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## Preface

This Element builds on and extends an inquiry about post-truth and climate denial introduced in an earlier essay (Fischer 2019).[1] The goals of this more elaborate study are twofold: the first is to examine the implications of post-truth and the spread of disinformation for public policy and policy analysis; the second is to show the way that interpretive policy analysis can help us better understand the politics associated with post-truth policy argumentation. After presenting the empirically oriented foundations of public policy studies, this contribution to the Element series examines specific political and epistemological issues pertinent to the post-truth challenge to policy analysis. Then, with the assistance of an interpretive logic of policy argumentation, the text assesses disinformation and fake news in the narrative-based arguments of those who deny climate change and COVID-19.

The general post-truth phenomenon and the specific cases are assessed from the perspective of interpretive social science and interpretive policy analysis in particular, with a focus on the social construction and interpretation of narratives and the arguments based on them. Whereas many critics of post-truth argue that the phenomenon can be traced to the relativism of postmodern constructivism, we argue here that this epistemic contention rests on a simplistic misunderstanding of constructivism and serves to divert attention away from the political motives that have given rise to post-truth as a tactic of denialism. Indeed, contrary to the critics, we seek to show that an interpretive policy-analytic approach is essential for an adequate understanding of post-truth politics. Interpretive policy analysis supplies an important postpositivist policy methodology – not to be confused with postmodernism – that can bring back the underlying politics of social meaning posed by post-truth.

It is not that facts are unimportant. Rather, it is that they gain meaning in the policy world from the social and political contexts to which they are applied. Thus, the social-subjective meanings that factual information have for political participants need to be brought into the analysis. Such social meanings are missing from standard empirically oriented policy methodologies, having long been methodologically ruled out of the analytical process. Here we show that social meanings, embedded in political narratives and articulated through policy arguments (also referred to as "narrative arguments"), are crucial explanatory factors. Indeed, it is the importance of such meanings that interpretive policy analysis seeks to draw out and emphasize.

The climate change example shows that better facts and fact-checking will not dissuade the deniers. They are more concerned with the political and social meanings attached to climate data than with the presentation of empirical

[1] The argument in the essay is restated here as part of this larger text, thanks to permission from Taylor and Francis.

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evidence. They worry in particular about specific political interpretations of climate change and their meanings for the future of individual freedoms and a free-market society. In this regard, the politics of COVID-19 denial is remarkably similar, concerned as well with an ideological defense of personal freedoms and the fate of the economy. The analysis of the COVID-19 case turns more specifically to the processes of policy argumentation to examine the ways in which meanings drawn from ideological value orientations are used discursively to interpret factual data in denial arguments. The case shows how denial narratives and the arguments based on them are politically and methodologically constructed. Finally, this work offers some closing thoughts about how to deal with the major challenges this insidious post-truth phenomenon presents for both the policy-oriented sciences and, more broadly, democratic governance.

## 1 Introduction: Policy Science, Facts and the Post-Truth Challenge

One of the critical issues in political and policy discussions today is the role of post-truth in the form of "alternative facts" and fake news. It is a concern focused in particular on their meaning for democratic governance and its policymaking processes (McIntyre 2018; Davis 2017; Ball 2017; Kakutani 2018). Although there is nothing new about disinformation, fake facts and deception in politics, post-truth politics took on new importance after the British "Brexit" referendum to leave the European Union and the presidential election of Donald Trump, both in 2016. Before and after these political votes there has been an unprecedented barrage of false policy-oriented information disseminated through the media, especially social media, advancing claims with little or no basis in reality.

Formerly called "propaganda," this post-truth style of political communication, generally associated with the rise of populist politics, has a worrisome impact on both electoral and policy politics. Since its onslaught, this post-truth phenomenon has become an important – if not always new – political concern in other countries around the world, including Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, Italy, Australia, Poland, Thailand and India, among others. In all of these countries, disinformation has come to influence and, in many cases, shape their policy deliberative processes. And there is no reason to believe that fake news will disappear after the electoral defeats of populist politicians (Mackintosh 2020; Baker 2020).

