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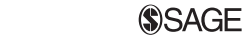

When Fiction Trumps Truth: What 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' mean for management studies

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Abstract

In this essay, we explore the notions of 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' for management studies. Adopting a pragmatist perspective, we argue that there is no intrinsically accurate language in terms of which to refer to reality. Language, rather, is a tool that enables agents to grab hold of causal forces and intervene in the world. 'Alternative facts' can be created by multimodal communication to highlight different aspects of the world for the purpose of political mobilization and legitimacy. 'Post-truth' politics reveals the fragmentation of the language game in which mainstream politics has been hitherto conducted. Using the communicative acts of businessman-turned-politician President Trump and his aides, as a prompt, we explore the implications that 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth' have for today's management scholarship. We argue that management scholars should unpack how managers navigate strategic action and communication, and how the creation of alternative realities is accomplished in conditions of informational abundance and multimodal communication.

Keywords

communication, justification, late modernity, post-truth, pragmatism

Ever since the referendum in the UK in June 2016 on exiting the European Union and the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States in November 2016, there has been an emerging discourse on 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth' (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017). Further, President Trump's systematic use of Twitter to provide political commentary has highlighted the importance of social media and multimodal communication at large in shaping what people regard

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as facts and truth (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The very terms 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth' highlight the increasing recognition that, in a mediated society, what we take to be a fact or truth is malleable.

Although there is no shortage of examples to illustrate 'alternative facts' drawn from the Trump administration, none is clearer in its simplicity than the controversy that surrounded the size of President Trump's inauguration ceremony in January 2017. It may be recalled that, at the time, the then White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, famously claimed at a televised press conference that '[the inauguration ceremony] was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period – both in person and around the globe' (S. Spicer, 2017). Press reporters were quick to respond by citing attendance statistics and tweeting photos of relatively empty arenas compared to Obama's inauguration. Trump countered on Twitter, calling the photos 'fake news' and 'phony'. Trump's senior adviser Kellyanne Conway went further and told NBC's 'Meet the Press' that Spicer's comments were not 'falsehoods' but merely 'alternative facts' (Todd, 2017).

Seen against a broader perspective, the inauguration size controversy reflected Trump's running war with the established media, which he repeatedly called 'dishonest' during and after his election campaign (Trump, 2017b). Trump's contempt has been replicated by several of his staff. For example, Reince Priebus, the then White House Chief of Staff, said on 'Fox News Sunday' that the administration is going to 'fight back tooth and nail every day' with the press (Wallace, 2017). 'There is an obsession by the media to delegitimize this President. We are not going to sit around and let it happen', he said (Wallace, 2017).

The size of the inauguration ceremony as such is a trivial matter. That it turned out to be so controversial not only crystallized early on the Trump administration's perspective on the malleability of 'facts' and 'truth' but illustrated a broader phenomenon: how, on the one hand, political polarization weakens common frameworks of understanding and communication, and, on the other hand, the role of social media and multimodal communication in creating and sustaining alternative realities.

The questions of what are 'facts' and how 'truth' is disclosed (or not) are not the exclusive interest of those in politics. Organizations and managers are also prone to construct their own versions of reality (including concealment), using many and varied tactics (Davis, 2017). Volkswagen received negative publicity in 2015 when the US Environmental Protection Agency revealed that the company had deliberately tampered with vehicles during emissions testing but had actively concealed the information from regulators and consumers (for example Rhodes, 2016; Siano, Vollero, Conte, & Amabile, 2017). BP came under pressure when it was found responsible for the largest accidental oil spill in the petroleum industry's history at Deepwater Horizon, despite its rhetoric claiming strong environmental credentials (Kassinis & Panayiotou, 2018). CEOs also feel they are under increased scrutiny because of the proliferation of social media and the 24/7 news cycle that has emerged (Per-Ola Karlsson, 2017). Spinning an official story about an important corporate event that has commanded media attention is more important than ever.

