

2017

Alt-Right, Alt-Facts, Alt-America: An Investigation into Public Amnesia and Political Exploitation in Trump's America

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Recommended Citation

Meharchand, Rebecca, "Alt-Right, Alt-Facts, Alt-America: An Investigation into Public Amnesia and Political Exploitation in Trump's America" (2017). *2017 Undergraduate Awards*. 7.
http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/undergradawards_2017/7

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Women's Studies 4464G

April 4th 2017

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Introduction:

Since Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in early November 2016, it would appear that the 'truth' has been something of a contested item. Whether this is a result of Trump's own conceptualizations of 'real' versus 'fake' news, or whether it is a result of Kellyanne Conway's 'alternative facts', one thing remains abundantly clear; the concept of the 'truth' has become something of an unstable entity. Postmodern theorists would argue that the concept of an absolute 'truth', or the idea of a meta narrative is counter productive to understanding the complex reality of humanity; however, in issues of both media and politics, it is imperative that facts and stories are presented to the general public in such a way that at least alludes to or insinuates a cohesive narrative, a narrative that does its best to present both objective and subjective facts to the public in an accurate manner. Theoretically, it is attractive to assert that there can be no concept of an 'absolute truth' – especially in considering the ways in which such a concept has historically been mobilized to the detriment of marginalized groups – however, in reality, there is a need for a means to differentiate between 'alternative facts' and *actual* facts. This essay, then, is not meant to be a denunciation of the postmodernist skepticism of absolute truths and meta narratives; rather, this essay is meant to highlight the way in which

the ‘truth’ recently has become such a contested phenomenon. *In this essay, I will highlight the way in which the ‘truth’ has recently been hijacked, co-opted, and utilized as a means of furthering a dangerously conservative, ‘alt-right’ political agenda. Throughout the course of this essay, I will focus primarily on a recent Canadian tragedy – the Québec City mosque shooting – as a means of exemplifying my claims. I have chosen this particular event for two main reasons, the first of which being the fact that it is a fairly recent event and a relatively rare occurrence in Canada. The second reason for choosing the Québec City mosque shooting as an entry point into my central claim is because of the way in which the event itself was taken up in American political agendas. My aim here, then, is to understand how collective trauma and public amnesia are utilized during times of crisis and instability by individuals in positions of power.*

A Brief Theoretical Background: Trump, Truth, Presidency, and Power

President Donald Trump has made several outlandish claims throughout the course of presidency and the election itself, and yet it seems as if his claims are somehow irrefutable. Scholars and news personas alike have expressed their confusion regarding how Trump might make such outlandish claims; in his mid-February episode “Trump vs. Truth”, news comedian John Oliver considers it to be a result of Trump’s own ideas of what constitutes a valid news source (“Trump vs. Truth” 2017). In fact, according to Oliver:

Since taking office... Trump has made it clear that reality is not important to him. Think about it: he’s exaggerated the size of his inauguration crowd, he said the election was marred with mass voter fraud – with no real proof of that. He also claims that, compared to Muslims, it was almost impossible for Christian refugees from Syria to get into the U.S. He even lied about the weather during his inauguration (“Trump vs. Truth” 2017).

Oliver goes on to examine all the ways in which Trump spews what Kellyanne Conway might refer to as ‘alternative facts’, he eventually concludes his analysis by considering the way in

which Donald Trump has been misinformed by bad journalism, typically extreme right-wing journalism (“Trump vs. Truth” 2017). However, Oliver’s media portrayals and analysis miss a crucial factor, and that is the fact that Trump is in a position of *power*. In fact, as the President of the United States of America, it is arguable that Donald Trump is one of the most powerful people in the world at this moment in time.

French philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault is perhaps best known for his theories on the interconnectivity and inseparability of knowledge and power, asserting in his book *Discipline and Punish* “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault 27). For Foucault, understanding the discursive nature of reality is imperative to understanding the ways in which power exists and affects society at large. Knowledge and power, then, are considered to be inseparable, for “it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge” (28). In this sense, then, knowledge is understood as a social process, a process which is intimately connected to power. This idea of knowledge as a social process, as a means of ultimately contributing to a discursive reality is something of a concern in Trump’s party, with a proliferation of – not discourse per se – but ‘alternative facts’ and a denunciation of ‘fake news’. Trump’s positionality as the President may mean that he has power, but that does not mean that the things he says and the claims he makes will be true, or even in tune with reality at all. However, in understanding knowledge as a social process, as being nearly inseparable from power, it is impossible to ignore that Trump – and his

associates – have the ability to spread a false discourse, the ability to attempt to construct a reality that suits them and serves their own political needs as they see fit.

