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'We Have Met The Enemy And He Is Us'

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LIVING POST-TRUTH LIVES ... BUT WHAT COMES AFTER?

A review essay by Kevin Marsh

Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back

Matthew D'Ancona. Ebury Publishing, 2017

Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World

James Ball. Biteback Publishing, 2017

Post Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit

Evan Davis. Hachette UK, 2017

The Retreat of Western Liberalism

Edward Luce. Hachette UK, 2017

Keywords: *post-truth, Brexit, Trump, spin, fake news, political communication, strategic communication, strategic communications*

About the author

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On the walls of the Musée Anne-de-Beaujeu in Moulins, a small town in the Auvergne, hangs a striking painting. It's called *La Vérité* or, more descriptively, *La Vérité sortant du puits armée de son martinet pour châtier l'humanité*—'Truth emerging from the well armed with her whip to chastise mankind.' Truth, in the painting, is naked; rendered almost photographically; and if her eyes and mouth, fixed in a barking rebuke, are anything to go by, she is angry. Very angry.

The painter was the conservative academist of the Belle Époque, Jean-Léon Gérôme. He and his 'realist' contemporaries faced an artistic assault on two fronts; from Impressionists, who disdained the visual 'truth' of figurative painting, preferring emotional 'truth'; and from photography, which by the 1890s captured visual 'truth' more precisely than any painter.

For Gérôme, though, photography was scientific 'proof' that there *was* a tangible 'truth', an objective reality out there that he and his like, rather than the impressionists, were able to reproduce: '*c'est grâce à elle*' he wrote, '*que la vérité est enfin sortie de son puits*'—'it's thanks to photography that Truth has finally left her well'.

That became an icon for conservative artists and writers of Gérôme's generation; French politics were chaotic, self-serving, and ineffectual; populism, nationalism, protectionism, clericalism, and anti-Semitism were the dominant 'isms of the day. It was the time of the Dreyfus affair—an exercise in 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' if ever there was one—and as the 19th century wheeled over into the 20th, 'Truth' was wished out of her well again and again to whip the liars into honesty.

Yearning for 'Truth'—with or without a chastising whip—is one of those cyclical things. It comes at critical moments when we feel we've somehow lost the collective ability to distinguish truth from lies, fact from opinion. The year 2016 was one of those critical moments.

Its signature events—Leave's narrow victory in the EU referendum and Donald Trump's electoral college win in the US—undermined our liberal conventional wisdoms about democracy and political communication. Both winning campaigns were founded on untruths, aggressively promoting divisive world views; both sought to overturn conventional economic or social thinking; both threatened cultural ruptures, or promised them, depending on your point of view.

More than anything else, though, both appeared finally to have snapped the overstretched link between democratic politics and anything deserving the name 'truth'. Together, they made 'post-truth' the word of the year and introduced 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' to a wider audience. Unsurprising, then, that in 2017, the cycle turned and politicians, political communicators, and journalists—especially, ironically, journalists—yearn for *La Vérité* to whip the offenders back to honesty.

Matthew D’Ancona in *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, for example—a short, sharp cry of anguish and frustration from a journalist of the centre-right, who ...

... would be betraying my trade if I stood by as its central value – accuracy – was degraded by bucksters and snake-oil salesmen.

D’Ancona wishes *La Vérité* out of her well to confront ...

... the declining value of truth as society’s reserve currency, and the infectious spread of pernicious relativism disguised as legitimate scepticism.

It’s unfortunate that he elides ‘truth’ which, if it’s anything, is a moral value and ‘accuracy’, a mere process. While we can approach ‘truth’ through ‘accuracy’, achieving ‘accuracy’ is no guarantee of ‘truth’—accurately reporting the words of a liar is a long way from ‘truth’.

The idea of fighting the ‘post-truthers’ with classical, objective ‘truth’ is seductive—but it’s an epistemological nonsense. As nonsensical as G  r  me’s vision of *La V  rit  *, based as that was on a mistranslation and misunderstanding of the pre-Socratic Thracian atomist Democritus:

We are ignorant ...

... he is reported to have said ...

... since Truth has been submerged in an abyss, with everything in the grip of opinions and conventions.¹

Democritus’ point—as well as Cicero’s in referencing him—was to underline a fundamental and very old idea in epistemology. *If* objective truth even exists, it’s beyond the reach of our perceptions; our senses are limited, our minds weak, and our lives short; *‘nihil veritati relinqui, deinceps omnia tenebris circumfusa esse’*—‘nothing is left for truth and everything, in turn, is wrapped in darkness’.

