Roads to Pseudocracy

Charting Major Contributors to the Rule of Falsehoods

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Abstract

Recent efforts to understand post-truth or post-factual politicking and governing contribute to our understanding but tend to be as short-term, ad hoc when not haphazard, and behavioral rather than structural as the politicking and governing on which they report or comment.Such“current events” journalism is fraught with perils for readers lay and professional, who may overlook perspec­tives that undermine remedies proposed. Readers may mistake the latest manifestations of habits years, decades, or centuries old for some recent developments. Even if ad hoc, myopic solutions to nar­rowly behavioral problems provided more hope than we should expect, dealing with transitory symptoms rather than enduring systems seems short-sighted. In this paper I explore chronic, struc­tural, systemic sources of the pseudocracy or rule of falsehoods in which we live and—more to my point—have lived for some time. Relying on contributions of Edward Bernays, George Orwell, Daniel Boorstin, Jacques Ellul, Neil Postman, and especially Murray Edelman to understanding mass communication and public opinion in the 20th century, I trace an etiology of our factually chal­lenged 21st century.  The proposed paper contextualizes a spate of academic and journalistic ac­counts of a post-factual politics by deploying insights from the major thinkers above.  It concludes that "post-factuality" may not have been inevitable but that 1) the permanence of public relations concoctions of shared realities [Bernays], 2) the enduring utility of spinning semantics [Orwell], 3) the suffusion of imagery [Boorstin], 4) the ubiquity and necessity of propagandizing [Ellul], and 5) the triumph of infotainment [Postman] each and all tended to select for useful untruths and to select against less tractable truths in a manner best theorized and synthesized by Murray Edelman.

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**Introduction**

In our age there is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics’. All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia.

George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Recent efforts to understand post-truth or post-factual[[2]](#footnote-2) politicking and governing contribute to our understanding but tend to be as extemporized[[3]](#footnote-3) as the politicking and governing on which they report.Such“current events” journalism is fraught with perils for undergraduate readers but for post-graduate scholars as well. Readers lay and professional may overlook perspec­tives that un­dermine or resist remedies proposed. When analyses of post-truth politick­ing do not consider false­hoods or partial truths in historical, chronic, or social contexts, readers may mistake as novel be­haviors of presi­dents or spokespeople that are the latest manifestations of habits years,[[4]](#footnote-4) decades,[[5]](#footnote-5) or centuries[[6]](#footnote-6) old. Even if ephemeral, myopic palliatives for narrowly behavioral problems provided more hope than one should expect, such works treat symptoms rather than address systems.

In this paper I explore chronic, structural, systemic sources of the pseudocracy in which we live and—more to my riposte to current journalism—have lived for some time. Relying on theoret­ical and practical contributions of Edward Bernays, George Orwell, Daniel Boorstin, Jacques Ellul, Murray Edelman, and Neil Postman to understand mass communication and public opinion in the 20th century, the proposed paper traces an etiology of our factually challenged 21st century.  The paper contextualizes a spate of academic and journalistic accounts of a post-factual politics by de­ploying insights from the five major thinkers above.  It concludes that "post-factuality" may not have been inevitable but that the evolution of public relations [Bernays], semantics [Orwell], imagery [Boorstin], propaganda [Ellul], symbolism [Edelman], and infotainment [Postman] tended to select for useful untruths and to select against less tractable truths.

**My Problem: Extemporaneous Works Look Past Chronic, Systemic Trends In U. S. Politicking to Sensationalize Current, Striking Developments.**

Richard Rich I was lamenting. I've lost my innocence.

Thomas Cromwell Some time ago. Have you only just noticed?

Robert Bolt, screenplay for “A Man for All Seasons”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Recent works on mendacity or lack of veracity in politics and government play up the imme­diate, letting novelty real, imagined, or asserted convey supposed urgency. Lee McIntyre proposes near the end of *Post-Truth* solutions to formulations of problems with veracity, formula­tions ad hoc and oriented by and for an immediate present dominated by President Donald J. Trump.[[8]](#footnote-8) Amanda Carpenter in *Gaslighting America[[9]](#footnote-9)* focuses on President Trump’s shtick with great expertise and speci­ficity, but that very specificity is a problem in that it directs us to her instant fixes and away from more persistent aspects of merchandizing at which Donald Trump was proficient long before his presidency. Bruce Bartlett in *The Truth*[[10]](#footnote-10) rehearses means by which tounspin or fact-check reports but understates the degree to which modern misinformation and mendacity dodge or defy discon­firma­tion.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Age of Trump[[12]](#footnote-12) has abounded in far more publications than those I have listed in this paragraph, as will be evident in the footnotes of the paper as we go along. The exam­ples I have adduced above, however, should suffice to illustrate my problem with the extemporizing.

Extemporaneous works reiterate when they do not retrace a long tradition in political letters: the mendacity and deception with which advertising, marketing, politicking, and governing teem, what in 1992 I termed “pseudocracy,” the rule of falsehoods.[[13]](#footnote-13) Benjamin Ginsberg ma­gis­terially covered the traditions of misinformation and disinformation in *The American Lie*.[[14]](#footnote-14)George Orwell published “Politics and the English Language” in two periodicals in 1946. Carl Bybee wrote of the “post-factual age” in 1999 but traced debates about informing and deforming public opinion back to Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. In an earlier WPSA paper Hans A. Ostrom and I created a long footnote of studies about lying in modern politics published before 2012.[[15]](#footnote-15) Before “Crooks and Liars”[[16]](#footnote-16) liberally blogged about politicos and journalism, *Lies of Our Times*[[17]](#footnote-17) (1990-1994) inveighed against convention in *The New York Times*. Fakery and falsity hav­ing long afflicted poli­ticking and reporting in the United States and elsewhere, newer angles on per­sistent pseudocracy de­manded increasing the stakes of works in the last few years. Authors of late have accentuated—hyped is a less pleasant term—departures from veracity and facticity that have been chronicled long and often.

That the latest authors to be “shocked, shocked” to discover mendacity in our midst appear to have hyped the novelty of their findings is deliciously ironic, but all of us who publish tend to over­state the stakes of our writings. The problem I address in this paper rather is that extempora­neous works regarding floods of falsehoods tend to focus on bad actors and wicked acts hence to overlook systems. Chronic, systemic features of politics and government likely foredoom panaceas that authors append to trendy alarums.

In each subsequent section of this paper I introduce a systemic feature of politicking and govern­ing through mass communication in the United States. I introduce a figure who exemplifies that systemic feature: a forerunner who foresaw qualitative shifts that are in the latest works over­looked in favor of “hot takes.” I then “locate” the precursor and the systemic feature in a theoretic­cal synthesis I derive from the late Murray Edelman. Since Professor Edelman stated that he was organizing unconventional premises about politicking and governing that were at once some­what postmodern and a great deal more realistic than conventional presumptions, I rely on Dr. Edelman to establish longer run trends that contrast starkly with recent works on post-truth politicking and governing. In this manner I hope to reveal just how extemporaneous and exigent recent analyses and interpretations have been and how much those works and authors may misdirect our attention if we permit them to do so.

