial. It is the *corruption* of power - power in the service of immorality - that is reprehensible. Furthermore, corruption, like mould, thrives in darkness. Corruption is most effective when it is invisible. People will tolerate unfairness more willingly if it is presented to them disguised behind a mask of necessity and the greater good. Tallis (2000, p 204) describes shining a light into the darkness by telling the truth and exposing corruption, as the core Enlightenment project,

"The fundamental vision of the enlightenment - that we are all members of the human race - not only elevates the oppressed, but unmask the oppressors: it strips away the aura behind which they hide from critical evaluation."

According to TT, media power is the power to reveal what is really going on, or misrepresent it. In both cases the power of the media stems from its control of the information upon which public opinion rests. As Savoie (op cit, p 87) puts it,

"The media's power is unique. It is tied to their ability to shape a policy agenda and to influence voters, politicians, and public servants to take positions that they would not otherwise take. In brief, theirs is a power of persuasion and agenda setting, a form of soft power".

By shaping what audiences understand to be fair, just and reasonable, journalism is also able to mould audience desire and expectation. Thus journalistic power is a mechanism of rational, psychological cause and effect. Or as Lukes (p 27) explains,

"To put the matter sharply, A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have - that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires."

Having outlined the Truth Theoretical concept of power, let us compare this with the Foucauldian.

#### **09.04.00 Michel Foucault – King of Equivocation.**

The French postmodern historian and philosopher Michel Foucault is widely considered one of the most influential theorists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. His influence extends to literary criticism, history, media theory, sociology, political theory, education, criminology, sexuality and much more. One academic, (Armstrong 1994), has even written, somewhat improbably, of *The Influence of Michel Foucault on Accounting Research*.

One explanation for the popularity of Foucauldian theory lies in the highly equivocal nature of his pronouncements. Foucault surpasses other equivocators partly because he equivocates between different spheres of philosophical reality - between the realms of epistemology and ontology. This is to say he is constantly sliding between the real, concrete world, and the transcendental world of metaphysics. The resulting equivocation and confusion leads readers deep into the swamp of conceptual ambiguity and irrationalism. For these reasons Foucault may be considered the King of Equivocation.<sup>102</sup> As Jonathan Gaventa observes (Gaventa 2003), although Foucault discusses truth and power, he attaches a range of ambiguous meanings to these words. Thus notions of Foucauldian power and truth cannot be “easily integrated” into our everyday discussions,

"Michel Foucault is, in my view, the most influential theorist of power of the late 20th century, spawning a whole new genre of analysis as well as nearly endless reviews, summaries and critiques. His work marks a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them".

Explaining precisely what Foucault means by power and truth is no easy matter. Foucault writes with a poetic ambiguity which provides commentators with ample

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<sup>102</sup> See section 05.03.00 for Jean Baudrillard's similar approach.

opportunity to interpret and reinterpret his words, and claim that only they understand what he "really" meant. According to the Guatemalan-American Foucauldian scholar Carlos Prado, Foucault uses the word 'truth' in five different ways. None of them refer to real events in the real world. Therefore none of these five 'truths' mean 'truth' as it is commonly understood by ordinary people, or by journalism. Specifically, truth, for Foucault, has nothing to do with correspondence to reality. As Prado explains (Prado 2010, p 103-104),

"Foucault understands all truth as linguistic and power-produced. Any apparent ambiguity is due to how showing that power produces truth in the physical sciences is a very difficult matter and not one he undertakes. He explicitly rejected interpretation of his position as distinguishing between hard truth about physical reality and what passes for truth in other contexts."

For the purposes of the present project it is noteworthy then, that Foucauldian truth has nothing in common with journalistic truth. For Foucault, truth is a mysterious, cosmic abstraction. It should not be confused with the business of accurately reporting events in the real world. As Foucault (Foucault 1993, p 209) explained,

"Truth, as you see, is not defined by a correspondence to reality but as a force inherent to principles and which has to be developed in a discourse. Two, this truth is not something which is hidden behind or under the consciousness in the deepest and most obscure part of the soul. It is something which is before the individual as point of attraction, a kind of magnetic force which attracts him towards a goal. Three this truth is not obtained by an analytical exploration of what is supposed to be real in the individual but by rhetorical explanation of what is good for anyone who wants to approach the life of a sage."

Not only is Foucauldian truth incompatible with journalistic truth and reality, it is hostile to it. Foucault continues (p 221),

"We have to sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about ourselves, and we have to discover the truth about ourselves in order to sacrifice ourselves. Truth and

sacrifice, the truth about oneself and the sacrifice of oneself, are deeply and closely connected. And we have to understand this sacrifice not only as a radical change in the way of life, but as the consequence of a formula like this; you will become the subject of the manifestation of truth when and only when you disappear or you destroy yourself as a real body or as a real existence".

This transcendental, metaphysical conception of truth is clearly not what a journalist would recognise as truth in the context of reporting news. To complicate matters Foucault's thought evolved throughout his career. Foucault therefore said different things about truth and power at different times. For example in his later writing he was not squeamish about admitting that his earlier ideas were wrong.<sup>103</sup> Thus in 1977 (Foucault 1980 (2006), p 92) he discarded his earlier approaches in favour of power theory,

"It is obvious that all my work in recent years has been couched in the schema of struggle-repression, and it is this... which I have now been forced to reconsider".

Foucault's biographer James Miller points to the philosopher's experience with LSD, and his involvement with the sadomasochistic gay scene in California in 1975, as important catalysts in Foucault's shifting spiritual and philosophical evolution, and his understanding of truth and power. Speaking of Foucault's first experience of LSD in May of that year, Miller writes (Miller 1993, p 245),

"Foucault was about to enjoy what he would later call the greatest experience in his life – an epiphany that climaxed a series of similarly intense 'limit experiences' in the gay community of San Francisco. As a result of these experiences, Foucault's thought would take a dramatic new turn, transforming, in paradoxical and surprising ways, his continuing effort to illuminate what Nietzsche had called "the riddle which man must solve" – the riddle of his own singular being".

Miller also notes that Foucault's awareness that he was dying of AIDS in the early 1980s, as well as his experience of bondage and torture in the dungeons of San Francisco, fed his eclectic conception of power and truth. Miller explains (p 276)

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<sup>103</sup> The translation of his writings from French to English provides another opportunity for interpretation.

that, through his sexual experiences, Foucault came to understand that,

“Through an ordeal of self-chosen 'torture', a human being might get beyond conventional ways of thinking, and also beyond a reified 'valorization' of the genitalia... Armed with this quintessentially Nietzschean kind of 'knowledge', the genealogist of 'suffering pleasure' might even be able to imagine *new* combinations of impulses and phantasms, *new* relations of power, a *new* 'style' of life – perhaps even a new 'game' of truth”.