The purpose of this essay is to home in on the particular phenomenon of 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth' – to analyse how it operates and evaluate what its mechanisms might mean for strategic action and communication in organizations – in order to generate new avenues for research. Prior studies have prefigured the rise of a 'de-materialized' economy in late modernity, in which the ability of an organization to control the means of meaning production is beginning to matter more than controlling the means of material production (Tsoukas, 1999). Moreover, studies have recently begun to usefully explore the role of 'bullshitting' (A. Spicer, 2013) in organizations. Drawing on philosopher Frankfurt (2009), Spicer suggests that in bullshitting, the speaker is unconcerned with the truth and fundamentally preoccupied with pursuing his or her own purposes and interests. Bullshitting is 'prompted by organizations that are dominated by immaterial roles that provide

their occupants with little sense of broader social purpose and value' (A. Spicer, 2013, p. 659). However, while clearly engaging in bullshitting (Griffin, 2017), Trump goes beyond it, insofar as he uses his high (and anything but immaterial) office to carve new meanings through multimodal communication. The Trump presidency visibly illuminates how social media, with its recent technological capabilities and affordances, has significantly amplified actors' ability to engage in meaning production and, thus, in making knowledge claims about 'reality' more contestable. Our core argument will be that the use of social media has the capacity to elicit new forms of meaning-making for both negative and positive outcomes. In this respect, we argue that while this moment represents an instance of a strategic attack against established liberalism in politics, it offers an opportunity to conceptualize multimodal meaning-making and evaluate what is at stake in management studies more broadly.

The essay is organized as follows. In the next section, we define and explore the terms 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' in the context of speech acts and language games. Following this, we focus on alternative facts and the fragmentation of language games, especially in conditions of multimodal communication which we will further define. We then analyse the process of meaning-making through Trump's strategic use of social media technology and multimodality. Finally, we tie this back to management scholarship to show the implications for strategic action and communication, particularly for firms operating in low economic resource environments, and for managers who face entrenched economic and hierarchical interests within organizations.

Facts, Speech Acts and Language Games

Post-truth is defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford English Dictionary, June 2017). The term is relatively new and was identified by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the 'Word of 2016' based on its increasing use. However, there is more to 'post-truth' than what dictionaries convey.

Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts provides a sound starting point. Austin defined speech acts as utterances that have a performative function. His interest was on how language gets used to 'do' certain things and influence particular outcomes. Austin differentiated between three types of speech acts: *locutionary* acts are the actual utterances themselves and their ostensible meaning; *illocutionary* acts are the intentions or pragmatic forces motivating the utterances; and perlocutionary acts are the consequences of these acts, such as in realizing action.

In his collection of essays, *Expression and Meaning* (1979), Searle (one of Austin's students) applied speech act theory to ask the question: How do individuals know when they are reading fiction or non-fiction? For Searle fact and fiction were two classes of illocutionary acts. For a naïve reader picking up a page of 'facts' about a murder, it would be impossible to discern anything from the words themselves indicating that they were reading a crime report as opposed to a Sherlock Holmes story. However, Searle argued that this *would* be revealed through illocutionary acts – such as the way the text is presented, narrative tropes and so forth – that allowed the reader to appreciate the rules governing meaning-making for that particular text. Searle argued that fiction was guided by a 'set of extra-linguistic, non-semantic conventions that break the connection between words and the world established by the rules [of non-fiction]' (Searle, 1979, p. 66).

In arbitrating these distinctions, Searle acknowledged that some utterances have the effect of being 'brute facts' (1995, p. 27). Brute facts exist independently of human institutions, including language. Although brute facts require the institution of language to enable us to state the facts, nonetheless their very existence does not depend on language. 'Thus', notes Searle,

> the *statement* that the sun is ninety-three million miles from the earth requires an institution of language and an institution of measuring distances in miles, but the *fact stated* – the fact that there is a certain distance between the earth and the sun – exists independently of any institution. (Searle, 1995, p. 27, italics in the original).

Similarly, the statement that X number of people gathered on the National Mall on 20 January 2017, at around 11.00 am, is an objective (or brute) fact. Even if we did not have a language to express such a brute fact, it would still be objectively true. Such a claim is based on the correspondence theory of truth (Blackburn, 2017; Haack, 1995): statements are true to the extent that they 'correspond' to reality.

Pragmatist and hermeneutical philosophers go beyond the correspondence theory of truth to make a distinction between the causal force of the world and the facts that may be generated for interpretation. Caputo asks playfully: 'How many facts are there right now in your kitchen?' (2013, p. 216), only to acknowledge that this is not a serious question to answer.