I do not attempt to set the systemic features in some sequence. I do not hazard even a rickety framework. I do not examine many interactions. For this paper I settle for distinguishing analytically six sorts of systematic features underplayed in recent works on post-truth. In order, these six systemic features are 1) multiple ersatz realities; 2) cunning semantics; 3) pseudo-events; 4) suffusing, ubiquitous orchestration; 5) top-down manipulation; and 6) infotaining spectacle. These six systemic features each and all are and long have been far more consequential for politicking and governing than upticks or even surges in falsehoods. What is more, each systemic feature affects politicking and governing in ways neither simply true nor simply false, neither truly factual nor truly counter-factual.

Systemic Feature One—**Multiple, ersatz constructions render realities in ways neither strictly true nor strictly false, neither strictly factual nor strictly counter-factual.**[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Otter**: I’ll tell you what. We’ll tell Fred you were doing a great job taking care of his car, but you parked it out back last night and this morning … it was gone. We report it as stolen to the police. D-Day takes care of the wreck. Your brother’s insurance company buys him a new car.

**Flounder**: Will that work?

**Otter**: Hey, it’s gotta work better than the truth.

“Animal House” (1978)[[19]](#footnote-19)

Post-truth tracts build, at least in part, on gotcha episodes such as Kellyanne Conway’s im­promptu, artless defense that demonstrably false claims about attendance at the inauguration of Presi­­dent Trump were “alternative facts.” Ms. Conway reproved Chuck Todd of NBC and MSNBC “You're saying it’s [the claim that President Trump drew a larger audience for his inauguration than President Obama had in 2009] a falsehood. And . . . Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alterna­tive facts [to that].” Mr. Todd responded: “Alternative facts aren't facts; they are falsehoods.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Mr. Todd’s easy derision was widely shared, especially when Ms. Conway followed soon thereafter with reference to a “Bowling Green massacre” that has never happened.[[21]](#footnote-21) Such facile outrage echoed when in 2018 Rudolph Giuliani offered that truth isn’t truth, that facts are subjective judgments rendered by someone with a point of view.[[22]](#footnote-22)For all the folderol about “alternative facts” and the like,[[23]](#footnote-23) Ms. Conway and Mr. Giuliani were hardly incorrect to presume that multiple sets of “facts” were available whenever estimates, evidence. inferences, widely shared guesswork, and other disputa­ble claims were asserted to be factual. Even if premises alleged to be truths have grown of late ever more ephemeral and transactional, the factuality and truthfulness of propositions are almost always relative to some presumed, apparent, commonsense definition of reality.

However, “realization” that operatives—spinmeisters in politics and mass media; promoters of puffery in advertising and marketing—might refashion received realities into realities more help­ful to themselves or their clients or both was at least a century old. Pioneer of public relations Ed­ward Bernays was adamant that his art was not merely to shape opinion but in fact—so to speak—to shape reality.[[24]](#footnote-24) Long before academics and intellectuals bandied about the social construction of reality, Bernays demanded that audiences see what he was doing as reconstructing actualities to suit his clients.[[25]](#footnote-25) Until Bernays revolted against tobacco publicists’ fabricating doubts about carcinogenic and other baneful effects of using tobacco products, he reveled creating “alternative facts” consis­tent with alternative realities.

The notion of **Multiple,** **Ersatz Realities**, then, need not signify some misspeaking by Conway; “actually,” construction of alternative actualities more for the benefit of those who conjure than of targets is a tactic of long standing in public relations and in politicking and governing. Long before academics and journalists conjured “information silos” or “echo chambers,” politicos and publicists concocted multiple actualities that competed with one another to advance “truths” and “facts” both to be accepted by “us” and to be rejected by “them.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Competing actualities replaced previously common, commonsense constructions with elements neither truly authentic nor obvious­ly counterfeit, ersatz representations crafted to suit the ends of clientele better than other renditions of reality. Such renditions[[27]](#footnote-27) are socially constructed to be sure, but they displace or overlie common sense socially constructed or conventional perceptions communally shaped ordinary understandings.

Indeed, we dismiss Ms. Conway ‘s “alternative facts” too easily when we forget and hence resist acknowledging the degree to which spin and talking points make up what we take to be reality. Those who politick and publicize so depend on such arts that 20th century popular culture abounds with reminders. Cary Grant in “North by Northwest” glibly defends his profession in the back of a taxicab: “In the world of advertising, there’s no such thing as a lie. There’s only expedient exag­geration.”[[28]](#footnote-28) In *The Art of the Deal*  Donald J. Trump or Tony Schwartz or both inscribe

The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion.[[29]](#footnote-29)

A key to understanding multiple, ersatz realities is to see exaggeration as an overlay on what targets are likely already to understand in a manner that those who remake reality can predict and thus presume. The publicist, the politico, and other purveyors play up welcomed perceptions, construc­tions, and interpretations and play down unwelcome perceptions, constructions, and interpretations to refashion received reality into an alternative reality bristling with alternative facts.

At least since Bernays and the advent of public relations, it follows, politicos and other publicists have reconstructed realities tactically and transactionally to serve ideological and commer­cial interests. Whenever politicos render reality, “facts” will always be relative to selected con­struc­tions and truth will always be shaped by motivated reasoning. This first systemic feature is all the more remarkable when extemporaneous works treat of motivated reasoning but skip or skimp on one of the consequences of motivated reasoning.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The range and tendentiousness of “facts” may increase the greater the degree of partisan or ideological polarization. The more that collectivities coalesce around truths held to be indisputable, the more that fact-checking risks siding with a wing or a faction and therefore siding against another wing or faction. Under such conditions, “to lie” may be to fail to adhere to “facts” that are disputa­ble. Indeed, many of the talking points or shibboleths favored by one or another group are pre­sumed and asserted as much to be rejected by “them” as to be embraced by “us,” in which case fact-checking may itself become the construction or promulgation of talking points or shibboleths.

In sum, if “facts” are always or even often verified relative to competing, captious construc­tions, if truth is always or often shaped by motivated reasoning, and if determinations of facts and truths alike are matters of taking sides, then discussions of “post-truth” discourse may too starkly appear to be constructions preferred by this or that observer or critic imbued with confi­dence in her or his own grasp of reality. To be certain, if scientific or expert consensus prevails, confidence in one’s grasp of objective or nearly objective reality may be justified. For most matters or political dis­pute, however, such consensus will not exist but will be presumed when not outright conjured. At the least, then, analysts and observers should pretend humility in asserting that truth and facts are being abandoned. Indeed, “MAGA” [an acronym for “Make America Great Again”], like “Change” or “Compassionate Conservatism” or other sloganeering, summons fantasies and phantasms real to targets of the slogans. “It’s Morning in America” is a metaphor or myth truly appealing to many and absurdly wishful to others. Symbols, slogans, and shibboleths promise a future reality preferable to the present. That promise yields far more votes than empiricism can ever deliver. Compared to such promises, fibs and whoppers are as nothing.

Systemic Feature Two—**Purveyors and conveyors enthrall consumers and mystify citizenry with cunning semantics neither strictly true nor strictly false, neither strictly factual nor strictly counter-factual.**

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of popula­tion* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.