By the end of 2016, that felt less like a maxim of classical philosophy and more like a description of the state in which the political culture of the UK and US found itself. Nothing was ‘true’; ‘fact’ was indistinguishable from ‘opinion’, for every ‘fact’ there was an ‘alternative fact’; falsity flourished; scarcely credible conspiracy theories jostled with genuine inquiry; and mainstream media battled with the ‘bots’ spewing out ‘fake news’. Something had clearly gone wrong—but what?

¹ Nothing of Democritus’ writing survives, however Cicero attributes the aphorism to Democritus in Book 1.44 of his study of scepticism, *Academica*.

D’Ancona, though a journalist of the centre-right, is no fan of Leave nor of Trump:

... the expectations raised on both sides of the Atlantic,

he writes,

cannot possibly be satisfied.

And he disdains the 45th President as a ‘political sociopath’. But, he insists, neither Trump nor Leave is or was the cause of post-truth politics and culture. They’re its consequences, the symptoms of that ‘pernicious relativism’ which is, in turn, the ‘rust on the metal of truth’ that started its corrosive growth on the *Rive Gauche*, nurtured by ‘the loose-knit school’ of post-modernist thinkers—the ‘Po-Mos’—who...

... preferred to understand language and culture as ‘social constructs’ ... rather than the abstract ideals of classical philosophy. And if everything is a ‘social construct’ then who is to say what is false?

Thus, the election of Donald Trump:

... unhindered by care for the truth, accelerated by the force of social media ... in its way, the ultimate post-modern moment.

It’s a misguided attribution of blame.

The Po-Mos he chastises—Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard—in essence did little other than align a constructivist brand of epistemology as old as philosophy itself with 20th century communication ... predicting, incidentally, a time when the quantity of communicable information (and the means of communicating it) would far exceed our capacity to give it meaning. And where the act of communicating was the socialising factor in our lives, not the sharing of meaning.

Remind you of anything?

D’Ancona partly concedes that the habitués of *Les Deux Magots* didn’t invent the relativism and socially constructed ‘truth’ he castigates. He mentions Protagoras but could have added Democritus—Gérôme’s inspiration—Plato, or Aristotle. He could even have added the Gospel of John or, from the modern era, the Italian philosopher-scientist Giambattista Vico, who wrote in 1710 that: *‘verum esse ipsum factum’*—‘truth is itself a made thing’.

Unsurprising, then, that D’Ancona’s fightback comprises counsel and perhaps even rules to ensure we scrutinise one another more skeptically and behave towards each other more honestly: we should all take less on trust and become our own information gatekeepers, ‘scrutinising editors’, for example. We should rationally and diligently filter out what’s clearly ‘fake’ and untrue—the internet giants, Google and Facebook, should

do the same ... and so on. And doubtless the Po-Mos would shrug with Gallic approval when he demands more compelling narratives in the service of accuracy, for 'truthful' myths and for leaders who show statesmanship and leadership—socially constructed notions, all.

Journalism has taken a battering from the 'post-truthers' who dismiss and deride mainstream media as 'fake news'. President Trump does it daily, while the hard-line Brexiters do much the same with the BBC and the 'Remoaner' centrist press. But there is little evidence of a rush to journalism's defence outside of those in the trade. Journalists are bottom feeders in every poll measuring public trust.

Nevertheless, re-establishing trust in mainstream media seems a logical step to counter 'fake news'. But there's a snag—that's exactly what the relatively new army of fact-checkers have been trying to do for a decade. And it's made not a scrap of difference. In fact, mainstream media's fact-checking fetish—presented as if it were something new to and separate from journalism—may even be making things worse.

Few political campaigns can have been exposed to fact-checking as relentlessly as the Leave and Trump campaigns. Both saw their claims debunked but neither was harmed by it nor did either feel their campaigning styles cramped by pesky facts.

How come? Well, one explanation might be found in a survey published in the summer of 2016 by *Rasmussen Reports*²—an American polling organisation. That survey found just 29% of those likely to vote in the Presidential election trusted the fact-checkers. Nine out of ten Trump supporters believed mainstream media skewed its fact-checks; four out of ten Clinton supporters did the same. Fact-checking—'truth'—was never going to bring a divided America together. As new-media guru Clay Shirky tweeted in despair during the Republican Convention that confirmed Trump's nomination: 'we've brought fact-checkers to a culture war'.