The pressing nature of this problem has led to a search for explanations. Given its complexity, a full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this

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Element. In the United States, Britain and elsewhere, this would require in particular an examination of post-truth as the destructive outcome of the politics that has accompanied the rise of right-wing populism. As such, it is a consequence of a combination of intersecting political developments: a general "postdemocratic" decline in western democracies, right-wing strategies that fracture political cultures for sake of political gain, the subsequent rise of "tribal politics," the role of the social media and the politics of disinformation (Mann and Ornstein 2016: 31-80; Bennett and Livingston 2018). These developments have led to high levels of distrust, providing the underlying social basis of post-truth (D'Ancona 2017; Lewis 2016; Kahan 2017).

## 1.1 Knowledge for Policy

This analysis narrows the topic to an exploration of the meaning and implications of post-truth as it impacts the role of knowledge and facts in public policy. By and large, the main attempts to understand and deal with post-truth have focused on the importance of defending factual knowledge, if not truth per se, with a dominant emphasis on better facts and fact-checking strategies (Kavanagh and Rich 2020). This focus is understandable, but it runs into explanatory limitations. As argued here, such an understanding of post-truth largely rests on an empirical and overly objective understanding of policy knowledge. Whereas most people take the meaning of empirical objectivity to be relatively clear, work in the sociology and philosophy of science shows this concept to be more complicated epistemologically than would otherwise appear to be obvious.

Many writers have sought to place the blame for the post-truth phenomenon on the rise of postmodernist relativism and the interpretive methods of social constructivism (Andersen 2017). These are portrayed as having irresponsibly laid the groundwork for the post-truth rejection of established facts. But this is a limited view, as we argue herein. Moreover, we seek to show that the interpretive-analytic approach of a constructivist perspective, rather than being the culprit, is an epistemological orientation that can help us sort out and better understand post-truth arguments.

## 1.2 Post-Truth and Policy Science

Post-truth, not surprisingly, has created considerable concern on the part of both government officials and expert policy communities. It has led governments around the world to establish policies and programs – commissions, committees, watchdog groups and the like – to deal with the problem of disinformation (Farkas and Schou 2020: 87–95). In addition, it has given rise to a great deal of

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concern in the social and political sciences, including the applied policy-oriented disciplines.

Not only does post-truth pose a challenge to commonly held understandings about democracy – especially the belief that it depends on a commitment to truthful knowledge from multiple perspectives – it also raises fundamental questions about the core mission of the social sciences. Specifically, it challenges science's basic commitment to a truth-oriented pursuit of facts, as elusive as that might prove to be. Indeed, the concept of post-truth portends a fundamental challenge to the very raison d'etre of rigorous social and political inquiry. For a policy science, moreover, the issue is especially crucial, as it is more on the front lines of politics that other forms of academic social science.

The policy science orientation, as such, is designed to supply reliable information and advice to real-world policy decision-makers (Lasswell and Lerner 1951; Dunn 2019). Since the 1960s, when it became more common to speak of "policy analysis," the discipline has increasingly been shaped by a positivist understanding of knowledge, in particular as it is manifested in the methods of modern economics, the empiricist social science par excellence (Robert and Zechhauser 2010). Economic analysis, in fact, supplies the dominant methodologies for current policy-analytic practices.

Given this empirical search for the facts, the rise of post-truth, also referred to as "post-factualism," has led many contemporary scholars in the social and policy sciences to fret – not surprisingly – about the import of the challenge to the empirical methods and practices of the disciplines (Fischer 2019; Perl, Howlett and Ramesh 2018). This has especially been the case in countries where right-wing politicians have come to power, most notably in the United States and the United Kingdom. Suddenly, post-truthers were in charge of the agencies the policy sciences are designed to serve. What is more, political leaders such as Trump set out to eliminate expert reports, restrict data collection, remove expert advisory commissions, shift decision-making away from expert regulatory commissions and the like (Nichols 2019).