> That is because we have not specified the frame of reference. Facts are a function of the frame of reference that picks them out, which means that there are no un-interpreted facts of the matter. But if we reframe the question to ask, 'how many knives are found in your kitchen?', we can come up with an answer, hopefully, the right answer, the one determined by how many knives there really are. (Caputo, 2013, p. 216)

Similarly, remarks Rorty:

> The way in which a blank takes on the form of the die which stamps it has no analogy to the relation between the truth of a sentence and the event which the sentence is about. When the die hits the blank something causal happens, but as many *facts* are brought into the world as there are languages for describing that causal transaction. As Donald Davidson says, causation is not under a description, but explanation is. Facts are hybrid entities; that is, the causes for the assertibility of sentences include both physical stimuli and our antecedent choice of response to such stimuli. (Rorty, 1991, p. 81, italics in the original)

Thus, the object in the world that causes us to have beliefs, be it a cat, a murder case, or an inauguration is never context-free (Caputo, 2013). Upon entering human consciousness, it is turned into a 'fact' under a description created in the context of a practice world (Spinosa, Flores, & Dreyfus, 1997). A hammer, for example, exists as a tool for driving nails into wood, by virtue of being part of the practice world of, say, carpentry. For something to *be*, it needs to show up *as* something, in the context of a practice world (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, p. 343). Objects come with descriptions already attached.

When, therefore, Rorty (1991) describes facts as hybrid entities, what he means is that our 'antecedent choice of response' (p. 81) to the stimuli we are exposed to comes from the particular vocabulary we have equipped ourselves to cope with the causally impactful object. The latter *already* has a place in a language game. It is not stripped bare of human concerns. The point here is not that there is no independent reality out there that causes us to have beliefs, but that the beliefs we are caused to have do not 'correspond' to' or 'represent' a determinate (extra-linguistic) reality (Rorty, 1989, pp. 4–5). There is no language-independent test of the accuracy of correspondence of a statement with a chunk of the world. As Putnam (1996, pp. 113–116) has argued, relationships of reference – how statements refer to chunks of reality – are *internal* to our overall view of the world (Rorty, 1991, p. 6). One cannot exit language games to view the world from nowhere (Nagel, 1986). We would not know what such a vantage point would be like.

When, therefore, we agree that 'the cat is on the mat' or that 'the litmus paper has turned blue', we do not take these statements as 'representing' the chunks of reality they refer to, but as agreements

within a particular language game – agreements that enable us to say that we are justified in being caused to believe that the sentence is true (Rorty, 1989, p. 5; 1991, pp. 80–83). To say 'that we must have respect for facts is just to say that we must, if we are to play a certain language game, play by the rules' (Rorty, 1991, p. 81). In that sense, there is no ideal or intrinsically accurate language in terms of which to refer to reality. Language, on this pragmatist view, is a tool that gives us 'a way of grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering ourselves and our environment to suit our aspirations' (Rorty, 1991, p. 81). The critical question is not 'Are you representing reality adequately?' but 'What are you trying to do with the language you are using?'

Alternative Facts and the Fragmentation of Language Games

With the above in mind, let us turn our attention to the notion of 'alternative facts'. Although the term is relatively new, we suggest that the illocutionary force it signifies is old – the generation of alternative ways of communicating about an issue for strategic effect. Here, we make a distinction between interlocutors offering competing perspectives within the *same* language game versus switching between *different* language games.

In a well-functioning liberal democracy, every opposition often counters the government's claims by pointing to competing interpretations of an issue. For example, when a government highlights the higher growth rate achieved, the opposition usually focuses on what the government conveniently passes by: wage stagnation and the unequal distribution of income. If the government proudly points at the low unemployment rate, the opposition will likely insist on the quality of jobs created and the pockets of high unemployment in the country, and so on. In short, in a competitive and robust political system, such as a liberal democracy, 'facts' claimed by one side will likely be responded to by counter-facts of the other side, but these relate more to matters of priority (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017). That is, within the same language game (i.e., what is in the national interest or what drives prosperity) there may be differences of opinions about what is more relevant between competing priorities, without necessarily denying the existence of priorities other than the ones focused on.

However, Trump's use of the term 'alternative facts' connotes something subtly different. This is not about offering a different perspective within the same language game. It is about de-legitimating the current language game-in-use and switching to another in which his facts (that is, his 'alternative facts') have a different and more resonant meaning for his audiences. Trump is a master in switching between language games (for example Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016).