George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Readers familiar with George Orwell’s classic “Politics and the English Language” may chuc­kle that Orwell therein hyped then “solved” problems of his own devising yet in this paper I am as­sailing recent journalism for the same practice. Nonetheless, Orwell exemplified the proposi­tion that devious semantics might beguile the populace with clever phrases. What Orwell labeled his “catalogue of swindles and perversions”—in actuality a somewhat stale list of Orwell’s gripes about usage as of 1945 but by intellectual tradition a guide for the critical reader—featured euphemisms inset above. Of greatest moment for the present paper, Orwell posited that words and phrases might enthrall readers with soothing phrases that made citizens more pliable subjects of authori­tarians, a contention that Orwell, of course, made in more chilling form in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.[[32]](#footnote-32) Orwell there­by accentuated Bernays’ insight that wordsmiths might concoct not merely slogans but opinions, attitudes, and thereby social actualities. Orwell’s contentions in his dyspeptic essay and his dystopian novel have since been bolstered by chilling nonfiction such as *The Language of the Third Reich* and *The Tyranny of Words*.[[33]](#footnote-33) Long before such coinages as “truthiness” or “post-fact” or “post-truth,” Orwell and his successors excoriated writers and thinkers for making readers and audiences prisoners of cunning wordplay.

Orwell’s warnings have been widely acknowledged, yet recent monographs overlook implica­tions of **en­thralling semantics**. Fact-checking and monographs on fact-checking[[34]](#footnote-34) ignore the de­gree to which slogans and shibboleths furnish too little truth-value to be checked even if suppor­ters of deceivers would listen. Assailing Democrats for “socialism” or “anti-Semitic attitudes” and at­tacking the President for “fascism” or “white supremacy” circumvents truth and so escapes fact-checking. How often are such verbal assaults designed to avoid disconfirmation? To the extent that relevant realities are constructed and constructed realities serve ideological and material interests, “facts” will always be relative to selected constructions and “truth” will always be shaped by reasoning aimed at making sales or per­suading supporters.

Orwell’s euphemisms[[35]](#footnote-35) inset above bely such a facile appreciation of truth and falsity; as will so much political spin and partisan badinage. As Murray Edelman noted in 1988, conventional views of public opinion presume a polity in which demonstrable facts may be established and such facts circumscribe manipulation. Yet communicators formulate euphemisms, talking points, and spin to elude easy disconfirmation. Well might Jackson and Jamieson appeal to potential readers by promis­ing to show how to go about “Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation,” but the authors must know that crucial facts are “found” far less often than fabricated. Dr. Frank Luntz confessed in the subtitle of his 2007 work *Words That Work: It’s not What You Say, It’s What People Hear[[36]](#footnote-36)* that he cast facts for clients to manage impressions. Dr. Luntz’s title recalls—but his book does not cite—Dr. Edelman’s subtitle of 30 years before: *Political Language: Words That Work, Policies That Fail*.[[37]](#footnote-37) Purvey­ors of political appeals and conveyors of purveyed formulations in mass media select “words that work” by anticipating which phrases and symbols will distract attentive citizens from policies that solve politicos’ pragmatic problems far better than solve any real-world problems.

Clever phrasings enthrall to such an extent, then, that invocations of verity and factuality understate when they do not deny difficulties of exposing disinformation and misinformation. Especially works on fact-checking shortchange the ephemerality of truths and facts. Spinmeisters are employed to preserve plausible deniability, to excuse artless expression, to allege misquotation or misinterpretation. Dog whistles that create double-think and coded communiques that emulate double-talk insulate bunk from being debunked effectively and lastingly.[[38]](#footnote-38) Calling phrases puffery or spin lulls observers from critical thinking or alarm just as assurance that transparent blather will not be believed by any reasonable observer lulls us all. [Remember when we all were assured that no reasonable person would be taken in by Donald Trump?] Social media only make matters worse, for the professional commentators about whom and to whom Orwell wrote in 1945 were far more like­ly to resist mystification than mean [*sic*] users of the Internet in these post-literate times.

Systemic Feature Three—**Pseudo-events ambiguously related to realities approximate extra­vagant expectations in ways neither strictly true nor strictly false, neither strictly factual nor strictly counter-factual.**

In my religion we say, 'Act as if you had faith, and faith will be given to you.

Frank Galvin [Paul Newman] in “The Verdict[[39]](#footnote-39)

# Were we to date the foregoing systemic features that prescribe panaceas for post-fact prob­lems, we might invoke Plato’s Theory of Forms and his Myth of the Cave for multiple, ersatz re­alities and his Socratic definition-splicing and casuistry for cunning semantics. Modern mass me­dia would, it’s true, transmogrify Platonic insights, but we could treat of elite constructions to ply most citizens through recreations [*sic*] and wordplay. To get to the third systemic feature than com­plicates post-truth alarms and alleviations, however, we must get to modern mass media. In his clas­sic *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* Daniel J. Boorstin adduced the seminal observa­tion that imagery related to shared realities ambiguously at best.[[40]](#footnote-40) This image or that ritual was, strictly speaking, neither factual nor counterfactual but “actual” in the sense of being acted out by collec­ti­vities [even if the collectivities were far-flung virtual audiences for television or other media]. Truths might be “enacted” by drawing variegated members of audiences to different meanings or referents, each of which related to some reality or actualities with which audiences endowed imagery and, by so endowing imagery, acted on images constructed in part for their ambiguities. Based on represen­tations choreographed and scripted by politicos and created to be conveyed by mass media, indi­vid­ual consumers might shop and individual citizens might vote.

# Dr. Boorstin coined “pseudo-event” to recognize that in mass-mediated society the most publicized occasions will be designed to be disseminated. Planning and execution of a publicity stunt or a photo opportunity focuses on conveying one or a few “takeaways” [slogans or catch­phrases or other cunning semantics] and on denying reporters and spectators competing themes or interpretations. Boorstin was gentle when he noted that the reported happening bore at best an ambiguous relationship to any acknowledged reality; in practice, happenings designed for dissemina­tion need bear no relationship to any shared, common­sense actualities and may work best if they can­not be disconfirmed because they have few experiential referents. Indeed, the reporting of the apparent and the displacement of the actual is paramount lest aspects of the actual intrude upon or complicate the apparent. Propagation of pictures scripts, images and symbols that resound themes and that fend off contrary impressions is a major art of electioneering, governing, and other forms of communication in the modern United States.

When “underlying reality” is contested, therefore manifold, therefore unclear and maybe nonexistent, then ambiguous imagery makes factuality or truth even harder to establish and thus lying almost impossible. What is worse, pseudo-events and other imagery fulfill expectations far beyond ability of any shared realities, facts, or truths. Facts and truth seldom compete well with fictions and desires. Seeming beats being and appearances overwhelm actualities because pseudo-events, images, symbols, slogans, and shibboleths are selected tactically and strategically to do so. Whole profes­sions, including marketing and electioneering, dedicate themselves to supplanting inconvenient truths, facts, and especially complexities with convenient formulas and simplicities.

