

The view from Grubb Street—has it all just been fake news?

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Abstract

As the rapporteur of the Forum, Ross Gittins FRSN gave the concluding address.

We have had a lot of interesting and varied contributions on the topic of Truth, Rationality and Post-Truth, and I know from what people have said to me during the breaks how much you have enjoyed them. In summarising the various talks, I will try to draw out the range of views pertaining particularly to the central topic.

Opening proceedings, Don Hector asked us what had happened to reason, then told us that the post-modernists and relativists were in the ascendency, rejecting established sources of reason and accepting that belief should have equal sway with fact, and thereby putting an open, free society in great danger.

Simon Chapman, hero of the long-running battle against the tobacco companies to get restrictions on smoking and the harm it does, told us about his latest crusade, against the unfounded fear of wind turbines. Here, rather than battling powerful industrial interests, he's been battling uninformed individuals, whose fears have been taken far too seriously by a conservative government containing many climate-change deniers.

James Wilsdon's written contribution (spoken by the forum's chairman, Paul Griffiths) told us about the Brexit experience, with its many fanciful claims and rejection of evidence and the views of experts. He quoted the leading Tory Brexiteer Michael Gove's

line that some have regarded as spine-chilling: "People in this country have had enough of experts."¹ As a political scientist he put a lot of our worries about truth and post-truth into a more realistic context, making them less spine-chilling.

Emma Johnston said we were in a post-truth era of virulent attacks on science and online trolls, in which the truth can be virtually impossible to distinguish from fake news. As a profession, scientists needed to shore up their standing in the community, asserting the importance of their work in contributing to evidence-informed decision-making. They needed to help the public recognise credible scientific knowledge within the new "information free-for-all". They needed to change the culture that discourages scientists from speaking out. Genuine partnerships with communities, businesses and industries could go a long way to re-establishing trust in science.

Lisa Bero, from pharmacy, took a different, more professionally self-critical tack, reminding us of the way conflicts of interest arising from financial gain can reduce the influence of research evidence in policymaking, but then asking whether we should be paying more attention to the way conflicts of interest can bias the design, methods, conduct, interpretation and publication of research.

¹ *Financial Times*, 4 June 2016.

We need to make our research trustworthy, she concluded. I conclude that some scepticism about the findings of scientific papers may indeed be justified.

Then Peter Gluckman spoke about the role of evidence and expertise in policymaking, making a host of realistic and enlightening points drawn from his extensive experience as New Zealand's chief science advisor. He observed that science is not the only source of evidence political leaders take notice of (with a lot of attention given to advice from those less scientific beings, economists). And evidence is not the only thing policymakers take into account in the decisions they make. In a democracy, it's not surprising they take account of public opinion. Nor that their attitudes are influenced by ideology. And, of course, their decisions often involve a degree of compromise in the face of conflicting interest groups.

Andrew Jakubowicz explained how the internet facilitates the spread of racism and reduces trust, damaging the functioning of multicultural societies. He proposed ways to reduce the problem.

Nick Enfield argued it was not remotely in the community's interests to dismiss expert testimony from scientists, in the process diminishing our trust in them, in this "post-truth era" where we feel free to substitute "alternative facts". Rather than simply criticising the things anonymous people say on social media, he singled out Tony Abbott's assertion that "coal is good for humanity",² when "the overwhelming majority of people who are professionally qualified to evaluate scientific evidence on the matter know otherwise". (Economists are trained to weight the costs of actions against their benefits; taking account of its

contribution to our material living standards since the Industrial Revolution, I would have thought that coal, too, has benefits as well as costs.) But then Nick made a very pertinent contribution, joining Don Hector in reminding us of the findings of the psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who won the Nobel *memorial* prize in economics for his role as a founder of behavioural economics. Kahneman demonstrated that, most of the time, humans are unthinking, emotion-driven, non-rational animals notorious for their poor reasoning, even though they can, at times, reach the heights of rational reasoning we see our scientists attaining in, for instance, Newtonian physics and Einstein's theory of relativity. Which of those two, by the way, is or was the truth?

