

12 Open Access, “Publicity,” and Democratic Knowledge

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Barack Obama’s stunning election victory in 2008 was the culmination of a campaign that was energized by social media networks, especially Facebook. Commentators hailed the new president’s “virtual network of citizens.”¹ As the 2016 presidential campaign began, it initially looked as if Bernie Sanders’s bid for the Democratic nomination was following similar lines. However, as events unfolded it emerged that the impact of social media belonged to Donald Trump, to the “alt.Right” and a populist and nativist reaction against civil rights and equalities of opportunity.

In a short space of time, social media had moved from being a powerful means of social and political expression and democratic participation to something altogether darker. Whereas, in the first phase, communication on Facebook shared among “friends” was seen as extending networks of persuasion and influence, now “mining” of Facebook likes reveals psychological “traits” that could be targeted by well-funded political campaigns designed to get reluctant voters to the polls. “Authoritarian personalities,” it seemed, could be directly addressed with messages that were specifically designed to offset their (relative) alienation from the political process.² Thus, a little known data analytics company, Cambridge Analytica, emerged as having provided a data base of “sympathizers” to the Trump campaign, as well as to the leave campaign for the British referendum on the European Union.³

Social media were no longer hailed simply as bringing about greater openness, but also manipulation. They were no longer a way of providing greater access to information necessary for informed decision-making but could also be a way of mobilizing “fake” information that could undermine expert knowledge. Everyone would be their own expert in a “post-truth” era. In fact, with everyone an expert, no one could be, and knowledge claims become reduced to expressions of “interests”—for example, those

of “elites,” or “ordinary people.” “People like us” also became a rallying call, one which has recently received academic respectability in arguments by Kaufmann and Goodhardt that “racial self-interest”—people like us—should not be understood as racism, even where it represents the voice of the (relatively) privileged and is directed against others.⁴

Some of these issues have been taken up by Steve Fuller in his recent book, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*.⁵ The idea of post-truth (or perhaps, more correctly, of multiple—competing and irresolvable—truths) has been widely seen as a consequence of the post-modern turn associated with late capitalism.⁶ Put very simply, Fuller endorses the idea of post-truth as the logical conclusion of the arguments of the sociology of science and its deconstruction of philosophical attempts at demarcation—reason from emotion, knowledge from belief, and so on. For him, there is little to be gained from lamenting the situation and everything to be gained from joining the game. Post-truth, for Fuller, is nothing less than a consequence of the “democratization” of knowledge, especially in the context of social media and the internet where information and counterinformation is readily available. Fuller describes the new game in terms taken from Vilfredo Pareto’s theory of the circulation of elites, where “establishment lions” represent organized power, patronage, and conformity, which is disrupted from time to time by “innovator/ speculator foxes.” Professional organizations, journals, peer review, PhDs, doctoral programs, and so forth, are how a “monopoly” on knowledge claims is maintained and reproduced. The academy needs to get with the new game.

In this short chapter, I want to address these issues through an indirect route, albeit with the UK—more properly, England—and its universities as an exemplar of a new “knowledge regime” with potentially wider significance (depending on the extent to which its audit and other policies are diffused).⁷ I don’t think that the changing role of social media can be understood independently of changes in wider social structures of opinion formation and it is the latter that will be my focus. The problem, I will suggest, is less to do with how social media function and much more to do with separate changes to the social structures of expertise associated with neo-liberalism.⁸ For example, “fake news” has an older sibling, “rumor,” which had previously been argued to provide some positive sociological functions, generating solidarity in moments of great anxiety or uncertainty.⁹ However, “rumor” was stabilized and neutralized by “trusted” sources, frequently

associated with major institutions like those of public broadcasting and universities.