# Proliferation of images and illusions designed to resound messages and to resemble expecta­tions loops expectations and imagery to the amplification of each. Well-crafted imagery increases expectations and make them extravagant; extravagant expectations overmatch actuality and demand appearances embellished and hyperbolic. Indeed, when the apparent delivers what no actual can or likely will, coherence of correspondences between expectations and events substitutes for cogency.

**Pseudo-events** will tend to be associated with actions that members of audiences immediate and vicarious must take to complete the virtual event. Such actions—contributions, commitments to canvass,[[41]](#footnote-41) and pledges to support—set abstract appeals into concrete responses and thereby fix attitudes. Transformation of spectators into participants commits passive viewers and listeners to constructions fabricated to benefit politicos and their clientele more than targets.

In sum, **pseudo-events**’ imagery and scripting fan then fulfill expectations far beyond what any shared facts or truths or verities can and seem more real than reality. Politicos design messages and stage events in a manner that increases likelihood that the events will be covered and that the coverage will suit the **ersatz realities** that politicos have determined to purvey. These purveyors attend to scripts and symbols to assure themselves that outlets that convey events and images will be inclined to reinforce or at least to stay out of the way of selling points. Citizens attentive to coverage of public affairs then and thereby are surrounded by what purveyors design and conveyors amplify. Words and images that “work” are repeated and propagated; words and images that do not “work” are culled. Against this triad of purveyors of current events, conveyors of current events, and “cur­rent events mavens,”[[42]](#footnote-42) the presence or prevalence of propositions neither factual nor true seems in­significant. Even outright, outrageous lying is a lesser matter than why and how and when lies and verities alike are accepted as *de rigueur*.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Systemic Feature Four—**Purveying politicos and conveying journalists orchestrate construc­tions to surround consumers and to suffuse public spaces with information neither strictly true nor strictly false, neither strictly factual nor strictly counter-factual.**

It’s easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled.

Mark Twain [neither proved nor disproved]

T-shirts and internet to the contrary notwithstanding, Mark Twain probably never wrote or uttered the sentence inset above.[[44]](#footnote-44) Nevertheless, that sentence captures a fourth systemic feature that long predated pseudocracy and that seriously compromises panaceas for untruths and non-facts: success­ful communicators so integrate wily statements and sly lies into discourse that no fact-check or debunking will extricate falsehoods from many individual or collective minds. Wel­fare queens, McDonald’s coffee ladies, and other figures, symbols, and images are too widely re­nowned and, more to the point, too intricately interwoven with attitudes and actions to be displaced.Whentriads of purveyors, conveyors, and “current events mavens” correspond and hold if not fill the mediated public space, they may not constitute iron triangles but will often corral atten­tion and credence.

This fourth systemic feature—**encompassing orchestration**—was articulated by Jacques Ellul more than half a century ago. In *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* Professor Ellul ar­gued the necessity of states’ orchestrating propagandas[[45]](#footnote-45) to surround individuals in masses with or­thodoxy—prescribed approved facts, truths, and interpretations—that would incline indi­viduals to orthopraxy—actions that would tend to commit the mobilized to prescribed informa­tion—to “set” the orthodoxy. Mass media projected orthodoxy to isolated individuals amid sup­portive groups, at once reinforcing approved information and repelling disconfirming information. Orthodoxy com­bined with orthopraxy hewed individual attitudes, beliefs, and impressions to suit those who purvey propagandas and their clientele, which turned masses of such individuals into audiences whose pre­dictable conventions might be managed by élites and their propagandists. “Needs” of purveyors, conveyors, and citizenry came to be met by propagandas coordinated to match behaviors and beliefs to agendas and programmes. Formulators and conveyors of propa­gan­das could agitate targeted col­lectivities into alarm and calm collectivities into acquiescence. Élite or­chestrators [regimes, media] inculcated a sense of citizenship that stoked in “current events mavens” a felt need to hold and to spout opinions and in low-information non-voters a proclivity for distrac­tion and obliviousness. Re­cent polarization may have segregated consumers of news into bubbles and information silos and echo chambers, further focusing orchestrated orthodoxies and orthopractic actions.[[46]](#footnote-46)

An allied contribution of Ellul’s *Propagandes* was to reveal that the **encompassing orchestra­tion** of attitudes and actions required successful propagandists be as factual as possible. Flatter­ing as it was to those who rejected propaganda to dismiss propaganda as tall tales and lies purveyed to the credulous, Ellul argued that the tactics and designs of propagandists could not work on popula­tions with but a modicum of socialization and preparation. Ellul noted that “The more ig­norant and miserable a person is, the more easily will he be plunged into a rebel movement. But to go beyond this, to do a more profound propaganda job on him, one must educate him.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Ellul stated that Goebbels demanded that propaganda be as factual as his people could make it and posited:[[48]](#footnote-48)

The idea that propaganda consists of lies (which makes it harmless and even a little ridiculous in the eyes of the public) is still maintained by some specialists; … But it is certainly not so. For a long time propagandists have recognized that lying must be avoided. … The truth that pays of is in the realm of *facts*. The necessary falsehoods, which also pay off, are in the realm of *intentions* and *interpretations*. This is a fundamental rule for propaganda analysis. …

Finally, there is the use of accurate facts by propaganda. Based on them, the mechanism of suggestion can work best. Americans call this technique innuendo. … The public is left to draw obvious conclusions from a cleverly presented truth, and the great majority comes to the same conclusions. To obtain this result, propaganda must be based on some truth that can be said in few words and is able to linger in the collective consciousness. In such cases the enemy cannot go against the tide, which he might do if the basis of the propaganda were a lie or the sort of truth requiring a proof …

***Intentions and Interpretations.*** This is the real realm of the lie; but it is exactly here that it cannot be detected. If one falsifies a fact, one may be confronted with unquestionable proof to the contrary. … But no proof can be furnished where motivations or intentions are concerned or interpretation of a fact is involved.

Who would vouchsafe citizens from lies and liars had best understand that effective propa­ganda will tend to abound in precise, accurate, and defensible facts and truths and will tend to in­sulate fibs and untruths from detection by means of interpretations and intentions.Once we con­cede that even informed, attentive individuals are less rational receivers processing news—“We report. You decide.” https://www.foxnews.com/projects/dillards/—than they are addicts plied with shibboleths and slogans prefabricated by purveyors to manage impressions, interpre­tations, and responses to accord with common sense, the lesser importance of this or that untruth is evident.

I do not dwell further in this paper on how Ellul’s other insights about modern mass com­munications undermine fussing about facts beyond the following observations. Ellul showed how élites and masses, regimes and constituents, and collectivities and individuals met mutual psycho­logical, sociological, and political needs and wants created by propagandists and exploited by politi­cos. Those interlocking needs and wants shape **multiple, ersatz realities** that are contexts for contention and contest. Those contests are conducted by means of talking points that **cunning semantics** willraise as much for the opposition and opponents that shibboleths and symbols gen­erate as for the coalition of allies, causes, and grievances they foster. Shibboleths and symbols in turn erect echo chambers and information silos that mobilize adherents and commit them to indi­vidual and collective [albeit mass-mediated and vicarious] actions manifest in **pseudo-events**. Indi­vidual and collective actions belie the truths on which post-truthers necessarily rely to reveal misin­forma­tion and disinformation. In sum, Ellul fits together individuals, collectivities, and regimes to reveal how modern propagandizing conjures alternative realities and alternative vernaculars that per­sistent­ly inform news-worthy happenings; by contrast, post-truth analysts focus on liars and lies that often are as evanescent as news cycles and breaking developments can make them.