In the magnum opus of his later years, his four volume *History of Sexuality*, Foucault applied his mixture of metaphysics and relativist/constructivist ideas to the field of sex. In these mature works Foucault explores the relationship between truth, power, pleasure and the self, writing, for example (Foucault 1978, p 69),

"We demand that sex speak the truth (but, since it is the secret and is oblivious to its own nature, we reserve for ourselves the function of telling the truth of its truth, revealed and deciphered at last), and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness. We tell it its truth by deciphering what it tells us about that truth; it tells us our own by delivering up that part of it that escaped us."

Foucault's often opaque, neo-Lacanian, postmodern writing style is another source of confusion and ambiguity. This enables commentators to construct a Foucault of their choice and cite him in support of their own particular theses. Foucault's vagueness, and highly contradictory pronouncements, are, thus important factors in explaining his enduring popularity in a diverse range of social science disciplines. According to the Canadian scholar and political scientist Robert Nichols, Foucault has become an intellectual one-stop shop, a theoretical supermarket in which academics in search of some intellectual scaffolding can find something to support their chosen thesis. For example, Nichols (2010, p 139) laments how, in postcolonial studies, Foucault is frequently wildly misread, and then cited as an unimpeachable authority. Scholarly debate often then revolves around whether certain ideas agree, or disagree, with the imaginary, non-existing



'Foucault',

"'Foucault' comes to serve as a point of reference within the field of postcolonial studies... Foucault himself has become a discourse - at least in Said's sense of the term: a tradition of representation held together by the linguistic iterations within a specified domain of study rather than any truth-value in relation to an external referent."

Nichols writes (*ibid*), with exasperation, that many postcolonial theorists are guilty of cherry-picking convenient ideas from Foucault's early works – in apparent ignorance of the fact that Foucault later disavowed them. This, he complains, results in pseudo-scholarship,

"Working out from within the literature of postcolonial theory, one could only come to the conclusion that Michel Foucault was a thinker almost entirely preoccupied with questions of representation, texts and 'discourse' who stopped writing sometime in the early to mid 1970s."

There are therefore, arguably, as many Foucaults as there are readers of Foucault. As Gaventa (*op cit*) summarises,

"A note of caution: Foucault is probably the most frequently misunderstood or misapplied theorist of our times... Where Foucault does explain his work directly (e.g. in 'The Order of Discourse'), he tends towards hyperbole and abstraction of near poetic intensity."

Foucault was well aware that the vagueness, whimsicality and contradictory nature of his writings, invited uncritical use. However he expressed an impish satisfaction with this intellectual promiscuity, and indeed encouraged it, saying (Mottier 1995, p 27),

"All my books are, if you like, little toolboxes. If people want to open them, to use a particular sentence, a particular idea, a particular analysis like a screwdriver or a spanner to short-circuit, to discredit, to break systems of power, including perhaps

even those that my books issue from; well, so much the better!"

### **09.05.00 Analytic Philosophy vs Foucauldian Metaphysics.**

Foucault is indifferent to reality which he regards as irrelevant to his project. As Foucault explained (1981(1994)), he was not *that sort* of philosopher,

"I confess with the appropriate chagrin that I am not an analytic philosopher - nobody is perfect".

For scholars of journalism this is a vital clarification. If Foucault is not an analytical philosopher, then what type is he? The answer is that he is a metaphysician. As we have previously noted, metaphysics (whatever its merits in the context of philosophy and theology), is irrelevant both to academic journalism, and journalistic praxis. Analytical philosophy is the logical-analytic method embraced by the rationalist philosophers of the Enlightenment. This involved engaging with reason and rejecting mysticism and magic. As Roy Porter writes (Porter 2000, p 53), analytical thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed the academic heritage of the Middle and the Early Modern ages as a,

"Tragicomedy of errors - gazing up at the heavens, pedants had stumbled into a ditch... The demand for a clear-out and clean-up of the lumber house of the mind, condemned as dark, dilapidated and dangerous, unfit for habitation; metaphysics was dismissed as moonshine and traditional teachings were ridiculed as fictions, frauds, fantasies, fables or fallacies... obsolete orthodoxies in all shapes and sizes had to be swept away. Magic, mysticism, scholasticism and all other houses of cards or castles of error must be demolished, and knowledge rebuilt on firm foundations".

Analytical philosophy views metaphysical speculation as a form of artistic endeavour gone awry. For example the German philosopher Rudolf Carnap memorably described metaphysicians as "musicians without musical ability" explaining that (Carnap 1932),

"The metaphysician believes that he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist."

According to Carnap (ibid), metaphysical statements, although appearing to make sense semantically and grammatically, are in fact meaningless pseudo-statements,

"A sequence of words is meaningless if it does not, within a specified language, constitute a statement. It may happen that such a sequence of words looks like a statement at first glance; in that case we call it a pseudo-statement. Our thesis, now, is that logical analysis reveals the alleged statements of metaphysics to be pseudo-statements."

First and foremost then, analytical philosophy rejects metaphysics and views it as a form of spurious, quasi-religious spiritualism. As Russell put it (Russell 1914), echoing his 18<sup>th</sup> century intellectual forebears, any conception of the world which ignores concrete reality and replaces it with abstract reasoning should be discarded,

"The contention that time is unreal and that the world of sense is illusory must, I think, be regarded as based upon fallacious reasoning."

Thus Russell concluded (Russell 1999 (1897) p 84),

"We cannot find in philosophy the consolations of religion."

The English philosopher John Locke (1690) accused metaphysicians of "great folly, or greater dishonesty" by twisting the meaning of words equivocally to commit sophistry and intellectual fraud,

"One who would speak thus in the affairs and business of the world, and call eight sometimes seven, and sometimes nine, as best served his advantage, would presently have clapped upon him, one of the two names men are commonly

disgusted with. And yet in arguings and learned contests, the same sort of proceedings passes commonly for wit and learning."

This devilish equivocation, continued Locke (*ibid*), led, not to genuine understanding, but only to the production of quasi-intellectual "gibberish",

"An affected obscurity; by either applying old words to new and unusual significations; or introducing new and ambiguous terms, without defining either; or else putting them so together, as may confound their ordinary meaning."

Foucault, on the other hand, relished linguistic ambiguity and metaphysics. In the words of Miller (*op cit*, p 318) Foucault's project was to seek answers to the great cosmic questions of existence and the meaning of life. Foucault's adventure was intensely spiritual,

"Tunnelling his way deeper and deeper into his own labyrinth, spiralling back towards the "rediscovered origining", struggling more fiercely than ever before with his unrelenting fascination with death, trying to unriddle, in part through his writing, and in part through his ongoing pursuit of erotic ecstasy, the great Nietzschean questions; "Why am I alive? What lesson am I to learn from life? How did I become what I am, and why do I suffer from being what I am.""