What has changed, I will suggest, is less that social media operating in the context of wider neoliberal public policies have put those institutions under challenge, and more that neoliberal policies have undermined their social role. I will illustrate my argument in the case of universities. I will begin from their status as institutions of the public sphere, as developed by Habermas in his groundbreaking study of early bourgeois civil society. In his introduction, McCarthy describes the public sphere as, "a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest ... [came to be] ... institutionally guaranteed."¹⁰ What is significant about this definition is that it stresses processes of opinion formation separately from mechanisms of political representation through institutions of the state. At the same time, it situates them between political representation and the other activities of members of society expressed through private associations, including the market exchanges of emerging capitalism. The public sphere, then, is distinct from both the market and the state. It is the space in which the university operates.¹¹

As an institution of the public sphere, the university has multiple functions, giving rise to Clark Kerr's description of it as a "multiversity."¹² Among these functions is its service to what the North American sociologist Talcott Parsons called the "citizenship complex" of modern societies.¹³ Whereas the university had previously served the reproduction of elite culture—that is, a restricted public sphere—Parsons suggested that this was changed by developments in wider society (what he called the societal community): "The principle of equality has broken through to a new level of pervasiveness and generality. A societal community as basically composed of equals seems to be the 'end of the line' in the long process of undermining the legitimacy of ... older, more particularistic ascriptive bases of membership."¹⁴

Parsons was conscious that the modern university resembled the modern corporation in terms of its scale. However, he rather neatly reversed the argument to suggest that it was the modern corporation that was becoming like the university in so far as "associational" (or collegial) modes of management followed from the separation of ownership from control. Managers were increasingly called upon to have a "political" role reconciling the different claims upon the organization, as a short-term orientation to profits was transcended.¹⁵ In this way, management took on some of the

characteristics of a profession, including being credentialized within university business schools. Parsons was writing before the neoliberal return to shareholder value as the governing principle of the corporation.

The university is also responsible for what Parsons calls the “cognitive complex” within modern societies; that is, the knowledge associated with an emergent knowledge society. However, that knowledge is at the service of the values that underpin the citizenship complex of the public sphere. While “professions” are the “outward” face of the knowledge society and its demand for specialized expertise, the university is increasingly the guarantor of the knowledge base of that expertise and its development through research. However, on this analysis, the professions do not represent a self-interest derived from their monopoly of warranted knowledge, but a public interest, organized under democratic values of a society of equals. In contrast, under neoliberalism, private interests aggregated through the market have become the definition of the public interest, while claims of public benefits realized through the public funding of higher education are represented as an ideological cover for the sectional interests of faculty (operating as a profession).

The characteristic of knowledge production in the modern university is that it should be produced through dialogue and collegiality, obeying norms of what Habermas calls communicative rationality.¹⁶ Although the knowledge produced can be marketized through various kinds of application, the point is that it is, at its core, produced in a process unconstrained by the market or direct political power. To the extent that it is so constrained, then, its status as public knowledge is reduced to instrumental interests or political authority.

It is precisely the broader values of openness to criticism and revision that make universities and their academics particularly vulnerable to the claims of open access. The high cost of journal subscriptions and the limited access to university libraries, as much as the technical language of academic discourse, has served to restrict the extension of the ideals of communicative rationality. In this context, free open access represents a means of realizing those ideals, constituting the academy as a free, open-access, virtual library.

It is here that we can see the role of a different development of open access alongside private proprietary claims. In the UK, the driver of open access was less a democratic imperative than an economic imperative.¹⁷ How might university research be made available to small and medium businesses? How might open access encourage academic researchers to

commercialize their research through claims to intellectual property rights, claims made more imperative by open access to their findings?

In this way, the creation of a new academic commons as the completion of the democratic function of the university has faced a new enclosure movement. Thus, open data access provides a new possibility of data mixing and proprietary algorithms outside the public sphere. Indeed, as we shall see, it gives rise to the possibility of ceding the evaluation of public services to private data analytic companies. This arises in the context where commercial companies—for example, pharmaceutical firms—have been reluctant to commit to the publicity of data, especially those of negative outcomes associated with clinical trials.¹⁸ The use of commercial data analytics can now also take place within the academy itself, where data analytics companies offer data for the performance management of staff. In this way, collegiality is transformed into hierarchical management, where data-tracking points of performance are automatically generated by the ordinary activities of academic publishing, downloading, and citing. The audit regime of big data becomes inescapable at the same time as it becomes available to managers.