Systemic Feature Five—**Purveyors and conveyors orchestrate interpretations & impressions neither strictly true nor strictly false, neither strictly factual nor strictly counter-factual.**

The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' [...] 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.'

When Ron Suskind attributed to an unnamed aide to President George W. Bush the senti­ment inset immediately above, the quotation inspired some shock and maybe a little awe.[[49]](#footnote-49) That formulation, however, was far from as novel as the outrage might have signaled. Precursor Bernays preached that publicists created political realities with elective affinities for actions and atti­tudes of “history’s actors.” Precursor Orwell in “Politics and the English Language” and in *Nine­teen Eighty-Four[[50]](#footnote-50)* [as well as *Keep the* *Aspidistra Flying*,[[51]](#footnote-51) a novel about advertisers] dramatized how sym­bols, semantics, and spin could bolster publicists’ constructions into beguiling representations. Precursor Boorstin revealed how image-makers stage-managed events created to be covered by mass media in ways that by turns generated agitation and acquiescence to meet modal expectations. Pre­cursor Ellul showed that modern propagandists surrounded individuals amid collectivities in mutual­ly reinforcing interpretations so that consistency, coherence, and conviction could simulate cogen­cy.[[52]](#footnote-52) The four systemic features that I inventoried above prefigured, presaged, or predicted the pragmatism that horrified some readers of Suskind’s reporting: that reality-based thinking and see­ing must routinely succumb to “history’s actors” making up facts and truths as they blundered along.

More than a decade before Suskind’s report, Murray Edelman had contrasted a conventional representation of politicking and governing with an unconventional representation that better cor­responded to the systemic features in U. S. politicking and governing. In Table One I “translate” Edelman’s unconventional representation to elucidate the fiendish realism of Suskind’s informant.[[53]](#footnote-53)

**Table One**

**Edelman’s Contrasting Views Reformulated**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Naïve, Conventional View of**  **Reality-Based Community** | **Shrewd, Realistic View of**  **Reality-Creating Actors** |
| Problems exist in real world inde­pendently of the wishes and schemes of élite pseudocrats [purveyors and conveyors] and of the fantasies and wants of mass consumers. | Élite purveyors & conveyors reverse-engineer problems to suit their own mate­rial conditions, interests, & be­liefs, distracting mass consumers from alternative definitions of problems. |
| Purveyors of policies eventually solve most problems by official acts. | Purveyors of policies never solve most problems but manage them to their own advantage. |
| Conveyors [mass media] publicize solutions ameliorating conditions and ending or reducing problems. | Conveyors cover official solutions that distract from conditions, making pub­licized problems fade while latent conditions persist. |
| Consumers of news [current events mavens] presume that purveyors and conveyors define the most pressing conditions as problems then attack those problems with solutions the best of which are made into policies. | Consumers of news [current events mavens] seldom learn of solutions that contradict or compromise the interests or beliefs of élite purveyors. Instead, they learn that pressing but insoluble conditions are part of natural order. |

My object in Table One is not to pronounce Edelman’s unconventional view true or fac­tual or to denounce naïve, conventional views untrue or counterfactual. Rather than such cate­gorical self-indulgence,[[54]](#footnote-54) I aim to argue that the more and more often that politicking and govern­ing resemble Edelman’s representation the less that truth-telling and fact-parsing will matter. The more that élite purveyors and conveyors construct rather than merely acknowledge or recognize con­ditions, problems, and solutions, the less factuality or truthfulness may even per­tain to for­mu­lation and execution of policy [Systemic Feature One]. Likewise, the greater the sway of cunning semantics on politics and policies, the less that facts “on the ground” or truth will affect politick­ing or policymaking [Systemic Feature Two]. Proliferation of events choreo­graphed to convey a message or theme with at best an ambiguous, indeterminate relation to any real-world situation means that verisimilitude will often be beside the point [Systemic Fea­ture Three]. Moreover, to the extent that modern propaganda and pseudocracy sur­round indi­viduals within masses with mutually reinforcing, circle-closing, infidel-excluding inter­pre­tations and valu­ations, this factlet or that factoid matters little whatever its truth or falsity [Systemic Feature Four].

From Edelman’s insights, then, we learn that mass-mediated facts and truths mystify and dis­tract. Fact-checkers and other critics of pseudocracy may identify and “remedy” bad behaviors and bad language of individual campaigners or leaders but may by such exposures foster less understand­ing of system(s) or systematics and more naïvete, cynicism, and credulity. The modern Diogenes who reports or opines about the truth or the facts may mean well but in countering fakery and false­hood Diogenes must presume and thus reinforce Edelman’s naïve, conventional policy-making. Ex­posing the individual hypocrisies and duplicities of purveyors who formulate problems, solutions, and policies takes those who attend to current events further from understanding the sys­tem by fo­cusing on often trivial mistakes and misbe­haviors. Presuming as the basis for debunking behavioral expectations Edelman’s conventional representation of politicking and policymaking encourages be­liefs that politics and governance normally resemble candid, rational discourse, beliefs belied in every day’s newspapers, newscasts, and Internet feeds.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Systemic Feature Six—**Infotainment teems with factoids neither strictly true nor strictly false, neither strictly factual nor strictly counter-factual.**

Film historian Jon Tuska asked [Director John] Ford why he’d veered away from the real history [of the OK Corral]. “Did you like the film?” Ford asked. Tuska said it was one of his favorites. Ford replied—sharply—“What more do you want?[[56]](#footnote-56)

An obvious answer to Mr. Ford’s question would be that a viewer of the movie “My Darling Clementine” might prefer facticity alongside entertainment to entertainment’s trumping veracity, es­pe­cially regarding such matters as who died, who was wounded, and who was not actually present in the gunfight in the proximity of the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona.[[57]](#footnote-57) Director Ford might then intone that his job was to entertain. Such an answer would at least align “Holly­wood values” with “news values” in the later Twentieth Century, even before 24/7 news and social media. Indeed, Mr. Ford might fairly be interpreted to endorse elevating showbiz values above the traditional values claimed by journalists and historians, much as the editor of *The Shinbone Star* did in a later Ford film: “This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

The late Neil Postman warned in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* that infotain­ment—admixing information and entertainment—shallowed the discourse of the public by filtering reports through entertainment biases of mass media. Long before post-truth became a common charge, Professor Postman posited that society’s dominant medium—Postman’s primary target was television—shapes views of truth by what the medium designates as reliable knowledge and what it derogates as mere speculation or opinion.[[58]](#footnote-58) Television selects for items that have some arguable importance but formulates reports and frames discourse according to values and tastes at least as oriented by entertain­ment that grabs attention and delivers viewers to commercials as by more journalistic notions of news-worth. Substance is not necessarily subordinated to form, but suitability for “Show Busi­ness”—that is, both entertainment and commercial values—will affect or infect forms, thus media, thus discourse.[[59]](#footnote-59) Whatever veracity or factuality the substance of tele­vision news may have, entertaining forms and commercial-appeal [*sic*] must reduce either or both.