Foucault was deeply influenced by Nietzsche and took from Nietzsche his conception of the nature of philosophy and the scope of its enquiry. This was unashamedly metaphysical and transcendental.<sup>104</sup> The American philosopher Kevin Hill (2007, p6) explains that Nietzsche in turn, adopted this approach from Schopenhauer,

"For Schopenhauer, philosophy's central function is to explain the problematic character of the world and human existence, to vindicate the significance of art, morality and religion, and to offer to form a non-religious transcendence."

In summary, it is this "non-religious transcendence" that Foucault took from

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<sup>104</sup> For a discussion of Nietzsche's irrealist metaphysics, see (Poellner 2000). For Schopenhauer's irrealism and idealism, see Julian Young (Young, 1987).

Nietzsche. As Lukes op cit, p 91) puts it,

"The trouble is that, for most of his life, Foucault never ceased to clothe this idea in Nietzschean rhetoric, within which power excluded both freedom and truth".

The Irish Foucauldian and philosopher John McSweeney also notes Foucault's debt to Nietzsche and his deep concern for transcendental spirituality in the context of the Nietzschean "death of God". McSweeney (op cit, p 93) concludes that much mainstream scholarship deals with Foucault's metaphysics by simply ignoring it and pretending it doesn't exist. This he argues is intellectually unjustifiable,

"Foucault's earlier attempts to construct an immanent practice occur within the shadow of the death of God and that this practice is repeatedly circumscribed by an indirect 'theological' horizon... the indirect 'religious question' thus generated does not constitute so much an opening to and point of resonance with the theological, but ultimately a problem for immanent discourse, which threatens to undermine the consistency and effectiveness of Foucault's work and needs resolution".

In other words, metaphysics, and a Nietzschean, post-religious mysticism, is always lurking just below the surface of Foucault's thought. Sometimes these themes lurch up from the depths and reveal themselves. For example Foucault's most famous piece of writing, in *The Order of Things* (Foucault 2002 (1969) p 422), is also one of his most metaphysical. It speaks of the eternal mysteries of the human condition, of transience, mortality, and of our place in the universe,

"It is not around him and his secrets that knowledge prowled for so long in the darkness... in short, in the midst of all the episodes of that profound history of the Same – only one, that which began a century and a half ago and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear... If those arrangements were to disappear... then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."

Here the metaphysics and spirituality are impossible to ignore. Foucault's sermon

seems strikingly like a postmodern reworking of Psalm 103,

"As for man, his days are like grass;  
He flourishes like a flower of the field;  
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone."

In a 1974 lecture, *La maison des fous* (Foucault 1975), Foucault again spells out that his conception of truth has nothing to do with scientific, journalistic, or objective truth. It is not, he says, anything to do with "what is". Foucault explains that he is solely concerned with an "alchemical", mystical type of truth thought to have disappeared long ago and been chased away by the advances of science and reason during the Enlightenment. It is however an understanding of truth which he is eager to reintroduce,

"This truth is not concerned with what is, but rather with what happens; it is an event in itself. This sort of truth is not reported, but aroused... This type of truth has nothing to do with experiment or measurement of the real world, it is teased out through ritual, it is caught by tricks; psychological strategy, not scientific method. This sort of truth is produced inside the individual who seeks it and who is struck by it. This is not objective truth, a relationship between an object and the subject who knows it, but an ambiguous relationship, one which is reversible, hungry for mastery, hungry for domination, for victory. It is a relationship of power".<sup>105</sup>

In conclusion, as Foucault makes abundantly clear, he is not talking about the sort of truth which any journalist would recognise. Foucault's truth is not truth as the man or woman in the street would understand it. It has nothing to do with whether a report on the news is true or inaccurate. It has nothing to tell us about fake news. Foucault is not concerned with epistemology, but with ontology and

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<sup>105</sup> Author's translation. The original text is, "On peut donc supposer dans notre civilisation, et courant au long des siècles, toute une technologie de la vérité, que la pratique scientifique et le discours philosophique ont peu à peu disqualifiée, recouverte et chassée. La vérité n'y est pas de l'ordre de ce qui est, mais de ce qui arrive: événement. Elle n'est pas constatée mais suscitée: production au lieu d'apophantique. Elle ne se donne pas par la médiation d'instruments, elle se provoque par des rituels ; elle est attirée par des ruses, on la saisit selon des occasions: stratégie et non pas méthode. de cet événement ainsi produit à l'individu qui le guettait et qui en est frappé, le rapport n'est pas de l'objet au sujet de connaissance, c'est un rapport ambigu, réversible, belliqueux de maîtrise, de domination, de victoire : un rapport de pouvoir."

metaphysics.

### **09.05.01 A Foucauldian Riposte. Trapped in Regimes of Truth.**

A Foucauldian might respond by arguing that, rather than citing Foucault's later writing, one should confine oneself to his earlier works, such as his 1966 *The Order of Things*, in which he outlined his Archaeological method. Foucault here introduces the concept of the episteme, a concept he later described as a “world view” in which actors are trapped. Thus what people believe to be true is, according to Foucault, socially constructed and historically and culturally contingent (Foucault 2002 (1969) p 148),

"This episteme may be suspected of being something like a world view... a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape - a great body of legislation written once and for all by some anonymous hand."

For Foucault, all knowledge is socially, semiotically, or historically constructed. Ironically, the episteme is entirely stripped of epistemic qualities. As the British intellectual historian Richard Whatmore (2016, p 35) summarises, epistemes,

"Were governed by rules operating beneath the consciousness of historical actors... The range of ideas suited to the concepts was set, and historic actors could not imagine alternative futures outside this framework... As such, the history of ideas became 'the system of representations through which we see the world'".

Roger Scruton (2015, p 100) explains that the Foucauldian episteme is ultimately derived from relations of power,

“Each episteme, for Foucault, is the servant of some rising power, and has had, as its principle function, the creation of a 'truth' that serves the interest of power. Hence there are no received truths that are not also convenient truths”.

Or as Foucault put it, in a much-quoted 1976 interview (Foucault 1980 (2006)),

""Truth' is linked by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it. A 'regime' of truth."

Here we have, a Foucauldian might argue, a reading of Foucault which is relevant to the understanding of journalism, and which closely matches the practical, truth-theoretical account of power which we we sketched earlier. However this would be to indulge in a form of intellectual cherry picking to which Foucault readily lends himself. For example, in the same interview, Foucault explains that he is not referring to truth in the sense of correspondence to reality. He is referring to what comes to be accepted as true; i.e. what becomes the dominant narrative. As Foucault (ibid) puts it,

"There is a battle 'for truth', or at least 'around truth' - it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted', but rather 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true, it being understood also that it's not a matter of a battle 'on behalf' of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays".