There's something else, too. However 'fact-checked' our journalism, it simply doesn't have the traction the media classes believe. In 2016, researchers Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin Rao wanted to find out how Americans read news online³—but their work almost failed to get past first base.

2 *Rasmussen Reports*, 'Voters Don't Trust Media Fact-Checking', 30 September 2016, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/september_2016/voters_don_t_trust_media_fact_checking

3 Flaxman, Seth, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao, 'Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers and Online News Consumption', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 80, Special Issue, 2016, pp. 298–320, <https://5harad.com/papers/bubbles.pdf>

Their initial sample was the browsing data of some 1.2 million internet users. To be included in their study, a user had to have read just ten news articles and two opinion pieces over 12 weeks—a pretty low hurdle. Only 50,000—4% of the original sample—made it over that hurdle. The other 96% were more or less immune to mainstream journalism and any corrective to ‘post-truth’ it might offer.

When we realised in 2016 that the thread between politics and even the fuzziest notion of ‘truth’ seemed to have snapped, it was inevitable that we should rediscover the 1986 paper by American philosopher Harry Frankfurt: *On Bullshit*.

He it was who, in a different world, systematised the ontology of bovine faeces—not entirely seriously but not entirely tongue in cheek either. His paper first saw the light of day—in the pre-internet age—in a well-respected but narrowly read journal.⁴ Two decades on, in 2005—post-internet but pre-social media—it became a bestseller in a book of the same name.

Frankfurt described rather than defined ‘bullshit’. Critically, it’s not the same as lying. To lie, Frankfurt argues, you have to be aware of and sensitive to the possibility of ‘truth’. The ‘bullshitter’ has no such awareness, no such sensitivity:

... the fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality ... The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him.

Leave and Trump seemed to fit the second category. The Leavers had put front and centre of their campaign exceptionally questionable claims; the infamous red bus that screamed leaving the EU would free-up £350m a week that could go to the National Health Service; that 80 million Turks—‘Muslims, don’tcha know’—were about to flood into the EU; and that we could ‘Take Back Control’ without any sense of what that could possibly mean. Once their claims had worked their magic, they simply walked away.

Trump, however, did not walk away from his claims and promises made on the campaign trail, but he did appear to remain as indifferent to the distinction between truth and falsehood once in the White House as he had out on the road. Within hours of his inauguration, he was claiming that the crowd had ‘looked like a million-and-a-half people’⁵ ... even though TV and still images proved beyond argument the event was

⁴ The *Raritan Quarterly Review* published by Rutgers University

⁵ In a speech delivered at CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, on 21 January 2017

more sparsely attended than either Obama inauguration. And he claimed that ‘millions of undocumented migrants’⁶ cost him victory in the popular vote. That both assertions were easy to debunk seemed not to matter.

Mainstream journalism, found ‘bullshitting’ frustratingly difficult to deal with, precisely because ‘bullshitters’ don’t care about truth, accuracy, or even consistency—nor do their supporters, who judge mainstream media’s obsession with ‘facts’ and accuracy as nothing more than the strategy of the enemy in a class and culture war.

In *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* James Ball charts mainstream media’s witting and unwitting collusion in its own irrelevance, creating the partial vacuum into which ‘post truth’ has oozed. Traditional media’s failure to deal with new media’s assault on its business model is well documented. As is the consequence of its economic collapse on serious, costly, watchdog journalism. Those press titles that have kept their heads above the financial waterline have done so with a degraded form of ‘journalism’ that, not wholly unlike the worst of the fake news websites out there, peddles stories that are ...

... essentially untrue, but arguable to people who believe them or can convincingly pretend to ...

Even what we still think of as the reputable press has found itself chasing online advertising revenues by pimping clickbait and filling their online and paper pages with recycled content that, after even the most cursory journalistic examination in a previous age, would have gone straight to the spike. But for all these new-ish challenges, journalism’s vulnerability to ‘bullshitting’ derives from its very nature.