Perhaps even more serious than this compounding of journalistic gravitas and showbiz glitz, Postman noted that television broadcasts tended to truncate and to decontextualize news and con­versations news might inform. Truncation favored hype, conflict, and other attention-grabbing ele­ments over nuance, perspective, and reflection that might require more airtime and fewer pictures. Decontextualization favored show-worthy scripts. Truncation and decontextu­alization then sepa­rated happenings from the shared, consensual settings and understandings in which they proceeded by means of brisk editing and frequent cuts to emphasize striking pictures and dialog. As a result audiences were barraged by staccato stimuli with few pauses [other than for ads] to let viewers relax, recover, reflect, or—perhaps most important—talk among themselves about what they heard and what they did not hear. Amid the nightly shell-shocking, the truths conveyed amid the news became at best distorted and at worst displaced by headlong pursuit of ratings. Tele­vision sacrificed preci­sion, accuracy, and veracity for entertainment, hence much of the truth and many of the facts that authors have pronounced diminished in the 21st century were, Postman observed in 1985 and Paddy Chayevsky in 1976 [the screenplay for “Network”], being systematically leached out of the polity.

Generalizing from Postman’s and Chayevsky’s television-centric polemics, we may identify across mass media [including social media] proclivities that subordinate substance [factuality, vera­city, subtlety, complexity] to pizzazz. In pursuit of eyes, ears, and clicks, modern mass media hype, reduce, contort, and distort.Mass media havelong normalized **ersatz realities**, magnified **pseudo-events**, and stressed alternative facts, three sub­sets of information most widely known be­cause most consistently covered.[[60]](#footnote-60) Reporters and editorscondense to accommodate the flashy into the news holes of print and the airtime on broadcast and cable news shows. On social media users exag­gerate, compact, and troll, fragmenting perhaps even scattering attention, focus, meaning. In print media, broadcast media, cable media, the blogosphere, and now social media coverage and commen­tary tend to personalize [emphasize individuals and behaviors over institutions and trends], to dra­matize [emphasize emotional and sentimental elements], to fragment [emphasize self-contained stories more than broader connections], and to reduce politics to games and gamesmanship.[[61]](#footnote-61) Thus do the novel technologies of spectacle become spectacles that feature so little truth as to defy truth-testing or fact-checking, which in turn obviates abject lying.

Spectacles thus beguile by instructing chronic viewers of television and habitués of other media how celebrity talking heads reconceive the world for consumers of current events to follow. Entertainment values and the characteristic logic of each medium may deplete or subvert factuality or truth of substance or “merely” reconstitute technically verified factlets through recontextualiza­tion. Against powerful, all-encompassing media formats and styles and biases, the degree of veri­similitude or common acceptance may matter little.

**My Problem Restated: Extemporaneous Works Look Past Chronic, Systemic Trends in U. S. Politicking to Sensationalize Current, Striking Developments.**

Now all the truth is out,

Be secret and take defeat

From any brazen throat,

For how can you compete,

Being honor bred, with one

Who were it proved he lies

Were neither shamed in his own

Nor in his neighbors' eyes;

William Butler Yeats, “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing”[[62]](#footnote-62)

Amid the Era of Trump, authors and analysts are so tempted by the here and now that they shortchange what they should acknowledge. In 1988 and in 2001, the late Murray Edelman be­queathed academics, intellectuals, and journalists alike an understanding of politicking and governing in the United States that might enable us to cope with post-factual politicking and govern­ing.[[63]](#footnote-63) To do so, however, we shall have to play down immediate, ephemeral distractions such as President Trump’s Herculean—heroic?—mendacity and misinformation. Since social media have mass-medi­ated our polity 24/7, ducking bright, shiny canards and averting our attention from spectacles designed to seize our notice and our hot takes will not be easy. Articles and books on mendacity are themselves forms of infotainment that brim with informative banter and entertaining blather.

The Twitter Presidency reveals novel politicking that seems not merely quantitatively but qualitatively distinct from prior politicking. Sensible observers and theorists, however, must resist the temptation to dwell on shameless self-promotion and shameful deception of self and others when far more sinister, far more systemic flaws bedevil U. S. politicking and governing. President Trump’s rallies, for example, afforded him and continue to afford him enthusiastic live audiences guaranteed to accept misinformation and disinformation uncritically. Do these **pseudo-events**—happenings planned [and scripted even if Mr. Trump departs from the scripts]—differ qualitatively from the “Man Alone in the Arena” ads Roger Ailes staged for Richard Nixon in 1968?[[64]](#footnote-64) Do Presi­dent Trump’s branding of mainstream media as enemies of the people and trashing of so-called fake news summon **ersatz realities** so very differentfrom William Safire’s and Patrick J. Buchanan’s al­literative attacks scripted for Vice President Spiro Agnew in 1969-1970?[[65]](#footnote-65) Are tweets chock-full of fibs and fables the problem more than that mass media cannot or will not refrain from carrying lies and canards if **cunning semantics** pairs sound bites—all the news that fits on the chyron?[[66]](#footnote-66)—with compelling pictures? Are Trump’s spectacles major improvements on or departures from preceding **infotainment** such as the Clinton-Gorepost-convention bus trip in 1992? Does Mr. Trump disrupt and distract drastically differently from **interpretations and intentions** brandished by Swift Boat veterans in 2004? Are Mr. Trump’s slurring and labeling worse **shibboleths** than opponents’ deem­ing Senator Barry Goldwater insane in 1964 [substituting for the Goldwater campaign’s “In Your Heart You Know He’s Right” the vicious “In Your Guts You Know He’s Nuts”]? Given the six systemic [ir]regularities I have adduced above, candidate Trump’s campaign and President Trump’s communication—I here make a distinction without much difference, I admit—seem less an aber­ra­tion and more an alternative.

In this paper I have advocated perspective on U. S. politics and government as they are conducted or misconducted [*sic*]. If we elect to generalize President Trump’s “Lie of the Year” awards 2015-2017[[67]](#footnote-67) or President Obama’s 2013 “Lie of the Year” [“If you like your health careplan, you can keep it.”][[68]](#footnote-68) into society-wide decadence, we should at least devote some attention to society-wide decay longstanding and longer-term. Bernays’ reality-bending public relations, Orwell’s dys­topia-risking semantics, Boorstin’s expectations-raising imagery, Ellul’s all-encompassing propagan­das, Postman’s mind-numbing infotainment, and Edelman’s synoptic and synthetic model of the hegemony of élites each and all give us quite enough over which to fret. Those six systemic features long have been and still are major highways to pseudocracy; contemporary fibbing is but a byway.

**Coda**

Truth is a risky proposition. It's the nature of mediocre human beings to believe that lies are necessary, that they serve a purpose, that truth is subversive, that candor is dangerous, that the very scaffold of communal life is supported by lies.