Thus even a sympathetic reading of Foucault does not provide any useful conceptual framework for students of journalism. This is because Foucauldian truth, even as expressed in this 1976 interview, still does not refer to what is true and what is untrue, what news is fake and what is not. It is referring instead to what beliefs become fashionable and dominant *regardless* of whether or not they are epistemically true. Thus, for example, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century one might say there was a "regime of truth" that encouraged people to believe in witchcraft. Or, one might say, infants are subject to a "regime of truth" that encourages them to believe in Father Christmas and the tooth fairy. Once again we should note the failure to distinguish between what people believe to be true, and the truth of what they believe. In summary, when this truthophobic formula, with its tacit denial of



objective truth and reality, is transplanted uncritically into academic journalism, it is simply an aggressive form of relativism in which every statement and every lie are equally true and untrue.<sup>106</sup>

Viewed from the perspective of Truth Theory one is entitled to ask, if residents of different historical epistemes are imprisoned in different regimes of truth, what criteria can they use to distinguish one assertion from another? Are the rival statements, "Charles I died upon the scaffold", and "Charles I died in a car crash on the M25" equally true? Even an historian must have recourse to a methodology which allows him to evaluate which statements are most likely to be true, and dismiss those which are implausible, anachronistic or absurd. There must be some means of escaping the prison of the episteme, and establishing a hierarchy of epistemic credibility. There is surely something more to historical study than interpreting yesterday's episteme in terms of today's. Or, as Richard Whatmore (op cit, p 99) puts it,

"The lesson will always be the futility of lining historical actors up against a wall of contemporary moral values and shooting them down for not being like us. To return to John Burrow's metaphors, intellectual historians replace such practice with eavesdropping upon alien conversations, exploring neglected perspectives and translating sometimes difficult ideas for readers who need help in recovering their meaning."

A point echoed by the American historian Victor Davis Hanson (2018), who complains that the Foucauldian, anti-epistemological approach, turns history into a "tedious" pseudo-history,

"A sort of re-education camp in which modern standards of suburban orthodoxy time-travel to the past in order to judge materially impoverished historical figures or pivotal events as either culpable or exonerated."

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<sup>106</sup> Foucault tried (unconvincingly) to evade the charge of relativism by seeking refuge in ambiguity and paradox, and by describing the episteme as a "volume of space open in three dimensions". Adding, "From this epistemological trihedron the human sciences are excluded... But one can equally well say that they are included". And gnomically, "It is perhaps this cloudy distribution within a three-dimensional space that renders the human sciences so difficult to situate". (*Foucault (1966,2001), p 379*).

The Foucauldian approach to journalism is to argue that different journalists will produce different accounts depending on their cultural backgrounds and under whose control they operate. But to the Foucauldian, the Truth Theorist replies, "Yes – but which version is true"? What is the evidence for and against the views of differing regimes? The Truth Theorist also asks the Foucauldian; how do journalists in the *same* historical and cultural episteme distinguish between statements of fact which are true and false? What criteria can they use to judge rival interpretations of those facts? With these questions the ultra-radicalism of Foucault's view of truth and power begins to crumble. In a journalistic context it amounts to restating some elementary commonplaces of relativism. All Foucault has achieved, like the social constructivism of Berger and Luckmann, is to remove epistemology from the study of history and journalism. Foucauldianism produces fact-less history and fact-free journalism.

It is noteworthy that Marx rejected the type of relativism and truthphobia contained in Foucauldianism as absurd nonsense. Marx shrewdly pointed out that belief is not the same thing as truth. For Marx (Marx 1846) this was an obvious and "trivial insight",

"Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, our historians have not yet won even this trivial insight. They take every epoch at its word and believe that everything it says and imagines about itself is true."

#### **09.05.02 Foucauldian Truth is Power. But is that True?**

The critical point for students of journalism is that, in detaching the truth of a statement from whether it accurately or faithfully describes reality, Foucault is erasing the whole meaning of truth and falsity as it is understood by Truth Theory, by journalists and by audiences in the real world. Thus those who seek to uncritically transfer Foucauldian power theory to journalism, must face the reality that truth is a product of power, only because Foucault *defines* truth as a product of

power. Foucault is hence not attempting to tell his readers something about the real world (which may be true or false), he is merely asserting something by creating an entirely new definition of truth. It is the familiar technique of altering the meaning of words. As Foucault explains (1978),

“Power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. ... Power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession. It is the name we give to a complex strategic situation in a particular society.”

Or, as Prado (2010, p 103-104) succinctly notes, for Foucault,

"Foucault understands *all* truth as linguistic and power-produced... Power-produced truth is all the truth there is".

In summary, whatever the question, the Foucauldian answer is always power. Or as Prado (2005, p 27) points out,

"Foucault's starting point is not that the world is as it is, and that truth is getting it right; his starting point is that we are "subjected to the production of truth through power"."

Seen in this light, Foucauldian power theory is a pseudo-science which always provides the same explanation to every question. It is not falsifiable. It is the equivalent of explaining everything as being the result of the will of God. It explains everything, and yet it explains nothing. As Scruton puts it (Scruton 2015, p 109-110), power, for Foucault, is a self-fulfilling prophecy; a form of self-justifying, circular argument. This is because if truth, and everything else, is always a product of power relationships, then,

“By sleight of hand, he [Foucault] is able to present any feature of social order – even the disposition to heal the sick – as a covert exercise of domination, which furthers the interests of 'those in power'... The triviality of the argument needs no comment; what is astounding is the philosophical naivety that underlies it”.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1974, p 329) argues that blaming everything on relationships of power and oppression becomes, ironically, a way to hide those very relationships. Ricoeur calls for the fashionable intellectual obsession with power theory to be resisted,

“We must escape from the clutches of the fascination of the problem of domination in order to deal with a larger phenomenon”

Ricoeur argues to dismiss every criticism as propaganda arising from relationships of power, is to ignore the epistemic possibility that some criticisms might be true. Ricoeur (ibid) points out that the truthphobia of Foucauldian power theory thus becomes a useful tactic to close down rational debate, deflect criticism, and conceal the interests of those who wish to escape scrutiny. Power theory becomes a suit of ideological armour to protect the powerful. Its function is to,

“Hide the allegiance of individuals, professed by an individual or a group, that they have an interest in not recognizing.”

The American essayist and Foucauldian scholar Roger Kimball (1993) also notes how philosophically naïve Foucauldian power theory is. Kimball points out that Foucault's entire enterprise is parasitic, and dependent on, common-sense notions of reality and truth,

"Consider the central Foucauldian contention that objective truth is a “chimera,” that truth is always and everywhere a function of power, of “multiple forms of constraint.” Some version of this claim is propagated as gospel by academics across the country. But wait: is it true? Is it in fact the case that truth is always relative to a “regime of truth,” i.e., to politics? If one says: Yes, it is true, then one plunges directly into contradiction — for haven't we just dispensed with this naïve idea of truth?—and the logical cornerstone of Foucault's epistemology crumbles”.