Journalism isn’t a taxonomic information source. It is, among other things, a competition for attention. It deals not in completeness but in timeliness and salience. Its practice demands instant judgments, extremes, superlatives, conflict, and shame. Its entry points—its headlines—are calculated to excite rather than inform but, often to the dismay of their authors, are as far as many readers or viewers ever penetrate into a story.

Even one of the central values of the best journalism—‘impartiality’—has worked in the service of ‘bullshit’ rather than ‘truth’, especially when the complex idea is reduced to simple arithmetic ‘balance’. It leads to what Ball terms:

... the long standing media habit of leaving campaigns to duke it out over who was telling the truth ...

⁶ A claim made in his Twitter account and repeated to Congressional leaders on 23 January 2017.

Now ‘duking it out’ in this way has a respectable British philosophical heritage. Remember John Stuart Mill’s maxim that ‘truth emerges from the clash of adverse ideas’,⁷ opinion in combat with opinion. Suppressing that clash—that ‘duking it out’—reduces our liberty:

If the opinion is right, [people] are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

But if one party has no interest in arriving at any kind of ‘truth’, Mill’s maxim is meaningless. Instead, we become lost in ‘agnotology’—the deliberate creation of doubt and ignorance.

It was Stanford Professor, Robert Proctor who coined that term in 1998 to describe how Big Tobacco had, for decades, countered the overwhelming scientific evidence that proved its products were a lethal, addictive poison.⁸ That strategy was not to argue the science—it was to create a state of ‘not knowing’, uncertainty, and doubt even though science, the facts, showed there could be none. It was a strategy captured in a 1969 internal memo between tobacco executives:

Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.⁹

‘Doubt’ and ‘controversy’. Think anti-vaxers; creationism; climate change; the ‘birther controversy’; even wholly fake ‘controversies’, such as ‘Pizzagate’, often lurking behind the hashtag *#justsaying*.

Doubt is simple, facts are complex. We doubt in a single, emotional step; we verify in multiple, coldly rational steps. In the media, controversy makes headlines and demands attention; debunking fact-checking is buried deep in the story. Worse, the process of fact-checking itself gives currency to the so-called controversy, and when broadcasters challenge ‘doubters’ on air, they simply establish a subtext that says: ‘there are no facts here, just claim and counterclaim ...’

7 Mill, John Stewart, *On Liberty*, (London: Longman, Roberts & Green, 1869).

8 Proctor, Robert, *Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and What We Don't Know*, (New York: BasicBooks, 1995).

9 The memo is quoted in Michaels, David, *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

James Ball belongs to a generation equally at home in traditional and new media, a good place from which to set out how the online world—especially Facebook—is a place where...

... small and unscrupulous players trade off sentiment and stolen content with little or no regard for truth ...

Facebook matters far more than older, media-class Westerners imagine. It's the gateway to all that's out there for some 1.2 billion users each day and is the world's preferred path to its 'news'. That gateway, those paths are for each user the result of Facebook's algorithms. Those algorithms are supremely effective at creating online communities around what's 'trending', irrespective of whether it's 'true' or fake—and as Ball points out, there's no economic advantage of any kind to Facebook to weed out 'fake news'.

It is, if you like, Harry Frankfurt's ultimate 'bullshitter'—utterly indifferent to the truth or falsehood of anything its algorithms place in front of its users. And content producers, whether traditional mainstream media or the newest newcomer, are effectively forced to acquiesce in its 'bullshitting' by conforming to its formats and aligning with what's 'trending'.

It might matter less if there were anything intrinsic to any online content to indicate honesty and integrity. But there isn't; academic papers and careful journalistic inquiry jostle for our attention with wild conspiracies, pure ignorance, and the deliberately and carelessly fake. If it trends, if it's endorsed by our online community, it's 'true'.

Where does strategic, political communication fit into all of this? A trade that, over the past generation, has finessed its techniques to deliver short-term 'wins'—but has shredded both its own reputation and trust in representative democracy along the way.

Political communication in the West took its current shape in the US in the Clinton years and in the UK during Tony Blair's leadership of New Labour—its purpose, according to Peter Mandelson twenty years ago, was 'to create the truth';¹⁰ within a year, the word 'spin' had passed into ordinary speech; and voters' expectations of honesty in politics hit new lows. Fifteen years ago, they lowered still further when Downing Street created the infamous September 2002 dossier that tipped the balance in persuading MPs to vote

¹⁰ In an interview with Kath Viner, 'The ministry of truth', *Guardian*, 9 August 1997, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1997/aug/09/labour.mandelson>.

for war in Iraq.¹¹ While in 2017, Theresa May simply ripped up her manifesto when it failed to deliver her the majority she expected.