Thus, returning to the size of Trump's inauguration incident, one might argue, as NBC's Chuck Todd did, that certain claims are utterly false and that certain alternative facts are just falsehoods'. The gathering of thousands of people on the National Mall has the causal status of the die-hitting-the-blank: we are caused by the state of the world (i.e., number of people gathered) to see something. When, however, this nonlinguistic causality is stated in sentences or pictures, several facts are created, depending on the language used. The seemingly innocent question 'How many people watched on the National Mall President-elect Trump's inauguration?' presupposes some 'antecedent choice of response' (Rorty, 1991, p. 81), namely a language game. It could be the language game of everyday life, as when friends converse leisurely in a cafe; or it could be the language game of the National Park Service, which routinely collects daily statistics of such matters; or it could be the language game of competitive politics, in which case the question is loaded with political significance, since the number of people gathered connotes popular support (or not) and confers political legitimacy (or not).

Trump's tactics revolve around playing a competing language game to that of his opponents, namely liberal elites. Thus, his post-inauguration language game is not really about the inauguration ceremony or what we might think of as its functional attributes: where it took place, who

attended, or what was said. Instead, he is geared toward at least two interconnected games that 'speak' to his conservative base: (a) an anti-elitist game to amplify the elitism and aloofness of the liberal establishment media, and (b) a populist game to reiterate his legitimacy as the people's elected representative.

When Trump and his aides talk about 'deliberately false reporting' and the 'dishonesty in the media' (S. Spicer, 2017), he is playing a language game with his large, conservative base who feel left behind by the preoccupations of liberal elites. When Trump activates this emotion by calling for a 'running war with the media' (Trump, 2017a), he is turning away from the traditional language game of political competition to a war-like language game, in which, like in all wars, propaganda, or at least the self-serving use of whatever evidence one can get hold of, is a defensible tactic. Misquoting statistics is but one tactic of war used to defeat one's adversaries. Spicer later admitted his use of DC Metro public transit statistics was wrong, but only after the battle had been fought (Gajanan, 2017; Hunt, 2017).

Similarly, when Trump and his aides claim that 'this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration', he is playing a language game based on legitimacy (S. Spicer, 2017). Notice how quickly Trump shifted the terms of the debate from the crowd size on the National Mall to unverified views 'around the globe' watching online and on television (S. Spicer, 2017; Talev & Jacobs, 2017). Like Putnam's objects in the room, 'inauguration audience' is a linguistic object whose use is not fixed by the world itself but by the *use* that is made of it (Putnam, 1996, p. 114). Different uses of 'inauguration audience' generate different statements (say those of the *New York Times* versus those by Spicer) which can, potentially, all be true (Putnam, 1996, p. 115). Trump's goal, therefore, is to switch to language games that provide an alternative reality to what 'the media' projects about him, and ones that resonate for his constituencies. Trump-ism is a recycling of 'postmodernist' or 'relativist' modes of thinking and communicating by conservative power brokers (Anderson, 2017). They shape and produce alternative facts by tapping into and playing language games that operate outside the norms of liberal establishment media but have meaning to their constituents and their local contexts.

When political interlocutors fight over a seemingly 'brute fact' as the size of an inauguration, it reveals that the language game of politics has taken a new turn to become divisively opportunistic and self-serving. Interlocutors' disagreement about the political equivalent of 'the cat is on the mat' indicates that the hitherto agreed rules of the language game of politics have broken down and are no longer respected. To paraphrase Rorty (1991, p. 80), the malleability of the 'fact' in question signifies the fragility of the previous political agreements about the consequences of the fact. The causal independence of the inauguration from commentators does not mean that the inauguration can be seen 'as it is' and *then* interpreted. Rather, the very question of 'how many people watched the inauguration' arises in the context of a political language game. It is not a bare number, stripped of human interests and concerns, but is embedded in a particular context or game. In that sense, contra Searle, all facts are really 'institutional facts', insofar as they presuppose an institution and the definitional work institutions carry out (Searle, 1995, pp. 27–28; 2010, pp. 10–11).

Of course, both sides of the debate refer their statements concerning inauguration size *to* some state in the world. However, their reference is *internal* to each side's perspective on the world (Putnam, 1996). This is why the question 'How many people attended the Trump inauguration?' can be answered in several ways, depending on how interlocutors use the relevant words and pictures. As Putnam (1996) remarks, 'truth does not transcend use. Different statements … can be true in the same situation because the words – in some cases, the logical words themselves – are used differently' (pp. 115–116). In sum, pragmatist philosophy recognizes how this misunderstanding can come about, but it is late modernity that makes the possibilities for verbal/visual contradiction more acute.