In conclusion Foucauldian power theory describes a world in which there is no truth as it is commonly understood. There are only a series of narratives, each by definition an attempt to dominate. There is no escape from the clutches of this

bleak vision. There is no waking from the Foucauldian nightmare. Life is defined as an eternal, post-Nietzschean battle for domination. By redefining truth in terms of power, Foucault leads his followers away from the world of reason and truth, into a dungeon of unreason and untruth. Foucault's world is the post truth world – a truthophobic world in which truth is forbidden.

Truth Theory rejects this view. For TT, truth means what is true. TT acknowledges rational mechanisms of deception and manipulation. TT acknowledges the complex nature of society, and how different tribal alliances can promote self-serving agendas by manipulating information. TT regards power as practical power, and truth as purely epistemic. Knowledge, it is commonly said, is power. Since knowledge is founded on information, the ability to control and shape information is therefore the power to control knowledge. This is the folk-theoretical understanding of the word. It is also the Miltonic, as in Milton's celebrated speech in defence of freedom of the press in which he wrote (Milton 1644 (1927)),

"So Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter."

Foucauldian truth cannot however grapple with falsehood. It simply isn't that kind of truth.

## **Part Ten. Discussion. Towards an Epistemology of Journalism.**

In which the following research questions are addressed:

- What might a future epistemology of journalism look like?
- What are the benefits of a truth-theoretical approach to Journalism Studies and to wider society?

*"I loved that desperate period when black was black and white was white, and light was light and darkness was darkness... I hate this dismal rat-grey twilight. I hate this little hour... this is the hour of the mice."*

Gerald Kersh

*Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it.*

Blaise Pascal.

### **10.00.00 Truth Theory and the Fourth Estate.**

TT sees news as public information which is timeous, warranted to be true, and which can be used to inform decision making and opinion forming. One advantage of TT is that, whereas TDP is hostile to, and incompatible with, Fourth Estate models of news; TT therefore provides a long-overdue theoretical framework in which Fourth Estate accounts can be understood.

For example, all Fourth Estate accounts of journalism tacitly assume that audiences turn to news to learn something about the real world. The Fourth Estate model presupposes that the role of journalism is to supply citizens with facts about politics, and thereby help them to hold informed opinions. The British scholar of journalism Tim Luckhurst (2012) neatly summarises the "settled view" of the Fourth Estate,

"Since the emergence of representative democracy in economically liberal nation states, the role of the press has been understood to be one of service to the public sphere... It [journalism] informs citizens so that they may engage in critical debate about the practices of government and state. It renders potent the sanction of public opinion in order that it may prevent abuse of power."

Although there are various shades of opinion, and points of dispute between

scholars of the Fourth Estate, they all share common philosophical and psychological assumptions about reality, knowledge and truth. Specifically they assume there are facts which can be established, and consequences which follow from those facts. Thus rational debate is possible as a means of settling disputes about public policy. For example even George Boyce, the Northern Irish historian who has challenged certain Fourth Estate orthodoxies, assumes that newspapers throughout history were capable of reporting facts. Otherwise he points out (1978, p 20), there would have been little point in anyone buying them. Newspapers he says had to be,

“Able to give the public an authentic and reliable news service; in short, a newspaper had to be worth buying”.

Boyce (p 24) assumes, as per TT, that the best way of determining truth is through debate and by hearing diverse, competing views. Thus free speech is essential to the search for truth,

“One of the essential elements of the Fourth Estate was diversity; the press should consist of 'many organs, representing every variety and *nuance* of sentiment which prevails in the community, and expressing through numerous and divergent channels that aggregate of thought, feeling, prejudice and passion, which we term 'public opinion'. Thus the doctrines of one journal were criticised and refuted by another”.

But TDP, as we have established, is based on radically different philosophical and psychological assumptions. As Brian McNair summarises (1996, p 33), according to TDP, reality, facts and truth do not exist,

“News and journalism, in short are social constructions. The point (or something similar) has been made so often in the media studies literature that it has become a commonplace, but it is central to the sociology of journalism: news is never a mere recording or reporting of the world 'out there'”.

In consequence, TDP is hostile to all Fourth Estate approaches. If nothing is true



and everything is equally untrue; then there can be no informed discussion and analysis. The ultimate, and uncomfortable, consequence of this line of reasoning is to deny the possibility of civilised self government by free people. According to TDP there are merely hostile tribes, each with their own unassailably subjective 'facts', 'epistemes, and 'truths'. All journalism is subjective propaganda and the most powerful tribes, once they have achieved hegemony, will impose their 'regimes of truth' on those whom they oppress. As Lippmann (op cit, p 21) put it,

"Without protection against propaganda, without standards of evidence, without criteria of emphasis, the living substance of all popular decision is exposed to every prejudice and to infinite exploitation... There can be no liberty for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies."

The organic link between reality, truth, knowledge, reason, and democracy is summarised by Carl Becker (1945, p 38),

"The democratic doctrine of freedom of speech and of the press... rests upon certain assumptions. One of these is that men desire to know the truth and will be disposed to be guided by it. Another is that the sole method of arriving at the truth in the long run is by the free competition of opinion in the open market."

Thus, it may be argued, by cutting away the epistemic roots, TDP is not merely truthophobic, but ultimately and inevitably, anti-democratic and totalitarian. The Australian philosopher Russell Blackford (2018) notes that TDP converts complex debates about reality, fact and truth into simple equations of "power and counter-power." This, he argues, leads to intellectual vulgarity, intolerance of dissent and reduces all debate to a contest as to who is most thoroughly or multiply oppressed,

"Rational public discussion, based on empirically credible premises and formally cogent logic, is replaced by "taking sides in solidarity"... or by looking for which groups are most affected by various kinds of social subjugation, and then regarding those groups as sacred".

In journalistic terms, as Luckhurst (2014) has astutely observed, the irrationality

and truthphobia of “radical media theory” encourages the belief that social and political utopia is best approached via censorship of dissenting points of view, not via free speech,

"Radical media history has provided campaigners against an unregulated newspaper market with an intellectual rationale for reform: the market does not produce journalism designed for the primary purpose of informing the public sphere, they argue, it seeks profit above other goals. Therefore regulation may improve it".

Truth Theory is not the same thing as a detailed epistemology of journalism. TT are the conceptual roots, an epistemology would be the tree trunk rising from the roots. An epistemology of journalism would attempt to answer questions such as, "What are the conditions in which a belief acquired from the testimony of journalism qualifies as knowledge?" Or, more simply, "When should we trust, or not trust, the testimony of news?" In the interests of brevity it is only TT that is outlined here, an epistemology of journalism is suggested as an area of future research. That said, let us briefly consider what an epistemology of journalism might look like. Let us consider what field of enquiry might blossom from a replacement intellectual paradigm.