Despite the widespread expression of worries about the implications of post-truth among policy experts, however, there is not a lot of literature on post-truth and policy science per se. The literature that does exist generally holds to a relatively standard policy-analytic argument for better factual evidence. A case in point is an essay on policymaking models and "truthiness" by Perl, Howlett and Ramesh (2018). After exploring the epistemological challenges posed by various types of disinformation and ignorance, the authors examine the most prominent policy models – including the policy cycle heuristic, the advocacy coalition framework and the multiple streams model – to determine what sorts of difficulties they confront in reconciling "the new reality of false or

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evidence free policy making" (p. 583). These approaches, they conclude, can resiliently handle policy deliberations and decision-making processes that have to deal with disinformation and distorted factual claims. As they put it, "the 'standard' policy sciences frameworks themselves are quite robust and capable . . . of identifying the key features of the new policy process" which have emerged in the wake of the emergence of truthiness and also the challenges policymakers face in creating and controlling policy problems and processes "in a world filled with post-factual inputs and influences" (Perl et al. 2018: 583). They find, in short, better facts to be the solution to post-factuality. Further, they aver that the underlying problem can be traced to what they identify as a kind of "post-positivist anomie," whereby political discourse, normative beliefs and social identity are mixed in with, and at times indistinguishable from, factual policy evidence.

## 1.3 Interpretive Social Science and Public Policy

There can be no argument against the contention that better information is important for effective policymaking. But what if the ground beneath these empirical models has shifted? What if we have, in fact, moved into something of a postpositivist world in which there is no turning back? What if the understanding of what constitutes a fact is the very thing in question and needs a new, nonpositivist understanding? And what if instrumental rationality turns out to provide only one kind of knowledge relevant to the policy process? These are the sorts of questions that postpositivist policy scholars put forward. They offer, moreover, a different epistemological model for policy studies that deals directly with this challenge. Indeed, as we shall see, a postpositivist interpretive approach to knowledge offers a useful way to understand the post-truth phenomenon.

Although this perspective is generally identified by the critics of post-truth politics as "postmodern" (MacItyre 2018: 123–150), the methods of interpretive social science, and interpretive policy analysis (Yanow 2000; Münch 2016) in particular, are not necessarily postmodern. It is a mistake to confuse them for one and the same thing, especially if it means rejecting the interpretive perspective. To do so, we argue, limits the effort to adequately understand the phenomenon. We seek, in just this regard, to show that an interpretive policy-analytic perspective can in fact offer a better way of conceptualizing the post-truth controversy. It can do this by bringing back an analysis of the essential subjective dimensions inherent to post-truth politics.

Before presenting the interpretive policy-analytic perspective, however, it is important to gain a better grasp of post-truth and the political and discursive

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struggles that it has ushered in. Toward this end, we look more closely in the next section at the definitions of post-truth, fake news and the politics behind the denial of facts.

## 2 Post-Truth Defined

The concept of post-truth, as it concerns us here, emerged in 2015 during the campaigns for the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump. It had such a rapid rise that Oxford Dictionaries labeled it the "word of the year" in 2016, after a 2,000 percent increase in usage (Flood 2016). Although the term has no fixed meaning, the idea that we have moved into a post-truth world became a major topic of discussion and debate. According to the dictionary, "post-truth" is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions." It refers to "a political culture in which debate is framed largely by appeals to emotion disconnected from the details of policy, and by the repeated assertion of talking points to which factual rebuttals are ignored." As such, post-truth "differs from traditional contesting and falsifying of facts by relegating facts and expert opinions to be of secondary importance relative to appeal to emotion" (Flood 2016). The dictionary further describes it as a word that captures the "ethos, mood or preoccupations of that particular year," and as having "lasting potential as a word of cultural significance."

For the duration of a grueling political campaign leading up to the US presidential election in 2016, blatant post-truth lies and so-called "alternative facts" circulated freely in political speeches and media reporting. So problematic was this that it has led to nothing less than a fact-checking industry. While factual worries could be uncovered everywhere, such investigations found that Donald Trump's relationship to truth has been deeply problematic.[2]

### 2.1 Post-Truth and Fake News

It is also important to discuss the relationship of post-truth to "fake news," as the two concepts often accompany one another. Although closely related, they are not the same. The essential foundation of post-truth is established, following McDermott (2019: 218), as being "when people consider opinion to be as legitimate as confirmed facts, or when emotional factors weigh as heavily as statistical evidence. When these tendencies hold sway among even a significant minority of the public, they can exert a strong influence on public-policy

[2] Trump's flagrant neglect of the "facts" has been described as socio-pathological (Croucher 2019).