Post-truth and Meaning-Making in Multimodal Communication

In addition to switching up the language game-in-use, Trump's communication strategies coincide with a proliferation of communication technologies that enable language games to be played multimodally. By multimodally, we draw attention to both the multiple channels through which language is communicated – through newspapers, television, social media, at rallies, in meetings, and beyond – and also how these different channels are used simultaneously and cross-reference each other. The interdependent use of multiple modes of communicating shifts audience attention from one format to another, with each mode bringing to the message its own illocutionary force.

As stated above, few statements are simpler than stating the number of people gathered in a particular place at a particular date and time. However, different modes of communication can bring different illocutionary force to the alternative ways in which this statement can be 'true'. One interlocutor who wishes to break faith in the large size of the inauguration may use visual images (for example, an empty National Mall) to debunk verbal statements to the contrary. An interlocutor who wishes to bolster faith in the opposite argument may drive attention to television where Trump's charisma (e.g., speech-making at a well-attended supporter's' party) can cast doubt on the 'truth' that he is unpopular or illegitimate. Twitter might be deployed to make the debate more personal, pitting one person's view against that of the President himself. Each technology or mode of communication, therefore, affords its own advantages in terms of the type of language game being played and how the conversation is had. Moreover, moving between multiple modes of communication makes the possibility for language *gaming* sharper, more immediate and more frequent by bringing the illocutionary force of each modality to bear on the argument at hand.

As Trump's post-inauguration communication strategy illustrates, this is why controlling *the means* of meaning production is so valuable. Trump chooses where and how to communicate his words, often avoiding editors, interviewers or journalists as a medium for delivering his initial message. Twitter is useful for Trump in this regard. It allows him to control the timing, phraseology and context in which his language is received. This mode of communication also melds well with his anti-establishmentarian, personalized language game. Of course, the irony of Twitter is that Trump *doesn't* have to respond personally (unlike in an interview). This too is an important affordance of the technology. Twitter, Facebook, and other social media technologies activate what Thompson has called 'responsive action in distant contexts' (Thompson, 1995, p. 109). Unlike a face-to-face conversation where producer and recipient can co-construct meaning interpretations in real time, recipients respond indirectly to Trump (the producer) based on media messages they receive from him on social media. Thus, Trump's social media messages 'are elaborated, refined, criticized, praised and commented on by recipients who take the messages received as the subject matter of discussions with one another and with others' (Thompson, 1995, p. 110). This is also central to how Trump's messages are amplified. Trump relies on his tweets spreading, either by re-tweets, but more significantly through coverage across other media technologies such as on Facebook, chat forums, blogs, YouTube channels, press and ultimately broadcast television (Fuchs, 2018).

Trump's strategy is also multimodal because it is built toward a tactical goal of driving traffic from Twitter and other technological modes to cable news television broadcast on a daily basis where he can sell his message in a more elaborated, televisual form. Ross Douthat at the *New York Times* has convincingly illuminated this point, arguing that television rather than social media is the making of Trump as President (Douthat, 2018). Television is where Trump developed his original persona (on *The Apprentice*); it is how his tweets are re-broadcast and commentated upon, and it is the basis upon which he builds a relationship with news anchors and talk show hosts, like Sean Hannity, who invite him on their shows to further elaborate his news commentary. It is well reported that television, and in particular Fox News, is the first place Trump goes in the morning, and the last place he tunes out (Marantz, 2018).

Trump's command of the televisual allows him to play language games that tap into emotions in ways that traditional text-based language games may not. Returning to the 'inauguration audience', Trump uses this issue in a particular way that allows him to substantiate his broader point about '*the enthusiasm* of the inauguration' (S. Spicer, 2017). After all, the size of the inauguration audience matters insofar as it signifies political appeal or 'enthusiasm' for the President. To prosecute this case, Trump's aides direct attention elsewhere: to live coverage of his speech at the CIA, soon after the inauguration (Trump, 2017a). By doing so, they interweave the language game about the inauguration proper with the visual depiction of the 'raucous overflow crowd' of some 400-plus CIA employees and the 'five-minute standing ovation' that Trump receives there (S. Spicer, 2017). In other words, the world does not tell us how words like 'enthusiasm' must be used – that depends on the speaker's conceptual choices, in light of his or her view of the world (Putnam, 1996, p. 114). By giving sense to this word through grand hand gestures, distal facial positioning, and confident posture, Trump seeks to tap into the reservoir of 'greatness', of 'winning', of 'self-confidence' in an emotive way. The visuality of television allows his charisma to be manifest and allows him to literally dominate the stage on which these emotional issues are adjudicated by audiences.