In *Post Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit*, BBC presenter and former Economics Editor, Evan Davis, reflects on this trend in our politics which, he writes, have:

... become rehearsed, often defensive, obfuscatory and unwilling to entertain radical ideas ... the professionally crafted messages of expert political advisors, which are designed to hammer home a consistent, clear and simple message, have come to sound unnatural.

That feels a generous description: accurate as far as it goes but stopping well short of capturing the psychologically manipulative, quasi-propagandist quality of ‘post-truth’ political communication designed to deliver election victories with little regard for what comes after, little regard for representative democracy as it reflects back to the δῆμος, or *demos*, its certainty that complex problems, long-term problems, have simple, short-term solutions.

‘Creating consent’ by political communication has always flirted with the ethical touchlines and never assumed the most rational and informed audiences. Walter Lippmann, wrote about ‘creating consent’ in 1922, wondering at the same time how on earth we could allow ordinary voters to decide anything of consequence since their knowledge of the world was partial, imperfect, and random and each made his decision:

*... based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him.*¹²

Harold Laswell wrote in 1927 that consent could be created by:

*... the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols.*¹³

While Edward Bernays a year later, asserted that:

*The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society...*¹⁴

¹¹ *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction*, published September 2002

¹² Lippman, Walter, *Public Opinion*, (Courier Corporation, 2004). The publication of this volume sparked a famous debate over the nature of democracy with the educationalist John Dewey.

¹³ Lasswell, Harold D., ‘The Theory of Political Propaganda’, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (August 1927), pp. 627–631.

¹⁴ Bernays, Edward, *Propaganda*, (New York: Ig Publishing, 1928). Bernays is often called ‘the father of PR’. Significantly, in his PR business, Bernays was scrupulously ethical, demanding the same from his clients.

By the latter quarter of the 20th century, William Riker tried to put ‘creating consent’ on a quasi-scientific footing. His ‘positive political theory’ became the default model and brought statistics and Game Theory to the table, turning election campaigns into finely tuned exercises in statistics. It was a model that seemed to work on the grand scale. Its flaw was its assumption that voters were ‘rational agents’ and made their decisions in order to maximise their self-interests by seeking out and assessing with logic and reason all available evidence.

But we’re not ‘rational agents’. None of us is. And as two Yale researchers pointed out in the late 1990s,¹⁵ if we were, very few of us would ever vote; the investment in time and energy that we’d have to make to decide who to vote for would far exceed any potential personal gain.

Riker himself eventually conceded that:

There is no set of scientific laws that can be more or less mechanically applied to generate successful strategies.¹⁶

Enter cognitive psychology and Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel laureate economist who turned his back on ‘rational agent’ theory and sought, instead, to explain how we actually think our way to our decisions.¹⁷

Kahneman and others theorised that there are two distinct parts to our brains; the emotional, instinctive part and the deliberative, rational, logical part. And that it’s the emotional, instinctive part that we use to solve the most complex problems—like whether the UK should leave or remain in the EU or which of two candidates, each unsatisfactory in their own way, to send to the White House.

That emotional, instinctive part is full of ‘biases’—the bias to believe something is ‘true’ because it’s similar to something else that we already believe is ‘true’, for example. And rather than iteratively testing possible decisions until we come to the optimal, we use thinking shortcuts, ‘heuristics’, to leap from flawed perceptions and imperfect interpretations to a handful of possible decisions, settling on the first that satisfies our instinctive biases.

15 Shapiro, Ian with Donald Green, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

16 Riker, William T., *The Art of Political Manipulation*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

17 In particular his 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*—a book based on his research that ‘integrated insights from psychological research into economic science, especially concerning human judgment and decision-making under uncertainty’ that won him the 2002 Nobel Prize for Economics. Kahneman, Daniel, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

By the 2010s, political communication focused on leveraging the biases and heuristics of the tiny number of voters in any election who would determine the outcome. And doing that with semi-personalised, emotionally engaging narratives delivered with the precision offered by Facebook's algorithms—ideology and 'winning the argument' with facts and reason were passé. As the centre-right election supremo Sir Lynton Crosby puts it:

In politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins.¹⁸

Neither the Remain nor Clinton campaigns were calculated to engage emotion. Neither had its own 'deep narratives', both underestimated the power of their opponents' emotional appeal putting their faith in reason and expertise.