The wider context is the application of neoliberal policies to all public services, including universities themselves. This can be illustrated in policies for English higher education. The Jarrett Report of 1985 first introduced managerial practices from the private sector through the recommendation that departments should be treated as devolved cost centers. However, the search for market proxies has become more accentuated since the Browne Review and the various White Papers that have set out a new regulatory framework.¹⁹ In effect, the only functions that are recognized for universities are the development of human capital and the enhancement of economic growth.

With regard to the first, it was proposed that since students were the beneficiaries of higher education, they should pay for their degrees through fees (supported by income-contingent loans). At the same time, for-profit providers would be allowed access to students with loans and would be allowed the title of university. In this way, single function, teaching-only, for-profit providers were allowed to compete with multifunction universities, potentially undermining the viability of those other functions in the name of competitive efficiency.

As far as research is concerned, the Government introduced the "impact agenda," where all publicly funded research should show a direct benefit for identifiable users. Whereas the logic of the teaching reforms was that *the*

beneficiary should pay, the logic of the impact agenda is the opposite. There should be no publicly funded research without a beneficiary, *but the beneficiary should not pay*. It might be argued that the taxpayer is the ultimate beneficiary of economic growth, but this would require the latter to be inclusive. Neoliberal public policies, in contrast, are associated with widening inequalities.²⁰

The impact agenda, for example, recommends that research should be coproduced with beneficiaries.²¹ In consequence, it proposes that research should be aligned with the interests of those beneficiaries and modified in order better to realize them. The intention of the impact agenda was to speed up the commercialization of research, or the time from idea to income. However, it does allow the beneficiaries to be noncommercial. In principle, this suggests that research might also be directed toward democratic ends, even where the democratic functions of universities are demoted. However, this misses the significance of wider changes to the public sphere.

Neoliberal policies have also encouraged public authorities to become commissioners of services rather than direct providers. The providers of public services are increasingly for-profit companies and charities. The latter, for their part, are also recommended to coprovide services together with for-profit companies. For example, academy schools are frequently set up as charities with back-office services provided by for-profit companies and consultancies. In this context, the putative “public good,” or “social justice” focus of charities becomes attenuated, at just the moment that coproduction becomes a requirement of the impact agenda.

Michael Barber (member of the Browne Review,²² former chief education adviser at Pearson, and now designated head of the new regulatory body, the Office for Students) regards these arrangements as following on from the disruptive effects of new technology, which are “unbundling” organizations.²³ This unbundling includes not only the separation of teaching from research within universities, but also the creation of new research bodies and private consultancies outside universities, all seeking access to public funding and all potential agents within the coproduction of research.

This changing nature of civil society is well expressed in a report for the National Coalition for Independent Action:

the force of entering the welfare market, increasingly as bid candy, has had disastrous consequences for voluntary services and their ability to respond to community needs. The capitulation by many in the voluntary sector, including its national and local leadership bodies, to these government agendas has done

much damage to the ability of voluntary organisations to work with and represent the interests of individuals and communities under pressure. Privatisation and co-option into the market is driving down the conditions of staff working in voluntary services, diminishing their role in advocacy and jeopardising the safety of people using such services.²⁴

In effect, the impact agenda requires academics to align their research with private interests, rather than a general public interest. For the most part, academics have acceded to the wider environment that has eroded academic freedom and nonutilitarian claims about the public value of research. For example, the UK Academy of Social Sciences sponsored a Campaign for the Social Sciences, which lobbied MPs at the time of the 2015 general election. However, the value of social science it promoted was its benefit to policymakers and commercial organizations seeking to understand different aspects of the public's resistance to their endeavors.²⁵ It will be recalled that this was an election in which the Conservative Party manifesto committed a Conservative government to holding a referendum on leaving the European Union, yet there was no mention of social science research facilitating public debate.