It is, therefore, too simplistic to say that Trump's communication strategy 'masks' reality. He is changing the language game of politics itself by creating a new game, motivated by conservative causes and enabled by a new technological means of meaning production enhanced by social media networks, direct messaging and multimodal techniques. With this apparatus in place, Trump's post-truth America reminds us that even the hardest of facts are 'hard', not so much because they correspond to the world as it is, but because they are 'an artifact produced by our choice of language game' (Rorty, 1991, p. 80). Trump's language game is sustained by deep divisions in our politic and fragmentation of audiences: a sense of civic community between elites and non-elites that is breaking down; common understandings of concepts that is becoming ever so difficult to be achieved; and power as what matters most, pushing reasonable interpretation to the back seat.

What Social Media-Powered 'Post-truth' Implies for Management Research

Part of candidate Trump's campaign pitch was that he was a businessman who would bring his experience in business to bear on the office of the presidency. Given this, and what we are beginning to appreciate about the 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' contexts he has fostered, how might scholars of organizations and management reflect on current research and how can it be extended or re-evaluated in the future? Below we discuss three areas in which sensitivity to the practices that give rise to 'post-truth' claims and 'alternative facts' might offer fresh insights on organizational phenomena: strategizing and competing truth claims; empowerment and social inclusion; and multimodal communication to exercise power.

Organizations, communication technologies and competing truth claims

Post-truth contests permeate organizations. Insofar as organizations are filled with ambiguity (March, 2010), it is often nearly impossible to pinpoint with certainty the 'truth' behind an organization's success or decline, which is built over many years, and it is difficult to infer reliable lessons from the past to guide future actions. Ambiguity is endemic (March, 2010, p. 3). An appreciation of post-truth helps provide fresh impetus to the dramaturgical perspective on organizations (Mangham & Overington, 1987; March, 2010), namely, to viewing organizations as enacting prevalent social myths and organizational members as playing their roles on the organizational

stage (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Truth is not so much a correspondence with reality as enacting a socially acceptable drama that resonates with an audience. Moreover, it helps draw attention more strongly to the way organizations and managers construct narratives and undertake symbolic acts to justify themselves to internal and external audiences (Gabriel, 2004; Maguire & Hardy, 2013; Tsoukas, 1999). Ambiguity enables accounting for outcomes in multiple ways, and, thus, for all sorts of 'alternative facts' to be mobilized for particular purposes. Which ones are highlighted, what justifications are publicly projected, and what narratives are offered, provide fascinating topics to explore.

Yet this moment in our politic illuminates something new for organizations as well: the types and affordances of communication technologies that open up opportunities to subvert traditional power structures. To appreciate the scale of possible disruption, consider the Shell versus Greenpeace conflict in the North Sea in 1995 over the disposal of Brent Spar, a defunct oil platform. Whereas Shell emphasized scientific 'facts' contained in official reports – claiming that the effect of disposing of Brent Spar in the ocean would have had a negligible impact on the environment – Greenpeace chose to highlight heterodox scientific accounts that underscored the difficulty of predicting environmental impact. While Shell was narrowly concerned with the disposal of Brent Spar, Greenpeace took such disposal to create a precedent for how the rest of decommissioned platforms in the North Sea would be disposed of (Tsoukas, 1999). Each actor in the conflict produced different claims, which drew on different 'facts', and generated competing narratives suited to each actor's distinctive worldview (see Maguire & Hardy, 2013).

Tsoukas (1999) argued at the time that what was so striking about Greenpeace's influence over Shell was the extent to which Greenpeace dominated *television* coverage, and made knowledge claims about Shell that influenced audience opinions in the international 'agora' – that is, the sphere of public opinion in which individuals form their consumer preferences. This allowed a relatively small, low resource organization (Greenpeace) to outcompete a well-resourced organization (Shell), upending a traditional assumption in strategic management about the importance of controlling critical material resources in competing for strategic advantage. Tsoukas (1999) used this to suggest that a 'de-materialized' economy was emerging in late modernity in which controlling symbolic power could be more influential than controlling the capital means of production. By 'owning' the means of symbolic production through the influence over televised media coverage, Greenpeace was able to subvert existing power holders and make knowledge claims that had an impact on Shell's license to operate and ability to work with stakeholders and customers.