#### **10.01.00 Epistemic Vigilance or Free Ice Cream?**

It is envisaged that an epistemology of journalism would see the problem of fake news in terms of the communication of information, and its trustworthiness. Consequently it would draw on some of the insights provided by cognitive psychology – especially the study of epistemic vigilance. As Dan Sperber and his colleagues explain (Sperber et al. 2010, p 2),

"The major problem posed by communicated information has to do not with the competence of others, but with their interests and their honesty... In a variety of situations, their interests are best served by misleading or deceiving us. It is because of the risk of deception that epistemic vigilance may be not merely advantageous but indispensable if communication itself is to remain

advantageous."

Building on the concept of epistemic vigilance, the American psychologist Norbert Schwarz and his colleagues (Schwarz, Newman and Leach 2016), have attempted to identify the five most common heuristic processes which people instinctively use when attempting to judge if a statement is true or false. These criteria align with common-sense, folk techniques and with logical, rational processes. They are the sort of epistemic techniques which it is envisaged would feature in a future epistemology of journalism. The techniques are;

1. Social consensus: Do others believe it? Does it feel familiar?
2. Support: Is there much supporting evidence?
3. Consistency: Is it compatible with what I already believe? Does it feel right?
4. Coherence: Do the elements of the story logically fit together?
5. Credibility: Does it come from a credible source? Does the source have a competing interest? Is the source trustworthy?

What is noteworthy here is the combination of psychological, heuristic shortcuts, and rational, epistemic criteria. The American developmental psychologists Melissa Koenig and Elizabeth Stephens (Koenig and Stephens 2014, p 16) observe that two important criteria for the rational belief in testimony are; competence and benevolence. In other words, is the person (or journalist) who tells us something in a position to know? If so, can we trust him to be well-intentioned, and not to deceive us?

"The unreliability of testimony lies in the fact that informants can make mistakes (competence) and have interests that are not always in line with telling the truth (morality)."

The operative word here is "rational". As Koenig and Stephens note (ibid),

epistemic vigilance is both intuitive, organic and rational. It draws on a complex mosaic of rational and arational criteria. It is, in plain language, part of our human nature,

“Very young children, starting in infancy, are indeed rationally responsive (in the right directions) to considerations of speaker trustworthiness.”

An epistemology of journalism would then, also be entitled to seek authority from the disciplines of evolutionary psychology and social psychology; disciplines which see the disposition to be vigilant as having (Sperber, op cit),

"Evolved biologically alongside the ability to communicate in the way that humans do".

The view endorsed by cognitive psychology is therefore that audiences innately possess a suite of cognitive tools which they use, instinctively, to judge how trustworthy any given piece of journalism might be. This approach points to a complex picture where audiences assess many factors including the perceived motive of the news organisation, and any inconsistencies in the narrative offered. As we have already noted, the presence of a strong news narrative for example, may lead audiences to suspect that the motive of the journalist is to persuade, rather than to inform. From attribution of motive, audiences may infer an increased risk of deception. Observation of the behaviour of the journalist is therefore part to an epistemic matrix in which motive, and prediction of future behaviour can be assessed. Failure to individually, or collectively, pass this battery of tests triggers epistemic doubt, raises suspicions, and erodes trust. However epistemic vigilance is time-consuming and intellectually demanding. The search for journalistic truth is hard, and even our best efforts may be inadequate in the face of sophisticated deception. As Sperber (p 13) explains there is no,

"Fail-safe way of calibrating one's trust in communicated information so as to weed out all and only the misinformation."

In practical terms, the first essential, and healthy step, is to for audiences to

recognise that not everything they read, see or hear on the news is true. We can go further and say that to blindly trust a single source, or a cartel of like-minded sources, is gullibility. This is not an epistemic virtue, it is folly.

One of the most powerful techniques of epistemic vigilance is to challenge testimony by exposing it to an alternative account. The confounding point of view should, moreover, be presented by someone who is *motivated* to disprove it. Motive is evidence of a genuine desire to challenge and refute. Thus it is more rational to trust an argument which has been exposed to a contrary view, and robustly tested, than one which has not. In journalistic terms audiences should therefore look for genuine balance, and evidence that dissenting voices have been given the opportunity to express themselves fully.

It is common for academics to bemoan the fact that audiences are losing trust in journalism. For example the American scholar Katherine Fink (2019) writes,

"The single biggest challenge facing journalism today is the public's lack of trust in it."

Fink (ibid) goes on to argue that journalists should do more to "engage" with audiences, and she suggests that,

"Once a week, every journalist should meet someone new. Go out for coffee, or ice cream, or whatever. It should be face-to-face, because in-person conversations are better for building trust."

But Fink misses the point. Audiences should not blindly trust the testimony of journalism, whether it is accompanied by free ice cream or not. On the contrary they should be discerning and demand evidence in exchange for their trust. It is irrational to trust information unless there is evidence that it is trustworthy. Credulity and faith are more suited to religious belief than to journalism. Furthermore "engagement" is not the same thing as trust. Propaganda or advertising messages may be highly engaging and seductive, but it would not be prudent to trust them. Engagement, like free ice cream, is a sugary distraction to

ensnare the unwary. Audiences, like members of a jury, should be applauded for intelligent scepticism and epistemic doubt. They should be applauded for rejecting bad journalism and for demanding reliable evidence. They should be applauded, in short, for behaving rationally.

Robin Aitken makes a similar point more bluntly. He argues that declining trust in mainstream journalism reflects the fact that audiences increasingly realise they have been deceived and manipulated by distinguished news organisations such as the BBC. Aitken accuses the BBC "and its establishment and media allies" of steering the public debate in specific directions by creating "taboo" subjects in "pursuit of a political agenda". Aitken (2018, p 115) fears that this policy is now starting to unravel, and may have serious consequences for trust in journalism and in democracy itself. "Sooner or later" he writes, "people will realise they have been duped",

"In addition to its being absolutely wrong for the BBC to make some subjects 'taboo', it is also, finally, counterproductive: the truth will out - and when it escapes its gaolers it can wreak political havoc. Pretending that things are other than they actually are is no recipe for social harmony, but rather a social time bomb. Moreover it also leads to nonsensical journalism."

The irrationalism, irrationalism and truthphobia of TDP is blind to this sort of analysis, because it is unable to understand the meaning of the words, "Pretending that things are other than they actually are..." TDP, as we have seen, rejects the idea of objective reality and truth.