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debates as well as on behavioral outcomes," voting being an important case in point. This leads to what can be called "post-truth culture."

Fake news, on the other hand, can be differentiated from post-truth because it mainly involves the spread of false statements.[3] To be understood as fake news, a story must be put forward with the deliberate intent to mislead or deceive the recipient – the reader or listener – for the purposes of political objectives or financial gain. It can be described as an "empty signifier," which in itself carries no meaning but can be attached to anything (Farkus and Schou 2019). Despite its difference to post-truth, however, some argue that the increase in fake news, accelerated by social media, laid the groundwork for post-truth.

## 2.2 Spread of Post-Truth, Fake News and "Truthiness"

Today, examples of post-truth and fake news falsehoods are so extensive that they are beyond counting. They range from the more traditional variety, such as denial of the Holocaust, to more contemporary examples of falsehoods designed to influence the outcome of political elections, the machinations of foreign political leaders, the refusal to accept the effectiveness of vaccinations, the denial of climate change, myths about the origins of the COVID-19 and election denials. There is scarcely an issue that has not been affected.

Trump, it has been shown, holds the record when it comes to the spread of fake news, sheer lies and falsehoods. (Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly 2020). And, more than a little curiously, this has had only a small effect on his relationship with Republican voters, and next to none on his so-called support base. Even more perversely, they have held him to be more honest than Hillary Clinton. Underlying this are the populist movements in the United States and abroad that continue to be fueled by the rise of social media, the primary mechanism for spreading fake news and disinformation. In terms of populist politics, post-truth social media can be understood as a response to a growing distrust of the political establishment and the media – both their ideas and their practices.

It is certainly not the case that the spread of lies is unknown to politics; indeed, it is as old as the profession itself (Arendt 1972). To take just one prominent political example, George Orwell described political propaganda during the Spanish Civil War as fundamental to the struggle. In Orwellian style, he argued that "the very concept of objective truth" seemed to be "fading out of the world" (Orwell and Angus 1980: 295–296). He worried about how history would record the Spanish war if Franco won and his propagandists were to become the historians. Given that the government relied on the spread of

[3] For a history of fake news, see Czarniawska (2021).

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disinformation and lies, he wondered if people would forget what had actually happened, especially after those who could remember the war had died? Would the propaganda be believed, he worried? Would it become universally accepted, with lies turning into the truth?

So problematic is the situation today that various writers have expressed the same concern – namely, whether or not history could be truthfully written in the future. Very problematically, political systems are now so divided that there is "a battle between two ways of perceiving the world, two fundamentally different approaches to reality," between which one has to decide (D'Ancona 2017: 5). It is a point that can easily be tested. One need only compare the political reporting of Fox News with that of MNSBC on American television. Their interpretations of the same events often leave the impression that they are coming from different planets. Their respective coverage of the Trump impeachment hearing brought this phenomenon to new heights, only later to be surpassed by false claims about election fraud and COVID-19.

### 2.3 Truthiness

Arguably, Trump's lying has been qualitatively different from the sort of falsehoods that politicians have spread up to this point. Indeed, the contemporary use of the concept of truth in various ways no longer directly relates to truthfulness. In the words of the comedian Stephen Colbert, it can better be described as a kind of "truthiness," referring to the phenomenon of believing a statement to *feel* true, even though it is not supported by factual evidence (Watson 2016). In view of the attention that has been given to this interpretation of post-truth, Merriam-Webster included "truthiness" in its dictionary, stating that it cleared a way for a post-truth world "in which the feel of truth, or "truthiness" is the only thing that matters" (Zimmer 2010).

## 3 Post-Truth: Ignorance and "Anything Goes"

The emergence of post-truth is, certainly on the surface, a major threat to science and social as well as physical inquiry. Insofar as rigorously pursuing truthful facts with tested methods is the raison d'etre of science, post-truth challenges its very core. It is seen as leading to a form of irrationalism that offers no firm basis for developing the solid, policy-oriented facts required for the guidance of society. Indeed, this poses a fundamental worry for most contemporary institutions, techno-bureaucratic in nature, that are designed to assemble and apply confirmed facts to the policy issues confronting modern society. Indeed, the strategy of "evidence-based" policymaking has emerged in recent times to assist these organizations with the tasks at hand (Young et al. 2002).