Twenty years on, the de-materialization of the economy has gathered pace. The internet and social media have made 'the agora' more populous, more connected, more responsive and therefore more consequential for strategy-making and strategy participants. Future research might explore how claims to 'truth' are projected, contested and established between organizations in competitive contexts through their use of language games. Such studies might also raise questions about who 'wins' if commonly accepted understandings about the 'appropriate' language game erode to such a point that the creation of facts is up for grabs by anybody. Management scholars, particularly from the critical tradition, have already reflected on the use of corporate spin, impression management and greenwash by corporate power holders (for example Brown & Jones, 2000; Harvey, Tourky, Knight, & Kitchen, 2017; McDonnell & King, 2013). However, we now live in an environment where 'fake' firms can compete with real firms, or firms can project greater resources than they actually have, thereby changing the rules of strategic competition from a resource-based model to something in which reputation and image management are increasingly important (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005).

This new form of competition has a dark side: where firms or managers use media to make or amplify their claims with limited accountability to their truthfulness, we risk creating untrustworthy markets in which claims are no longer comprehensible and the fabric that sustains these marketplaces erodes. In August 2018, Elon Musk, the founder and CEO of Tesla, used Twitter to announce that he had 'funding secured' to take the company private, even though he had no legally binding agreement (Jenkins, 2018). In these situations, regulatory oversight is necessary to ensure language games are established and played in ways that maintain an appropriate level of trust in governing institutions, and that actors are held to account for certain types of rule-breaking behaviors. In Musk's case, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filed a suit in New York accusing Musk of fraud based on the tweet. The proceedings resulted in fines for Musk and Tesla and forced corporate governance changes in which Musk stood down as Tesla chair (Jenkins, 2018).

Empowerment and social inclusion

While post-truth and alternative facts tend to be used in a negative way to highlight power holder's' sway over a malleable reality, few scholars have yet highlighted the potentially *positive* outcomes from this same post-truth meaning-making process, at least in the sense of subverting entrenched power. In 2017, for example, several management controversies emerged, in which the underpowered and disenfranchised mobilized social media to overthrow or undermine corporate hierarchies. Travis Kalanick, the founder and CEO of ride-hailing service Uber, was ousted in June 2017 after a report about the company's aggressive culture and inappropriate treatment of women and employees went viral on social media (Isaac, 2017). Later that year, movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, the co-founder of The Weinstein Company, was forced to step down after allegations of sexual harassment and abuse were revealed and gained pace on social media (Farrow, 2017). This prompted a wider #MeToo social media campaign, in which victims of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace felt empowered to 'out' offenders, leading to resignations across many organizations and sectors (Khonmami, 2017).

In each case, these truth claims were contested by the power holders and/or their supporters. Some commentators and investors, for example, remarked that Uber's culture was not 'toxic' but conducive to the creativity needed for disruptive innovation (see Hook & Kuchler, 2017; Thornhill, 2017). Weinstein disputed the claims against him on the basis that his encounters were consensual (BBC, 2018). In other cases, powerful companies lost arguments in the court of public opinion directly impacting their financial performance. For example, the European Union applied fines on materially and symbolically powerful corporations such as Apple and Google (see Waters, Toplensky, & Ram, 2017) based on EU claims about tax avoidance and market dominance respectively. These were contested by the corporations, pointing to 'alternative facts' and seeking to project the image of creative wealth creators rather than tax avoiders or market exploiters.

Which account prevails is the outcome of, among other things, discursive battles. Yet social media not only creates a new agora for firms to compete in. It also provides a new way for internal organizational conflicts to emerge beyond an organization's boundaries that can be very consequential. Indeed, several Weinstein accusers later confessed that they felt compelled to suppress 'the truth' while acting under the company's oppressive non-disclosure agreements, but felt more able to come forward when their experience was legitimated within the broader discourse around sexual harassment (Farrow, 2017). In the future, management scholars could be more attuned to how this new era of social media openness enables multiple possibilities for meaning-making, opening up new forms of power relations that influence the dynamics between firms (e.g. Greenpeace vs. Shell) as well as within organizations themselves (e.g. Uber and The Weinstein Company). What alternatives to accepted 'facts' are mobilized, by what agents, for what purposes,

with what effects, all become important topics that relate to the management of organizational change, reputational management, institutional entrepreneurship, and innovation.