Davis reminds us that 'bullshit' dominates public communication for one simple reason: it works. And it works because we lap it up ... and we lap it up because it makes us feel better, whether it's 'bullshitting' politicians, advertisers, perfume packaging, PR—even the Greek tourist destination that promises butterflies when all it has is moths.

We lap it up because of the way our minds work—our biases. But we have a choice. Davis characterises that choice as one between the 'high road'—ethical, truth-regarding, placing a high value on integrity and reputation—and the 'low road'—indifferent to ethics or truth, short-termist, self-regarding. Without making the conscious choice to take the 'high road', whole communities can become trapped on the 'low road' cycling through repeated patterns of low trust and low integrity.

He cites Edward Banfield's 1950s study of an anonymised southern Italian town that he called 'Montegrano'—actually Chiaromonte; a community very firmly located on the low road. He identified there what he termed *amoral familism*; a way of life that maximised the material, short-run advantages of the family with little regard for the longer term or the wider community, a way of life followed on the assumption that everyone else would do the same.

But older residents in 'Montegrano' would speak almost wistfully of the Mussolini years. None thought fascism was in and of itself a good thing—but its tight controls touched everything from the price of food to the quality of cloth and abruptly ended the corrupt, cheating, self-serving navigation of the 'low road'. For a time, 'Montegrano' seemed to the old timers back on the high road. An object lesson, Banfield concluded, as to why:

¹⁸ From Sir Lynton Crosby's 2013 masterclass on political campaigning available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=H_YareK6WKk It's worth noting that while Sir Lynton delivered election victories for Boris Johnson in 2008 and David Cameron in 2015, he also delivered Michael Howard's defeat in 2005, Zac Goldsmith's defeat in 2016, and Theresa May's loss of majority in 2017.

...the economically disadvantaged would always see attractions in strong leadership to counter the selfish-anarchy of amoral familism.

As Davis concludes, we can read across from Banfield's 'Montegrano' to the 'post-truth', 'low road' culture of 2016:

...a pattern of low trust and low integrity that fuels and is fuelled by short term horizons and then encourages voters to look for candidates of a different, and more decisive character.

That choice, between 'low road' and 'high' is the determining one of our generation. Those on the 'high road' aren't intrinsically superior to those on the 'low'—the distinction lies in the choice. And we can choose to reward those who reflect back to us the simplicities that affirm our biases or we can reward with our consent:

... those who take the high road and behave with long term integrity ... we don't want politicians to believe that honesty is the wrong tactic during an election campaign.

Plus, taking the 'high road' isn't just about rejecting dishonesty; it's also about rejecting false doubt and fake controversy:

We need to be particularly sceptical of claims that make us feel good or satisfy our existing beliefs. There is an inverse requirement too: we need to be willing to believe things.

Davis isn't overly pessimistic. He refrains from talking up a 'crisis' and suggests by his title that we might already be emerging from a 'post-truth' world by virtue of understanding it for what it is. By contrast, Edward Luce in *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* is very much gloomier.

His central thesis is, in essence, that the Western model of free-market, liberal democracy is swerving in new directions—towards plutocracy on the one hand and populism on the other. Blue and white collars alike now count themselves among the 'left-behinds', with little access to the wealth accumulating in plutocrats' hands, losing faith in democracy's capacity to change their situation, living lives over which they have less and less control. A process intensified by the much faster economic growth in the semi-democracies of South and East Asia, China in particular, that many in the West seem oblivious to.

Western democracy is no longer the envy of the world; its survival isn't inevitable. Nor is it something we adhere to through principle—though that's what we tell ourselves. As Luce writes:

When growth vanishes, our societies reveal a different face.

That face we see on those who voted ‘Leave’ and Trump because they wanted to hear someone say that the past *‘they... the others’* took away can be given back—the grunt jobs in mines and steel-mills, the mono-ethnic neighbourhoods where ‘we know who we are’ and can ‘Take Back Control’:

... the chant of Brexiteers and Trump voters alike. It is the war cry of populist backlashes across the Western world ... blue-collar whites on both sides of the Atlantic are speaking the same idiom. They yearn for the security of a lost age

That yearning is satisfied by the ‘post-truth’ deep narratives that are to be taken ‘seriously but not literally’. But the risks of satisfying that demand extend far beyond simply losing the little trust voters still have in democratic politicians and democracy.