So, what are my thoughts about all this? Sorry, but the *journalistic* scepticism which is my substitute for *scientific* scepticism leaves me unconvinced by much of it. As a journo would put it, I think it's a beat up. I can understand how frustrating scientists must find it to discover there are uninformed people who simply reject the scientific evidence of global warming, and are impervious to counter argument. Indeed, the psychologists tell us, the more dire the scientists' warnings about how little time we have left to prevent hugely damaging climate change, the more the deniers are reinforced in their denial. I can understand how shocking many scientists find it to be told to their face that they're not believed, not telling the truth, but are making up crises to get more research funding. But I don't find this evidence-denying, unreasonable, irrational behaviour, this refusal to use one's brain, all that surprising. I've lived with it every week of the 40 years I've been a commentator on economics. It

²ABC, 13 Oct. 2014.

strikes me that hard scientists know a lot about how the physical world works, but not a lot about how humans work.

Nor do they seem to know much about how the political game is played. Did you know, for instance, that people are given a vote regardless of how uneducated they are, how unthinking they are, how willing they are to give free rein to their instant, emotional reactions to developments, and their refusal to use their grey matter for anything other than enhancing their encyclopaedic knowledge of cricket scores and reality television? Did you know that humans are prone to tribal behaviour? That politicians have, for their own venal reasons, turned climate change into a tribal issue, where your tribe believes in it, but my tribe doesn't? That I can close my mind to all your incomprehensible arguments, can simply refuse to accept that your professed expertise means you know the truth but I don't, for no reason other than that I and my tribe don't believe that sh*t?

I'm not convinced we live in the post-truth era. As we have heard, the Oxford dictionary defines "post-truth" as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". And this is something new, is it? We used to live in a world where rational analysis reigned supreme, where no one ever used facts selectively, no one quoted a fact that needed checking, and all the policy decisions politicians made were based strictly on evidence, where anything said by someone wearing a lab coat was accepted without question, but then along came the internet and social media, and suddenly all respect for the truth, and facts and evidence and experts went out the window. Really? I think we've always lived in a world where a lot of people are pretty dumb,

where many chose not to use their brains for the purposes scientists think they should, where they much prefer to give their emotions free rein, where anti-intellectualism is common. To me, this isn't something new, it's a description of the human condition. To attribute it to the ascendancy of post-modernist intellectualising rather than the prevalence of mug punters is to engage in intellectual delusion.

What's changed is that the internet and social media have given the anti-intellectuals and tribalists and racists a *microphone* through which to broadcast. One effect of this is to make *our* tribe far more *aware* of the terrible things other tribes have always thought and said about us while out of our hearing. This does mean there's now a lot more scope for people to be shocked and hurt by the new knowledge of the terrible things other people think and say about them. The internet and social media have also made it far easier for disparate members of particular tribes (including the science tribe) to find each other and engage in orgies of confirmation bias. To rev each other up. As has been observed today, social media has facilitated the development of many and varied echo chambers. What's less obvious to me is how much real difference this upsurge in preaching to the choir makes. It probably does contribute to the other forces making our politics and our community more polarised. Many speakers today have implied that there's been a big increase in the community's anti-intellectual attitudes and behaviour. This may or may not be true. Ironically, no one produced any hard statistical evidence that it is. One *alternative* explanation for the trends we think we see and attribute to the digital revolution, but which hardly rated a mention today, is the longstanding decline

in standards of political behaviour by the mainstream parties, which is prompting increasing numbers of voters to flirt with various strains of populism.

I think I detected a fair bit of tribal, ra-ra thinking by the science tribe in what was said today. Science and scientists are being disrespected as never before and we must lift our game and fight back. I suspect I heard echoes of nostalgia for the good old days when the pronouncements of scientists were accepted with respect and without question, much as people in olden times wanted their priests just to tell them what to do, and not do, to live moral life. Let me remind you that our population is better educated than it's

ever been, and one of the things they try to teach you at uni is to think critically about the pronouncements authority figures make, even those who tell you they're experts. Don't just nod when your doctor tells you something, put them through their paces.

The digital age has made us more conscious of the anti-intellectualism and intolerance that has always been with us. It may also have added to the quantity of that dysfunctional thinking and behaviour. In any event, it has made us more conscious of the need to find new and more psychologically effective ways of getting through to those we believe need the benefit of our enlightenment.