In Donald Trump's campaign for the presidency (and his conduct of office since) and the campaigns for the UK to leave the European Union, expertise was disparaged as self-interested and social media used to promote fake news, much to the dismay of many commentators; perhaps, especially, academics. Yet I have suggested that the attachment of expertise to interests has been a gradual process within the academy as neoliberal policies for higher education have been promoted. As Chris Newfield argues, the university has been privatized, where neoliberalism favors the market over professionalism, regarding the latter as a monopolistic producer interest.²⁶

Yet acceding to a neoliberal project for universities—"putting the student-consumer at the heart of the system"—opens the university to a wider neoliberal project. The neoliberal preference for markets also involves the representation of professional organization as a monopolistic producer interest. This is precisely what Fuller sets out in the justification of post-truth. He calls post-truth a consequence of democratization, but he conflates self-determination within the market and democracy. We can understand the conflation by going back to an older sociological (pragmatist) understanding of democracy in terms of "publics" and discursive processes of decision-making. The wider project of neoliberalism is to displace publics with markets, and thus the displacement of democracy itself by the market.

Little wonder that a “hollowed out” public sphere is vulnerable to populism. And part of the hollowing out of the public sphere is the privatization of the public university. In the history of reflection on the nature of the university, the figure of Kant reigns large—the faculty of philosophy, for him, was emblematic of the university’s relation to truth. Without irony, Fuller suggests that the emblem of the university in the age of post-truth is the business school, writing, “if any part of the university deserves to carry the torch for anti-expertism, it is business schools.”²⁷

It is associational relations of civil society that provide a defense against populism at the same time that neoliberalism requires populism as its supplement. Thus, Donald Trump promotes corporate interests in the name of populism; while in the UK, a hard neoliberal Brexit is promoted in the name of “taking back control.” The problem at hand is not that of the potentially malign role of social media, but of a broken public sphere. I began this article with a brief discussion of David Goodhardt. He has coined the terms “somewhere” and “nowhere” to characterize a new political division between those rooted in place (and nation) and those who represent unrooted elite values.²⁸ This makes it difficult to understand how a populism grounded in the former can be made to serve corporate interests. However, his distinction echoes an older one put forward by the sociologist Alvin Gouldner, in order to understand the new “associational” corporation, that of “cosmopolitans” and “locals.”²⁹ The former were those with professional expertise deriving from outside the corporation, while “locals” were those whose careers depended on the corporation. The latter were integrated with the hierarchy of the corporation and suspicious of the former. In this context, academics are the quintessential “cosmopolitans,” but we are increasingly under pressure to be “locals” (acting to sustain our corporate “brand”).

The new populist “localism” is one that subverts “cosmopolitanism.” However, it is not “elites” that are its target but public values, including those of the university and its functions of critique. It is in the latter context that open access now functions to provide data for private companies providing managerial consultancy to a new polity run as an exercise in public relations.

Notes

1. Soumitra Dutta and Matthew Fraser, “Barack Obama and the Facebook Election,” *US News & World Report*, November 19, 2008, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election>.

2. See Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, July 29, 2016), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2818659>.

3. See Hannes Grassegger and Mikael Krogerus, "The Data That Turned the World Upside Down," *Vice* (blog), January 28, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mg9vvn/how-our-likes-helped-trump-win. It was less the ideology of Brexit that inspired the Trump campaign than the techniques of campaigning. Differences in the use of Facebook by the Obama campaign and by Cambridge Analytica have been analysed by Manuela Tobias, "Comparing Facebook Data Use by Obama, Cambridge Analytica," *PolitFact*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2018/mar/22/meghan-mccain/comparing-facebook-data-use-obama-cambridge-analyt/>. The differences turn on the consent protocols, where the Obama campaign told potential subscribers what data and how their data would be used, whereas Cambridge Analytica did not.