Trump’s attacks on the Washington ‘swamp’, on mainstream media, globalisation, Muslims and Mexicans; his aggressively dangerous projection of ‘alternative facts’ in his Twitter account; his equivocation over events such as August’s white-supremacist violence in Charlottesville ... all these are calculated to reflect the characteristics of the ‘left-behinds’ back to them, a yearning for strong leadership and an imagined past.

Trump is, Luce writes, the political equivalent of the Ultimate Fighting Championship—a no-holds barred cage-fighting franchise:

... a brutal and unforgiving breed of show business. In place of solidarity, it offers the catharsis of revenge.

Or alternatively a:

... Ku Klux Kardashian, combining hard-right pugilism with the best of post-modern vaudeville.

The war against truth might well be being waged from the White House, as Luce writes, and Trump might well have made it clear that the US-led global order is no more—but there’s no clarity around the alternative he has in mind. Nor that he’s sensitive to the danger in which he’s placing the entire planet.

While Trump is clearly a disrupter, it’s hard to see any fully formed ‘disruption’ thesis in his vision, even harder now that his one-time chief strategist, Steve Bannon, who declared himself dedicated to ‘blowing up the system’, is back at Breitbart News and the Washington ‘swamp’ seems to be closing over the President’s head. Likewise, it’s hard to see in Trump’s belligerent ‘post-truth’ international relations any rationale behind making enemies of former NAFTA friends or crashing blindly into the ‘deepening thicket of Sino-American trip wires’ that could lead to the war with China that Luce imagines.

It's almost as if the cage-fight is an end in itself.

Post truth politics has posed questions that the normative instincts of the 'small-L' liberal media and political classes cannot hope to address, certainly not through more 'truthful' journalism and more assiduous fact-checking, given that those 'lapping up' the 'bullshit'—to use Evan Davis' phrase—see mainstream media not as watchdogs but as opposition. The former BBC journalist and № 10 senior staffer Craig Oliver puts it simply:

Serious journalism ...

... he could have added, conventional political discourse, too ...

... is struggling to hold to account those who are prepared to go beyond standard campaign hyperbole and stray into straightforward lies.¹⁹

Trump's and the Brexiteers' indifference to 'truth', indifference even to evidence, has challenged more than just political epistemology. It has, along the way, licenced and legitimised world views that, so those who held them felt, the 'small-L' liberal consensus had delegitimised and silenced for a generation. And it's, apparently, established 'new normals': one, that political communication is effective only when it tells publics what they want to hear, not what they need to hear; another, that trust in a political leader or cause bears little relationship to the credibility of either, or their willingness to be held accountable.

It's an episode in our history whose end is hard to see, though of one thing we can be certain. It doesn't end with *La Vérité* in all her angry purity climbing out of her well to whip the bullshitters into line. Perhaps it ends when bullshitt-ees realise the extent to which bullshitt-ers have taken them for fools. That undeliverable promises don't prevent reality's habit of happening in spite of truth-like assurances that it need not.

In his 2017 page-turner *To Kill The President*. 'Sam Bourne'—aka *Guardian* columnist and BBC broadcaster Jonathan Freedland—invents for his reader an improbably loathsome, racist, misogynist, amoral incarnation of mendacity, Crawford 'Mac' McNamara. 'Mac' is the imagined senior counsellor to an imagined, improbably unhinged President and the second most powerful man in the White House. His description of the imagined campaign that transformed his imagined boss into the most powerful man in this imagined world has a worrying familiarity about it:

¹⁹ *Unleashing Demons* is Oliver's account of his time in Downing Street as David Cameron's Director of Communications. Oliver, Craig, *Unleashing Demons, The Inside Story of Brexit*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016).

... you should have been there. These lines of morons and in-breeds, with one tooth in their head and a flag in their hands ready to believe absolutely anything. I feel sorry for them, I absolutely do. But the President had their number from the start: 'easy marks' he called them. You could tell them you're going to bring their jobs back, re-open the mines, bring back the horse-and-buggy—whatever you like—and they'd lap it up ... I mean, really.

Really.