Epistemic vigilance should not be confused with irrational scepticism. Believing that all journalism is fake news and propaganda, is to succumb to an equal and opposite prejudice; the prejudice of the pathological conspiracy theorist. To believe, "It must be a lie because it's on BBC News" is as unwise as to believe, "It must be true because it's on BBC News". The challenge for audiences, and for the academic study of journalism, is to recognise the problem and see it honestly for what it is. Truth Theory does not offer easy answers to difficult, eternal questions. It does argue however that no answers will be found unless the correct questions

are asked.

Truth Theory sees trust as confidence in testimony, analogously like confidence in a commercial product, or trust in a skilled tradesman. It may be merited or unmerited. In contrast, the truthphobia of TDP leaves trust as an orphaned concept, and many contemporary academics consequently tend to see it in terms of religious faith. In this model, audiences *should* trust journalists, provided journalists are ethically, or politically, well-intentioned – just as congregants should trust their priests, provided they are pious and Godly. TDP thus reverses the direction of trust and produces a formulation which recalls Brecht’s *Die Lösung*. In these satirical verses, written after the 1953 anti-government uprising in East Germany, Brecht warns the population that they have,

“Forfeited the confidence of the government  
And could win it back only  
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier  
In that case for the government  
To dissolve the people  
And elect another?”

Similarly, TDP appears to imply, not that journalism should change to win the approval of audiences, but that audiences should change to win the approval of journalists and journalistic theory.

Finally, the fact audiences do not have indefinite patience with untrustworthy journalism, and that they exercise epistemic vigilance, might be taken as evidence for the limited effects media model.<sup>107</sup> The withholding of trust would seem to signal that audiences do not slavishly believe everything they are told. Audiences arguably possess far more agency than contemporary media theorists assume. This particular area merits further research and long-overdue reassessment.

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<sup>107</sup> See section 04.08.03

### 10.02.00 Discussion. Academic Journalism - The Blind Policeman.

Truth Theory offers a conceptual framework to help understand the dramatic changes taking place within contemporary journalism. These changes are largely, or wholly, invisible to TDP. The American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan wrote about the feeling of being in the midst of unfathomable change,

"Something's happening, but you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?"

What is happening, according to Truth Theory, is that the rapid political polarization of society into conflicting tribal groups, is being mirrored, and accelerated, by partisan journalism. Audiences, who perceive a trend within the mainstream media away from truthful reporting, and towards advocacy and propaganda, are consequently withdrawing their trust. Forced to choose, they opt for partisan journalism sympathetic to their own interests, not partisan journalism hostile to them.

But TDP cannot comprehend what is happening because it does not recognise the concept of journalistic truth. Scholars wedded to TDP are unable and unwilling to acknowledge the possibility that what is happening is the rise of partisan journalism and the retreat from journalistic truth, even though this historical, real-life drama is unfolding in front of them. Instead TDP sees journalism as a benevolent, ethical force, not an epistemic one. TDP sees the role of journalism as *arete*, Truth Theory sees it as *aletheia*. In its irrationalism and truthphobia, the academy has painted itself into a corner. It no longer has the intellectual tools required to discuss and evaluate truth. Academic journalism is thus ill-equipped to practise its trade; to behold the object of its study and provide insightful, relevant analysis. Academic journalism in 2019 is like a blind policeman watching a robbery. It is dimly aware, like Dylan's Mr Jones, that something is happening, but it is neither able to put its finger on the problem, nor do anything about it.



## **Part Eleven. Conclusion.**

*Last season's fruit is eaten and the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.  
For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice.*

T.S. Eliot

### **11.00.00 Conclusion.**

This research adds to our understanding of journalism in a number of ways. It reveals the extent to which a single theoretical paradigm has achieved dominance within the academy. It reveals the extent to which this paradigm has become intellectually unbalanced and divorced from both journalistic praxis and the folk understanding of journalism.

It adds to a relatively small body of literature which questions the validity of the dominant paradigm by critically evaluating its canonical texts and challenging its underlying assumptions. It illustrates the epistemic weakness of the paradigm and its inability to explain the nature of news and fake news. It provides an alternative framework which rescues the concept of journalistic truth, and provides insight into the nature of trust in journalism. Finally, in a world increasingly riven by political polarisation and journalistic partisanship, it offers a new conceptual matrix in which news can be conceptualised. Consequently this research has a significant impact factor, and opens up a rich, new seam of enquiry for future scholarship.

The Austrian-American radical philosopher Paul Feyerabend argued in 1970 for the abandonment of the concepts of reality, truth and reason, and in favour of intellectual "anarchy". His views were popular with the generation of radical scholars which constructed TDP. Looking at the world from 1970 Feyerabend believed that truth and reason should be locked in a box and put away in the intellectual attic (2010, p5). However he added a proviso,

"There may of course come a time when it will be necessary to give reason a temporary advantage and when it will be wise to defend its rules... I do not think that we are living in such a time today".

Looking at the landscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, I argue it is now time to retrieve the box, wipe away the dust, and carefully unlock it. Journalism Studies is in need of a Truth Theoretical Turn.

## Appendix A. Plato's Noble Lie and the Problem of Structural Racism.

The distinction between *arete* and *aletheia* is offered in this paper as a conceptual tool to help analyse the contemporary journalistic landscape. The insight being that attempting to do what is ethically, or politically expedient, and telling the truth are different goals. As we have noted, Plato, in *Meno*, concludes that *aletheia* trumps *arete*. However, and more famously, Plato, in *The Republic*, argues the opposite.<sup>108</sup>

In *The Republic*, Plato reasons that, in perfect society, an enlightened and benevolent aristocracy of Guardians would rule with totalitarian power for the benefit of all. The American political and legal theorist David Lay Williams (2013, p 373) explains that Plato's system is therefore profoundly elitist and anti-democratic. It assumes the superiority of the Guardian caste, and the inferiority of the lower orders who are incapable of making intelligent political decisions for themselves,

"The masses are largely condemned to the ignorance of the Cave - mistaking shadows for reality, as it were. So he has no intention of engaging these citizens in any kind of serious discourse or deliberation. They are to be guided, like children, by those who know better."

Williams continues (p 364),

"Plato would have the superior few govern the inferior many in matters large and small - in the many's own best interests, to be sure, but without ever losing sight of the moral incapacity of the many to serve as free and responsible citizens. As it is precisely the masses' inability to apprehend the truth that makes them inferior, the rulers have higher obligations than telling the truth."

In *The Republic* Plato builds his case for censorship and deception asking (2007 (1955) p 85),

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<sup>108</sup> It is unclear which of these represent Plato's mature thought. For a philological discussion about Platonic chronologies see; (Thesleff 1989) and (Howland 1991).

"What kind of literature remains, then, for us to deal with in our definition of what can and cannot be allowed?"