Power and multimodal communication

A related implication for management scholars is the opportunity to explore in greater detail how managers actually use multimodal communication to project non-American spelling, choose favorable images of themselves and/or their organizations to build personal and/or corporate reputations (Bloom & Rhodes, 2018; Rindova et al., 2006). It is increasingly the case that managers communicate not only through talk and written text (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011), but also visually through the adept use of PowerPoint presentations and data visualizations (Knight, Paroutis, & Heracleous, 2018), which are often accentuated through body gestures (Wenzel & Koch, 2018).

Using Trump as a starting point, future studies might consider how Trump's behaviors feature in entrepreneurial and management practice. Indeed, his practice as an entrepreneur, switching between television coverage (such as *The Apprentice*), appearances in the newspapers and in-person negotiations in meetings, helped him to build up an image of success in the commercial agora that led to strategic advantages in his business dealings. Yet how these different mechanisms get combined multimodally for strategic effect is largely unexamined in the literature (Boczkowski & Orlikowski, 2004).

Knight et al.'s (2018) study of how management consultants influence the strategy process offers some insight into this based on how they move between different types of strategy materials in communications. The study found that consultants exerted considerable influence over the direction of the strategy process by deliberately switching from the PowerPoint slides, to the conversations, to how those emergent ideas were depicted visually, and back again, to shape the direction of strategy meaning-making. The study also found that different kinds of visual techniques (e.g., text slides, pictures, graphs, among others) afforded opportunities to tackle different kinds of issues – be they politically and emotionally charged, logically complex, or widely accepted. Their study described strategy making as a visual semiotic process in which the interdependence *between* talk, text, and visuality moved meaning-making on. This is somewhat analogous to Trump's use of multimodal modes of communication to sustain political dominance: he has used Twitter (one mode of communication) to drive attention to television broadcasts (the second mode of communication), thereby leveraging the affordances of each mode. Twitter is instantaneous and brief, allowing for controversial statements that get broadcast widely with little clarification. Television, on the other hand, is emotionally charged, allowing for the iconography of stadiums and crowds to complement grand hand gestures and provocative rhetoric.

Future studies could go further by examining the affordances of new kinds of communication technologies, the effects of new combinations of semiotic practices, or exploring extreme cases of success or failure in the public agora. For example, in 2009, members of the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia became the subjects of international attention when climate skeptics hacked into their email servers and published confidential email dialogues between scientific researchers, including reference to a methodological 'trick' used in the presentation of data for publication (Revkin, 2009). Although no wrongdoing was found, the research unit in question attracted negative attention, illustrating how hackers could take language out of context to marginalize actors and de-legitimate reputations (Henig, 2009). Interestingly, this problem arose partly because the very purpose behind the data – to *show* that climate change was real – poorly achieved that task because the affordance of scientific figures lacked the immediacy through which a 'brute fact' (i.e., climate change) could be visually appraised and made 'real' to non-expert audiences (Knight, 2013). Management issues that face similar visualization challenges

– such as diversity and social inclusion in the workplace, climate change accountability, data privacy, among others – are useful contexts in which battles over what is 'truth' and what are 'alternative facts' might be played out.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the discourse on 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' reminds us, sometimes painfully, that what we take to be facts and truth are heavily dependent on the language games we take part in. Insofar as we happen not to wonder about facts, it is because we have faith in the rules of the relevant language games, and vice versa. Fixing a language game that does not command our allegiance requires generating more trust, not better facts. This is as important in politics as in business. The more business organizations are seen to be self-serving and unaccountable, the less trust they are likely to elicit and the less credible their statements will likely be. Moreover, since any claims made are made within particular contexts of communication, it is important to turn management scholars' attention to the multimodal communication within which contemporary discursive battles are increasingly carried out. Exploring how different modes activate and empower (or not) new audiences to unseat (or bolster) established power relations within and around organizations provides new opportunities for management research. While we have adopted a pragmatist lens in this essay, we acknowledge that alternative theoretical frames, such as discourse analysis, genealogy, and deconstruction, can provide illuminatingly different insights to those we have discussed here, which will likely enrich our understanding of how 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' shape organizing in late capitalism (Fuchs, 2018).

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