Anne Rice, *The Wolf Gift[[69]](#footnote-69)*

I do not dismiss consternation about mendacity. Integrity, credibility, honor, and candor mat­­ter to me as to every academic. However, I do insist that dishonesty, misrepresentation, fabrica­tion, and other deceptive practices tend to subvert our democratic republic at a retail but not whole­sale level. By contrast, the six systemic features subvert self-government wholesale and whole hog. Or, as three analysts recently put the matter,

. . . our study suggests that we should focus on the structural, not the novel; on the long-term dynamic between [*sic*] institutions, culture, and technol­ogy, not only the disruptive technological moment; and on the inter­action between the different media and technologies that make up a society’s media ecosystem, not on a single medium, like the internet, much less a single platform like Facebook or Twitter.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Appendix One

Notes on Edelman’s Two Representations in *Constructing the Political Spectacle*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Problems exist in real world inde­pendently of observers' wishes. | Creators fashion problems to suit their mate­rial conditions and be­liefs. |
| Most problems are eventually solved by official solutions. | Most problems are never solved. |
| Solutions remove conditions, ending problems. | Solutions distract attention from conditions, making problems disap­pear while conditions persist. |
| Many solutions are considered, but only the best are made part of policy. | Many solutions contradict interests or beliefs of elites and so are never even considered. |
| Most pressing conditions are de­fined as problems and then attacked with solutions that are units of policy. | Most pressing, insoluble conditions are never officially admitted to be problems, but are treated as part of natural order and ignored. |