Having surveyed the sort of journalism that is available to the public, Plato (p 84) argues that, in the interest of the majority, *arete* must trump *aletheia*. Unwanted content must be suppressed,

"We must therefore put a stop to stories of this kind before they breed in our young men an undue tolerance of wickedness."

Once this principle has been accepted, then lies are ethically justified, provided they are told by the elite to preserve the social order. The climax of Plato's thesis (at 414 b-c in Book 3) is an argument for fake news on a grand scale in the interest of social harmony and stability. Plato calls (p 115-116) for the deception of the masses by means of a "magnificent myth", or "noble lie",<sup>109</sup>

"I wonder if we could contrive one of those convenient stories we were talking about a few minutes ago, I asked, some magnificent myth that would in itself carry conviction to our whole community, including, if possible, the Guardians themselves?"

'What sort of story?'

'Nothing new - a fairy story like those the poets tell and have persuaded people to believe...'

Plato then describes an "audacious" myth which involves rewriting history, and fabricating a version of human biology. It is, says Williams, "A lie of epic proportions", "All in one fantastic tale."

In contemporary, journalistic terms, *The Republic* argues for irrationalism, deception, manipulation and fake news. It argues that it is ethically good to lie in the name of

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<sup>109</sup> For a discussion of the different translations of Plato's original, see; (Schofield 2007)

social justice. In *The Republic* the truth must be concealed and convenient stories and myths should be spun to encourage the faithful, and beguile the credulous. But no mechanism is provided in *The Republic* for distinguishing between reality and illusion, between fake news and news. Propaganda and truth are dissolved into one. The philosopher of science Karl Popper (1947 (1945) p 78) is among those who have pointed out the similarity between Plato's *Republic* and 20th century totalitarian regimes. In both cases, Popper argues, the emphasis is on "the supreme importance of the tribe", where justice is not thought of as justice for individuals based on what is true, but "tribal justice", or "social justice", for rival identity groups within the state,

"Plato considers justice not as a relationship between individuals, but as a property of the whole state, based upon a relationship between its classes. The state is just if it is healthy, strong, united stable."

Popper's insight is that the Platonic division of society into castes, though logical and well-intentioned, is uncomfortably close to its corollary; discrimination against those deemed inferior by those deemed superior. Once corrupted, Plato's ideal society quickly sours into one in which intolerance and hostility are justified on the grounds that members of a particular caste are inferior. In other words, once a tribal structure of this sort is established, social justice demands, not equity, but inequity. For example the Russian revolutionary Martin Latsis (Tolczyk 1999, p 19) advocated social justice against class enemies. He established the principle that sentences were not to be determined by the guilt or innocence of individuals based on evidence, but according to tribal identity. Not individual justice, but social justice,

"We are engaged in exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. You need not prove that this or that man acted against the interests of the Soviet power. The first thing you have to ask an arrested person is: To what class does he belong, where does he come from, what kind of education did he have, what is his occupation? These questions are to decide the fate of the accused. That is the quintessence of the Red Terror".

The relevance of this to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is that, it may be argued, this form of tribalism is resurgent. For example we have previously noted<sup>110</sup> that the contemporary understanding of racism (institutional or structural racism) is quite different to the traditional understanding of racism.

The contemporary approach redefines racism to remove personal agency, rational choice and responsibility, and makes it, *by definition*, a function of belonging to a particular tribe. Thus an influential American think tank (Aspen Institute, 2017) explains that even fair-minded and unprejudiced individuals are guilty of racism because of the colour of their skin and membership of their identity groups,

"[Structural racism] identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with "whiteness" and disadvantages associated with "color" to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist."

Ironically then, structural racism, viewed from the point of view of traditional racism, is itself highly racist. It changes the meaning of the word so as to brand whole groups of people morally inferior and culpable. Martin Luther King's colour-blind dream, in which every individual will be judged impartially according to merit, is reversed. Tribal superiority is proportionate to the level of oppression of the tribe. Tribal inferiority is proportionate to how structurally oppressive it has been. And, as we have previously noted, oppression is understood as something which is emotionally, or intuitively, felt. It is determined subjectively, according to religious ways of knowing, not according to factual evidence. This modern combination of structural racism, truthphobia and subjectivism, signals, it may be argued, an unintended return to the irrational sectarianism of the pre-Enlightenment. If so, as Popper (op cit, p 1) gloomily concludes, despite modern technological progress and our superficial sophistication, humanity is confronted by eternal problems unchanged by time,

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<sup>110</sup> See section 04.08.01

"What we call nowadays totalitarianism belongs to these movements, which are just as old or just as young as our civilization itself."

## **Appendix B. Narratives, Motives and Goals.**

Analysis of media coverage of the Pittsburgh Massacre provides evidence that political narratives shape how news stories are covered by the mainstream media. However commercial motives can also influence what journalists report and what they omit. For example in February 2015, the *Daily Telegraph's* chief political commentator Peter Osborne resigned, claiming that *The Telegraph* had deliberately suppressed stories critical of HSBC bank. In other words, Osborne accused *The Telegraph* of wishing to promote the narrative that HSBC was an excellent, well-run and entirely trustworthy bank. Consequently, according to Osborne (2015), *The Telegraph* suppressed news stories which might have provided evidence to the contrary. In an excoriating online article he pointed out that journalists have a "duty to tell their readers the truth." In pursuit of that goal he wrote,

"It has long been axiomatic in quality British journalism that the advertising department and editorial should be kept rigorously apart. There is a great deal of evidence that, at the Telegraph, this distinction has collapsed."

He continued that,

"If advertising priorities are allowed to determine editorial judgments, how can readers continue to feel this trust? The Telegraph's recent coverage of HSBC amounts to a form of fraud on its readers. It has been placing what it perceives to be the interests of a major international bank above its duty to bring the news to Telegraph readers. There is only one word to describe this situation: terrible".

Osborne went on to suggest that impartiality had become an endangered species within British journalism as a whole. He hinted darkly that narrative led journalism, of one form or another, had become the norm,

"It is not only the Telegraph that is at fault here. The past few years have seen the rise of shadowy executives who determine what truths can, and what truths can't be conveyed across the mainstream media."

Osborne's accusation, which *The Telegraph* dismissed as an, "Astonishing and unfounded attack, full of inaccuracy and innuendo", was that *The Telegraph* had replaced the goal of telling the truth (*aletheia*), not with the goal of doing what was politically good (*arete*), but with the goal of its own financial enrichment. Osborne's accusation was that the lure of advertising revenue had corrupted the goal of *aletheia*. In the context of the present project, and of Truth Theory, one might observe that different goals, in the real world, are often entangled and conflicted. Determining a news organisation's "real" motive for publishing, or not publishing, information, can be every bit as difficult as trying to determine whether the information is itself journalistically true or false.



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