The Dangerous Reality of an 'Alternative' Reality: The Québec City Mosque Shooting

A common theme within postmodern theory is the denunciation of absolute truths and grand meta narratives. However, critics of postmodernism have often taken this notion as an assertion that postmodernism denounces the idea of 'truth' altogether – but it would be a mistake to assume that this is something that postmodernism actually purports. The postmodern critique of 'truth' narratives is more concerned with the way in which absolute truths have been historically utilized to the detriment of marginalized groups (Luntley 87). Rather than denying the existence of 'truths' altogether, postmodernism seeks to draw attention to the way in which truths have been curated and coopted by dominant, hegemonic groups within society to create a particular narrative that is then presented as an absolute and indisputable truth. Such is the concern regarding Donald Trump and his administration, and the Québec City mosque shooting is just one example of the way in which 'truth' may be coopted, curated, and frankly, presented in an inaccurate manner so as to further a specific political goal, as was the case with a recent Canadian tragedy: the Québec City mosque shooting.

The Québec City mosque shooting took place on January 29th 2017 (Lum 2017). The victims of the massacre were six Canadian-Muslim men: Abdelkrim Hassane, Khaled Belkacemi, Aboubaker Thabti, Mamadou Tanou Barry, Ibrahima Barry and Azzeddine Soufiane (Lum 2017). The murderer was later identified as a young man by the name of Alexandre Bissonnette, a student at Laval University who was known to have extreme 'alt-right' political views; he was also an avid supporter of recently-elected President Donald Trump (Lum 2017).

The event itself was presented as a particular kind of tragedy within Canadian news sources, as extensive gun violence and mass murders are much less common in Canada than they are in the States; in fact, in a both unusual and nuanced fashion, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau went so far as to label this particular tragedy as an act of ‘terrorism’ – a word which, in the post-9/11 era, is both racially and politically charged against people of Islamic faith (Lum 2017). However, despite Trudeau’s nuancing of the term ‘terrorist’, and more importantly, despite the fact that the *victims* rather than the *perpetrator* of this particular tragedy were Muslim, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer chose to use this particular tragedy as a justification for President Donald Trump’s so called ‘Muslim ban’, an extremely conservative piece of legislation that attempted to prevent people of the Islamic faith from entering the United States, stating that “It’s a terrible reminder of why we must remain vigilant. And why the president is taking steps to be proactive, not reactive,” (Panetta 2017). Whether Spicer was aware of whether or not Bissonnette was actually a born-and-raised non-Muslim Canadian is up for debate, however, what remains abundantly clear is that – regardless of Spicer’s intentions – the Québec City mosque shooting was taken up by Trump’s right-wing administration as a justification for Trump’s ‘Muslim ban’ – a rather controversial piece of legislation. The Québec City mosque shooting, then, was an event which was adopted and coopted for a particular political goal, despite the fact that it was actually a false justification on Spicer’s part; however, his position as Press Secretary puts him in a position of power, and allows him to present ‘alternative facts’ as irrefutable claims. Despite the fact that the Québec City mosque shooting does nothing to further Trump’s ‘Muslim ban’ theoretically, Sean Spicer – and by extension the Trump administration –

utilized this traumatic event as a means of furthering their own political goals by mobilizing their own positions of power to disseminate false knowledge.

Collective Confusion, Public Amnesia, and False Memory:

By constructing this kind of ‘alternative’ reality in which events, definitions, and tragedies become curated and coopted for a particular political meta narrative, the Trump administration is actually instilling and – in a sense, enabling – a large scale, public process of amnesia. Furthermore, competing discourses between left-leaning and right-leaning news sources – or what President Trump might refer to as ‘fake’ and ‘real’ news – only add an element of confusion to the general public’s media consumption practices. As such, discourses mobilized by political groups – each of which claims to speak the ‘truth’ – results in a divided public, of which both sides are claiming to be defendants of the ‘truth’. This idea of public memory being heavily influenced by dominant news sources is something that Adrian Parr takes up in his book *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, specifically examining the impact of 9/11 news coverage on both public memory and collective consciousness:

Once the traumatic memory of 9/11 is repeated an increasingly repressed social field and repressing memory labor comes into effect. Memories of 9/11 now become authoritarian, for in their repetition they turn into a repressing force. However it is not just the endless documentation and the appropriation of that documentation of publicly traumatic events by the mass media that do not allow us to forget, the public actively participates in the consumption of this material. The public doesn’t want to forget (83).

At the centre of this ‘alternative’ phenomenon, is the idea that if the public is bombarded with enough images accompanied with affirming messages from their political party, they will come to accept these presentations as reality, as fact, as truth because of two main factors: on one level, the public is not allowed to forget; on another, the public does not want to forget.

