

The role of the academic in the era of fake news

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Today I want to revisit a piece I wrote for the [Times Higher Education](#) outlet back in August (7th) 2018, entitled “The need to be both scholar and expert is an urgent one”.

I was writing this in a Brexit context in looking at the myriad ways that misinformation, or downright lies, were widely used – mainly by the Leave side it has to be said – in the run-up to the referendum campaign.

In so doing, I wanted to get to grips with the notion that the Internet, rather than necessarily being a means to more widely distil objective, evidence-based information, could just as easily become a platform to amplify existing prejudices and outright nonsense.

After all, even the [Flat Earth Society](#) have a website – they clearly know how to build one and even have a regular podcast series. There they promote their views as “alternative science” and rage against a “globularist conspiracy”.

In a similar fashion, the current Covid-19 Pandemic has given anti-vaccination campaigners a renewed vigour in attempting to spread their dubious views.

Whilst these groups are on the fringe, the liberating power of the Internet has given them new reach, and as research into the activities of the far right has shown, highly distasteful ideas around race and class can be fed by such groups through social media to inveigle their way into more supposedly mainstream conversations...

It is not too difficult to imagine an all-powerful Party (with a capital P) could actually charge its mathematicians to construct a “dual system of astronomy” – Ptolemaic and Copernican – depending on its whims.

George Orwell, in writing his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, said as much about the ability of multi-media technology to enable an all-controlling state to impose its double-think ideology on a captive populace and denigrate the empirical, sceptical mode of thinking.

As the arch-totalitarian O’Brien, interrogating the novel’s hero, Winston Smith, expounded “*The Earth is the centre of the universe, the sun and the stars go round it.....* to which he then added ‘*For certain purposes, of course, that is not true. When we navigate the ocean, or when we predict an eclipse, we often find it convenient to assume that the earth goes round the sun and that the stars are millions upon millions of kilometres away. But what of it?*’”

No doubt the flat-earthers and anti-vaxxers regard themselves as sceptical and fighting an all-controlling state – but note the key word here is empirical; based on evidence and experimentation, control trials and all that.

In other words, those painstaking elements of the scientific method that are built up over years of hypothesising, testing and exposing one’s theories to the great philosopher Karl Popper’s principle of falsification, whereby a theory should be exposed to testing so as to critically assess its propositions. The exact opposite of axiomatic political dogma.

We might be tempted to dismiss Orwell’s dark alternative history as a literary device, rather than an accurate prediction of the future.

However, as the election of Donald Trump, on-going stories of Russian interference in Western elections and the Brexit referendum highlighted, it is not just fringe groups that seek to exploit the power of the internet and social media to influence and manipulate public opinion, but also those in positions of considerable power.

Indeed, as George Monbiot, writing in the *Guardian* pointed out, “*micro-targeting on social media, peer-to-peer texting and now the possibility of deep-fake videos allow today’s politicians to confuse and misdirect people, to bombard us with lies and conspiracy theories, to destroy trust and create alternative realities more quickly and effectively than any tools 20th-century dictators had at their disposal.*” [\[1\]](#)

It is in this context where academics have had to increasingly struggle to get their voices heard, as in the social media buzz it can be very difficult to get your points above the background static and all too often, what passes for so-called conversations on social media is often little more than opposing viewpoints shouting past each other; more-or-less abusively; or otherwise like-minded people agreeing with each other like a band of nodding dogs.

For academics then, there is a huge imperative to being able to put their ideas forward in the public domain in a manner that is accessible to the wider public. Thus the traditional imperative to “publish or perish” has been superseded by the need to ensure one’s research is rigorous and relevant and thereby generate impacts on the wider economy and society.

However, as we have seen in the UK Government’s response to Covid-19, the views of academics can be readily adopted or discarded as the political imperative shifts – the simple example of reducing physical distancing requirements so as to enable a wider range of businesses to open, namely, pubs, hairdressers and restaurants, despite the widespread concerns of medics and public health professionals. In such a fashion has “stay home protect the NHS Save lives” morphed into “stay alert control the virus”, at least in England [\[2\]](#).

Moreover, in the realm of economics, the response to the pandemic saw a jettisoning of neoliberal orthodoxy in favour of a package of support measures that the most ardent Keynesian could only have dreamed of. And for the most part, all glowingly approved by a right-wing media that would have howled in rage should any Labour Government have proposed the same measures.

Watch as the Keynesian ideas that were once derided are adopted and then discarded and derided again as what passes for normality returns. Or to paraphrase from 1984 again, “the lie becomes truth and then becomes a lie again”.

For academic economists denoting themselves as Keynesian, it can be disheartening to see one’s ideas lambasted as leftist heresy one minute and then only to be adopted at times of crisis.

In contrast, those professionals working in the City of London financial services sector who are termed “economists” by the media – even though in some cases they might not have an economics degree – were rapidly rehabilitated in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis as economic orthodoxy reasserted itself in the guise of austerity.

That many of these individuals simply repeated conventional nostrums about free markets and their purported “efficiency” only exposed the fragility of their so-called expert status in failing to predict the 2008 financial crisis. Not that it has stopped the same siren voices warning about the costs of the pandemic, and that there will inevitably have to be spending cuts and/or tax rises in the near future to pay for it all.

That the economic theories these opinions are based on have been abused and misrepresented bypasses public debate. For example, the simple claim that a wage rise will generate unemployment in neoclassical modelling is based on a particular set of assumptions in a model referred to as a partial equilibrium, where the effects of a change in one variable are analysed under the assumption of ceteris paribus – that is, all else being held equal.

Drop the ceteris paribus assumption and explore the impact of other extraneous factors on the impact of a wage rise such as a resultant increase in aggregate demand and the simple postulate of wage rises as always leading to an increase in unemployment goes out the window.

However, right-wing politicians rule out these models selectively because they are seen by them to provide academic “evidence” to support their free-market ideology.

The great economist and public intellectual, John Maynard Keynes, writing in 1936 was all too acutely aware of this tendency by political leaders to selectively adopt ideas when he presciently commented that “[m]admen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back”.

However, academics are defined as credible by grounding their arguments in some type of robust evidence base. Should the evidence change, then that would lead one to changes one’s assumptions.

Suffice to say, in the realm of human interaction characterised by the social sciences, separating the “objective” from the “normative” has been a difficult activity at the best of times. In the 21st-century context of all-pervasive multimedia, the academic function of enquiry that I referred to earlier – that of testing, reviewing and publishing one’s research findings – becomes ever more pressured by the need to inform public debate.

However, the urgency of this in a political climate where democratic norms are increasingly coming under attack demands it. For academics then, the challenge is to stay true to their basic ethical and scholarly principles, and keep pushing to get their ideas out in the public domain and engage directly with the public.

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/02/donald-trump-boris-johnson-fascism-us-uk-rightwing>

[2] *The devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have handled the messaging quite differently.*