1. “Politics and the English Language” <http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit>; last accessed 25 March 2019. This classic appeared in *Horizon* (April 1946) pp. 252-265 and in *The New Republic* (17 June 1946) pp. 872-874 and (24 June 1946) pp. 903-904. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Henceforth in this paper, I use “post-truth” to stand for decline of veracity and increase in deceit, post-factuality, mendacity, misinformation and disinformation, and similar vices. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this paper I use “extemporized” to convey short-term, ad hoc, tactical, transient, topical, and behavioral rather than long-run, consistent, strategic, lasting, chronic, and structural publications. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. # For examples, Carl Bybee, “Can Democracy Survive in the Post-Factual Age? A Return to the Lippmann-Dewey De­bate About the Politics of News” (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication 1999) [https://doi.org/10.1177/152263799900100103](https://doi.org/10.1177%2F152263799900100103); last accessed 25 March 2019 and Christopher Hitchens, *No One Left to Lie To: The Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton* (Twelve 2012) or *No One Left to Lie To: The Values of the Worst Family* (Verso 2000).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E.g., Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. # E.g., Benjamin Ginsberg, *The American Lie: Government by the People and Other Political Fables* (Paradigm Publishers 2007).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie\_scripts/m/man-for-all-seasons-script.html; last accessed 5 March 2019. In Mr. Bolt’s play, the sequence goes: “RICH (*Hastily buffooning*) I’m lamenting. I’ve lost my innocence. CROMWELL You lost that some time ago. If you’ve only just noticed, it can’t have been very important to you.” Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons: A Play in Two Acts* (Vintage International 1990) p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts The MIT Press 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Amanda Carpenter, *Gaslighting America: Why We Love It When Trump Lies to Us* (Broadside Books 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *The Truth Matters: A Citizen’s Guide to Separating Facts from Lies and Stopping Fake News in its Tracks* (New York: Ten Speed Press 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Were it not too neat a trick to pull, I should be tempted to pair each current work with one or more precursors that likewise overlooked chronic features to focus on immediate challenges and outrages. Before McIntyre’s *Post-Truth*, Farhad Manjoo’s *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society* (Wiley 2008) covered similar topics. Before Bartlett’s *The Truth*, Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson pioneered infact-checking in *unSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks 2007). Before Peter Oborne authored *The Rise of Political Lying* (Simon & Schuster 2005), F. G. Bailey authored *The Prevalence of Deceit* (Cornell University Press 1991). Before “the Age of Trump” [Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (Tim Duggan Books 2018)], Ralph Keyes wrote *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (St. Martin’s Press 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (Tim Duggan Books 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. William Haltom, “Commentary,” *Puget Sound Magazine* (Summer/Fall 1992) p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ##### Ginsberg, [*The American Lie*](https://www.amazon.com/American-Lie-Government-People-Political/dp/1594514127/ref=sr_1_1?crid=1HB4LNXNZR0W4&keywords=the+american+lie&qid=1553954346&s=books&sprefix=american+lie%2Cstripbooks%2C193&sr=1-1).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. William Haltom and Hans A. Ostrom, “When Did We Start Just Making Shit Up? Origins of U. S. Pseudocracy,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association, Portland OR 2012, p. 6, n. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://crooksandliars.com/>; last accessed 26 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. LOOT [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Newt Gingrich in *Post-Truth* [pp. 3-4] may reflect less brutal cynicism and more blunt pragmatism than Dr. McIntyre allows. Although I share Dr. McIntyre’s incredulity at Speaker Gingrich’s stubborn insistence on “facts” that contradict official statistics and seem to reflect sentiments or misimpressions [and to support the position for which Speaker Gingrich was arguing—with apologies to Vice President Gore a most convenient truth], I must concede that Mr. Gingrich’s insistence that “feelings” about and especially fear of crime may yield “facts” that politicos are disposed to honor. My concession, of course, does not make Mr. Gingrich correct. However, McIntyre’s and my incredulity does not make Mr. Gingrich a liar or a fellow indifferent to truth. Dr. McIntyre might contemplate the following lines from Kurt Luedtke’s script for the movie “Absence of Malice.” Wine-merchant Paul Newman delivers newspaper reporter Sally Field the facts of life: “You don't write the truth. You write what people say. What you overhear, you eavesdrop. You don't come across truth that easy. Maybe it's just what you think, what you feel.” http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie\_scripts/a/absence-of-malice-script-transcript.html [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077975/quotes/?tab=qt&ref_=tt_trv_qu>; last accessed 29 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/22/politics/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts/index.html>; last accessed 10 March 2019. I replaced a comma splice with a semicolon. Ms. Conway would later explain that she meant that additional facts and alternative information supported Mr. Spicer’s claims. I am inclined to accept Ms. Conway’s protest to the extent that “alternative facts” counter fact-claims that are “in fact” estimates, indicators, or evidence rather than objective, outright facts. Longstanding ambiguities and usages of “facts” and synonyms similarly afforded Chuck Todd ingen­uous indignation based perhaps on epistemology pioneered by Sergeant Joe Friday on “Dragnet.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/03/kellyanne-conway-refugees-bowling-green-massacre-never-happened>; last accessed 29 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/08/19/giuliani_truth_isnt_truth.html>; last accessed 29 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See David E. McCraw, *Truth in Our Times: Inside the Fight for Press Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts* (New York: All Points Books 2019); Jill Abramson, *Merchants of Truth: The Business of News and the Fight for Facts* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Mark Crispin Miller’s introduction to Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (Ig Publishing 2005) pp. 9-30; Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (Basic Books 1996) Part I. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Bernays admired his contemporary Walter Lippmann’s understanding of public opinion even though Mr. Lippmann took the very different tack that expertise and critical intelligence might generate consensus regarding facts and truth. Bernays and Lippmann alike would manage or manipulate opinion; Bernays and Lippmann diverged, it seems to me, on whether managing opinion created [Bernays] or acknowledged [Lippmann] shared reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political* Spectacle (University of Chicago 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I deploy “renditions” to remind readers and myself that “to render” means by turns 1) to cause to be or become; make: *to render someone helpless*; 2) to do; perform: *to render a service;* 3) to furnish; provide: *to render aid;* 4) to provide due reward; 5) to try out oil from fat, blubber, etc., by melting. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/render?s=t>; last accessed 21 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053125/quotes/?tab=qt&ref_=tt_trv_qu>; last accessed 29 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Donald J. Trump and Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (Ballantine Books 2015) p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See McIntyre, *Post-Truth* and Manjoo, *True Enough*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Orwell prefaces the epigraph with his explanation of euphemizing: “In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Everyman’s Library 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. ##### Victor Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich* (Bloomsbury Revelations 2013); Stuart Chase, *The Tyranny of Words* (Harcourt Children’s Books 1959); Don Watson, [*Death Sentences: How Cliches, Weasel Words and Management-Speak Are Strangling Public Language*](https://www.amazon.com/Death-Sentences-Management-Speak-Strangling-Language/dp/1592401406/ref=sr_1_3?keywords=Don+Watson&qid=1553858414&s=books&sr=1-3) (Gotham 2005).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jackson and Jamieson, *unSpun*; Bartlett, *The Truth Matters*; <https://www.factcheck.org/>; last accessed 21 March 2019; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/?utm_term=.4c3abadf82f0>; last accessed 21 March 2019; <https://www.politifact.com/>; last accessed 21 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. In the inset quotation from Orwell, uses of pacification, transfer of popula­tion or rectification of frontiers, and elimination of unreliable elements are not merely euphemisms but rank obscenities. To do their dirty work without being dismissed too easily, however, such phrases must not be untrue or counterfactual. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Frank I. Luntz, *Words That Work: It’s not What You Say, It’s What People Hear* (Oxford University Press 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Murray Edelman, *Political Language: Words That Work, Policies That Fail* (Academic Press 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. # [Ian Haney López](https://www.amazon.com/Ian-Haney-L%C3%B3pez/e/B00FLZ31KK/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1), *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (Oxford University Press 2014); Thom Hartmann, *Cracking the Code: How to Win Hearts, Change Minds, and Restore America's Original Vision* (Berrett Koehler Publishers 2007); William Lutz, *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone’s Saying Anymore* (HarperPerennial 1996).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. <https://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Verdict,-The.html>; last accessed 25 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. (Vintage 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (Vintage 1973) pp. 25-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In this paragraph I am informed by Ellul’s discussion of “current events men,” an idea I politically corrected in “Current Events Mavens: Should We Teach Students to Follow Current Events?” unpublished paper for the annual meeting of the Pacific Northwest Political Science Association in Portland, Oregon in 2014. Ellul, *Propaganda,* pp. 43-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. When dishonesty and honesty “work,” each will likely be favored. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Please see <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/did-mark-twain-say-its-easier-to-fool-people-than-to-convince-them-that-they-have-been-fooled/> to find quotations that substantiate but do not quite match the sentiment in the epigraph. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ellul initially published his classic in French with the title *Propagandes*. Because Ellul discusses multiple kinds of propa­ganda, the English title should have been *Propagandas*. However, I have used *Propaganda* for the English translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. However, a recent study has disclosed that such polarized bubbles, silos, and echo cham­bers may be more contrary to fact and truth on the extreme right than near the center or on the left. Ychai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford University Press 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ellul, *Propaganda*, pp. 53, 56-57. Italics in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. ["Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush,"](https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?ex=1255665600&en=890a96189e162076&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland) *The New York Times Magazine* (17 October 2004) <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>; last accessed 24 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (Secker and Warburg 1962). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. # I rehearse in this paragraph features established earlier in this paper. I might have cited myriad other works that might have led observers to expect the pragmatics articulated by Mr. Suskind’s informant: E. E. Schattschneider’s “Whose Game Do We Play?” in *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s Guide to Democracy in America* (Cengage 1975) or Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder*, Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-Building* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1975) are examples. Edelman 1971 —established well before either Bush presidency that framing often outper­formed facts, that presumptions unspoken outperformed data & expertise, and that attention-arresting audacity dis­tracted from inconvenient truths.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Please consult Appendix One to see how I derived Table One. Appendix One features notes that I created contem­poraneously with my reading *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. The contrasts I drew in those notes represent my most faithful reading of Professor Edelman’s constructions. Table One, by contrast, reflects my concerns in this paper. Lest the instant paper distort what even I would admit and have admitted that Edelman was saying, I include Appendix One. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. I do not mean that Professor Edelman was thinking categorically. He intended the contrast as a heuristic, I suspect. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. E.g., how many campaigns that, reporters discover with mock shock, are not informing or instructing citizens about issues need one endure before one concludes that campaign operatives are not honest and not public-spirited but dishonest or evil? Thus do post-truth analysts and apologists for electioneering in America yoke naïvete with cynicism. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Mark Boardman, “John Ford – True to Hollywood” <https://truewestmagazine.com/true-to-hollywood/>; last accessed 18 March 2019. I corrected the spelling of Mr. Tuska’s first name in the inset quotation. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. “Just about every detail of the gun battle at the OK Corral is unhistorical. The positioning of the corral …, the time, the positioning of the participants, the identities of the sur­vivors and the killed, etc.” <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038762/goofs/?tab=gf&ref_=tt_trv_gf>; last accessed 24 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Penguin Books 2005) Ch. 2 “Media as Epistemology.” [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Ch. 6 “The Age of Show Business.” [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Experts on mass media long have chronicled contortions and distortions: David L. Paletz and Robert M. Entman, *Media Power Politics* (Free Press 1981) or W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion* 1st edition (Longman 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion* 10th edition (University of Chicago Press 2016) pp. 36-53. On fragmen­tation, please see Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Ch. 7 for his classic “Now This.” [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/12882/to-a-friend-whose-work-has-come-to-nothing>; last accessed 24 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. While *Constructing the Political Spectacle* will enhance anyone open-minded enough to read it and heed it, I have a later work more in mind as a source of sober reflection on post-fact publication: Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation* (Cambridge University Press 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President 1968* (Pocket 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Cf. Buchanan https://www.newsmax.com/patrickbuchanan/humphrey-kennedy-maga-mueller/2019/03/01/id/904975/?ns\_mail\_uid=c435cef6-8362-49d2-8e5e-364f5d7fa141&ns\_mail\_job=DM18684\_03032019&s=acs&dkt\_nbr=010104k9phcs [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. On television news a chyron is that band on the lower part of a screen that provides snippets of text to headline a report. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. <https://www.salon.com/2017/12/12/politifacts-lie-of-the-year-goes-to-donald-trump/>; last accessed 28 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2013/dec/12/lie-year-if-you-like-your-health-care-plan-keep-it/>; last accessed 28 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. p. 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda,* p. 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)