Politics and trauma are deeply intertwined in a way which is not always obvious. Traumatic events appear to occur outside of the political realm – they are received as events that are, by and large, outside of political control; and to some degree, this is true, however, what is often left out of the picture is the way in which traumatic events are utilized to further political goals. Public tragedies are the perfect forum for mobilizing and rallying the public *because* of their affective and emotional impacts; traumatic events are events that the public pays a great deal of attention to, for “the majority of Americans [pay] very little attention to news stories except, that is, those covering national calamities or the use of American military force” (Parr 168). The significance of choosing to co-opt and revamp the ‘truth’ of traumatic events, then, is that these events are simply the ones that garner the most attention from the general public. The fact that politicians may then choose to capitalize on these traumatic events in order to further their own political goals creates a ‘truth’ narrative that is presented to the general public as being a part of an absolute reality, without drawing attention to the way in which these events may be coopted for a personal or political purpose, since “In the aftermath of violence, where blame is spread widely...competing narratives and memories jockey for primacy as ‘truth’” (Milton 201). Such competing narratives and memories, further instilled by the insistence of politicians and political discourses, creates a collective confusion, with each side of the political spectrum defending or rejecting the claims of politician’s as ‘truth’.

Significance:

The idea of ‘truth’ is at the forefront of several major institutions in society, including both politics and media. Traumatic events, being events that are regularly consumed by the general public, then, make for ideal events for political curation. The Québec City mosque

shooting was an ideal event for the Trump administration to try and co-opt because if misconstrued ever so slightly – which it was, thanks to Spicer – it would be a perfect justification for their political agenda regarding the entry of people of the Islamic faith into America. American right-wing politicians, then, capitalized on this recent Canadian tragedy in order to further their own controversial agenda.

The cooptation of national tragedies to further political ends is, needless to say, rather significant; as ‘alternative facts’ are circulated among the general populace, it becomes more and more difficult to convince the public that these so-called ‘facts’ are indeed misinformation (Hochschild & Einstein 65). In their book *Do Facts Matter?*, Jennifer Hochschild and Katherine Einstein posit that this desire to hold onto misinformation is a significant impediment to democracy for three main reasons:

First, difficult though it can be to persuade people to act in accord with their correct information, it is much harder to induce people to relinquish misinformation in favour of facts...Second, as the literature on persuasion shows, people most readily accept new information when it comes from elites [ie: President Trump and his administration] or friends...Third, ‘false facts’ are indeed false. Developing public policies in response to pressures linked to misinformation risks making bad decisions and implementing them poorly (65-66).

While, here in Canada, it may have been easier for the public to recognize that Spicer’s claims regarding the Québec City mosque shooting were in fact false – perhaps due to the close proximity of the tragedy itself – according to Hochschild and Einstein, it would be a much more difficult task to convince the American populace that a member of the President’s administration such as Spicer was in fact spreading misinformation.

Generally speaking, a response to the realization of this spreading of misinformation, however, would be something of a difficult task. According to Hochschild and Einstein, there are

two main categories of politically involved and politically aware people, the ‘inactive informed’ and the ‘active misinformed’, the latter of which directly threaten democratic governance, since “People who use falsehoods in their political activity are in an emotionally and cognitively stable position; disagreement with their stance is arguably more likely to make them dig in than to feel embarrassed” (86). The political or epistemological ‘group’ that the active misinformed belong to are more likely to curate and support the ‘knowledge’ that they have both acquired and spread to the general public. This ‘group’, then, acts as an isolating force that only re-enforces the notion that these misinformed claims are actually true, thus bringing the active misinformed further away from the actual, real, facts of the events themselves. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that the spreading of ‘misinformation’ is accidental (103). In reality, politicians – especially those in Donald Trump’s administration – often have much to gain by keeping citizens misinformed, which presents a difficult challenge in bringing both misinformation and the cooptation of traumatic events for political ends to the forefront of public awareness; those in power acknowledge their unique position in the construction and dissemination of false knowledge and are willing to use it to their own advantage.

Conclusion:

The current phenomenon of politicians labelling ‘misinformation’ as ‘alternative facts’, and the spreading of such misinformation is something that should not be ignored. In this digital age, during which people are constantly bombarded with images and messages – each of which claims to speak the ‘truth’ – the public now, more than ever, must be willing to engage critically with the claims of politicians and the cooptation of traumatic events for a specific political agenda. In tune with what Einstein and Hochschild assert, it is not enough for those who are

informed to remain inactive. Collectively, the public must not settle for being passive consumers of political and media discourses – especially considering the fact that this kind of public complacency and confusion will only aid in the dissemination of false information (103). In fact, politicians such as Donald Trump and Sean Spicer depend on this complacency and confusion – without it, the spreading of false information, and the construction of a meta narrative to suit their specific needs and agenda would be a much more difficult task. The fact that these individuals occupy specific locations of power does not mean that they will always speak the truth – despite the fact they should feel an obligated to do so. Nevertheless, the fact that the spreading of misinformation can help to further their political goals means that it is an option that they can, will, and already have utilized, capitalizing and coopting traumatic events as a means of confusing the collective consciousness of the American people. There *is* a truth in every traumatic event, but it requires a critical and active engagement by the public; the fact that Trump and Spicer attempt to construct their own reality that suits their own political desires does not mean that the truth ceases to exist – not even the President is powerful enough to fully obscure and erase reality.

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