4. See Eric Kaufmann, "'Racial Self-Interest' Is Not Racism," *Policy Exchange* (blog), 2017, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/racial-self-interest-is-not-racism/>. For further discussion, see, John Holmwood, "Claiming Whiteness," *Ethnicities* 20, no. 1, 2020.

5. Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (New York: Anthem Press, 2018).

6. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

7. Higher education is a devolved responsibility in the UK and recent reforms to higher education have applied most comprehensively to England, although those associated with research are more wide-ranging.

8. For present purposes, neoliberalism will be defined as a political commitment to private property, markets, and deregulation. In this context, it represents a form of political ideology governing public policy. Its hegemonic role is consistent with criticisms of economists and their expertise.

9. Dan E. Miller, "Rumor: An Examination of Some Stereotypes," *Symbolic Interaction* 28, no. 4 (2005): 505–519, <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2005.28.4.505>.

10. Thomas McCarthy, "Introduction," in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, by Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), xi.

11. For a detailed elaboration of these arguments, see John Holmwood, "The University, Democracy and the Public Sphere," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38, no. 7 (2017): 927–942, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2016.1220286>.

12. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

13. Talcott Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, Foundations of Modern Sociology Series (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).
14. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, 119.
15. Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
16. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, vol. 2. (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).
17. Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings (“Finch Group”), “Accessibility, Sustainability, Excellence: How to Expand Access to Research Publications.”
18. See, for example, Vasee S. Moorthy et al., “Rationale for WHO’s New Position Calling for Prompt Reporting and Public Disclosure of Interventional Clinical Trial Results,” *PLOS Medicine* 12, no. 4 (2015): e1001819, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001819>.
19. See Edmund John Philip Browne, “Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance,” Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-browne-report-higher-education-funding-and-student-finance>; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, “Students at the Heart of the System.,” 2011, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, “Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice,” 2016, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523396/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf.
20. In its advocacy for inclusive growth, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for example, argues that, “Inclusive growth is economic growth that creates opportunity for all segments of the population and distributes the dividends of increased prosperity, both in monetary and non-monetary terms, fairly across society. In many countries, people have not seen their incomes rise for years. The gap between rich and poor has widened, with those at the top capturing the ‘lion’s share’ of growth.” See OECD, “Inclusive Growth,” accessed May 10, 2019, <http://www.oecd.org/inclusive-growth/#inequality-puts-our-world-at-risk>.
21. See Research Councils UK, “Pathways to Impact,” n.d., <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/innovation/impacts/>.
22. Alternatively known as the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, chaired by Lord Browne of Madingley, the former chief executive of BP. This review considered and determined the future direction of higher education funding in England. See note 19.

23. Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly, and Saad Rizvi, "An Avalanche Is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead" (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2013), https://s3.amazonaws.com/avalanche-assets/avalanche-is-coming_Mar2013_10432.pdf.
24. Penny Waterhouse, "Homes for Local Radical Action: The Position and Role of Local Umbrella Groups" (National Coalition for Independent Action, Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services, June 2014), 2, <http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2014/08/Role-of-local-umbrella-groups-final.pdf>.
25. Campaign for Social Science, "The Business of People: The Significance of Social Science over the Next Decade" (SAGE, 2015), <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/businessofpeople/>. Among its statements are, "Advancing and applying science depends on profits, policies, markets, organisations and attitudes" (from the executive summary); "The study of public values and attitudes is vital, too, especially when innovation prompts uncertainties and concerns, as with genetically modified crops or shale gas extraction" (page 6); and "without a better grasp of people, technological advances may be frustrated, or blocked, and fail to realise their potential" (page 5).
26. Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016). For discussion of the parallels with the UK, see John Holmwood, "Inegalitarian Populism and the University: British Reflections on Newfield's *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*," *British Journal of Sociology*, 69, no. 2 (2018).
27. Fuller, *Post-Truth*, 22.
28. David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).
29. Alvin W. Gouldner, "Cosmopolitans and Locals: Toward an Analysis of Latent Social Roles," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1957): 281, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2391000>.

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