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More than a few have worried that postmodern thought and its focus on the relativity of truth has played a major role in bringing about post-truth and the idea of alternative facts. So worried is the scientific community about the rejection of facts that it organized a large "March for Science" protest in Washington, DC (Vence and Grant 2017). The predominant counter-response, especially by the media, has been to emphasize "fact-checking." This is an approach that has been of particular concern in dealing with the pressing problem of climate change, but later the focus turned to COVID-19 as well.

## 3.1 Agnotology

On a more sophisticated level, this worry has led various scholars to move beyond the emphasis on established facts and acknowledge the failure to understand the role of ignorance, in particular the ways ignorance is shaped and constructed. Indeed, this concern about disinformation has led to a new field of ignorance studies called "agnotology." As Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) point out, scholars have focused on the production of scientifically tested knowledge at the expense of ignorance, which can also be systematically produced to serve particular purposes. There is a large literature on how to avoid ignorance, but little on ignorance itself, despite its pervasiveness. For Proctor and Schiebinger, the distribution and maintenance of ignorance is a much-neglected element in the current post-factual world. A point central to the post-truth debate, they stress a need to also study the reasons and purposes for the maintenance of ignorance, particularly as it pertains to post-truth.

## 3.2 Ignorance and Relativism: Science Wars Redux

Those who take postmodernism to be promoting a form of ignorance launch their primary response at its critique of science. Scholars of postmodern persuasion, along with many in the fields of cultural studies and science studies, have been lambasted for raising questions about the nature and practices of science. In various ways, the struggle is more than a little reminiscent of the earlier "science wars" debates of the 1990s between cultural theorists and members of the scientific community (Ross 1996; Berube 2011). These exchanges, often caustic in nature, focused on the claim that science is founded on social, political and cultural factors. Basic to this culturally oriented "deconstruction" of what science does and how it works has been a rejection of the idea that stable definitions of reality can exist, thus undercutting the possibility of universal truths. Although the target of these debates has typically been the physical and natural sciences, it also extends to economics and the social sciences more generally (Graber 2019).

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Over time, this critique of science has given rise to a postpositivist understanding of science that emphasizes the relative, uncertain, contextually site-specific and language-based character of knowledge. The debate, which has vacillated between epistemological sophistication and ad hominem argument, turns on questions about the nature of reality. Is knowledge about reality something "out there" to be uncovered independently of human ideas, as the scientific community generally contends, or is all knowledge, to one degree or another, socially constructed and thus dependent on human conventions? In this postpositivist view, all disciplines need to critically rethink their basic principles in light of these social influences, a view rigorously resisted and rejected by most members of the scientific community, preferring instead to hold onto their foundational myth of "the search for objective truth."

For the opponents of postmodernism, cultural studies and social constructivism, these modes of inquiry are seen to lead to the view that all facts are just matters of opinion. By denying the possibility of truths that are eternal or ideal, the approach is accused of allowing for "anything goes" (Sokal 2008). Such relativism is thus seen to enable an ignorant world in which all competing positions are believed to make equally valid truth claims. However, in the view of theorists who've grappled with relativism, it is not necessarily the case that there are no standards for judging what is good or what is right. Rather, it means recognizing that such standards are the products of conventions and assessments that are always context dependent (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2020).

These ongoing criticisms have led a seminal figure in cultural studies – none less than Bruno Latour (2018) – to assert that the time has come for postmodernists to now reestablish "some of the authority of science." Worrying in particular about the denial of climate change, without altogether rejecting the social elements in scientific conduct, he calls for a revision of the more problematic relationship to reality put forth by the radical critics of science. But this does not mean a rejection of interpretivism, which, as we shall see, need not mean anything goes.

Much of the discussion, however, overlooks the possibility that post-truth may reflect a deeper – even insidious – phenomenon that is about more than established scientific facts per se. While fact-checking is a worthy activity, we need to look deeper into this development to find out what it is about, what is behind it. Toward this end, we look next at "post-truth culture."

## 4 The Political Rise of the Post-Truth Culture

Post-truth is first and foremost the outcome of the destructive politics that has invaded modern political systems, especially in the United States and Britain.

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