

**Level Two** - amended 14/10/2017

“What is truth?” said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.

- *Francis Bacon, Essays, Civil and Moral; Of Truth*

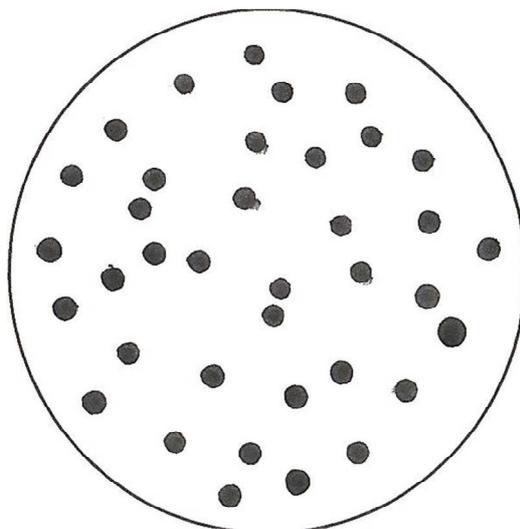
A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.

- *George Orwell, in Politics and the English Language.*

When you go looking for the facts to help you make a decision, or engage in discussion with someone, how do you separate fact from fiction, reliable information from misleading versions? It's not an easy process, and it depends what you are looking for.

This section, being level 2, assumes you already know the main differences between terms like Left and Right, Labour, Liberal and Conservative. If you wish to re-examine those words feel free to nip back to Level One briefly and check them out. But if you think you have at least a rough idea, let's start with this:

Look at this circle of dots and, as you stare at it, try to discover the number 8.



Can you see it? Suppose I told you this was an intelligence test and you had ten seconds to find it. I've told you it is there, you want to see it, so you'll see it. Of course, it is only a random selection of dots. Any 'number 8' you see is an order imposed on the random facts by your desire to see what you want. That, by and large, is how we make sense of the random nature of reality. Millions of external stimuli assail our eyes and ears every hour and we ignore most of them, because there are far too many to process. The rest we put into an order that corresponds to shapes, ideas and beliefs that are familiar to us. Or that we wish to believe. We make sense of the world in ways we have been taught to use, by simplifying it into our own private world.

We can look at this in various ways, using ideas from:

**Structuralism**

**Media analysis**

**Social media analysis (fake news and technology)**

**Psychology, logic and syllogism**

**Substructure, superstructure and ideology**

Then think about

**Fake news and fact checking**

and

**Is truth possible?**

## **Structuralism**

This is easier to understand than most people think. Much of it evolved from ideas that have been around for a very long time.

What we do in dreams, we also do when we are awake; we invent and fabricate the people with whom we associate and immediately forget that we have done so. - Nietzsche

We see things not as they are, but as we are. - Kant

The philosopher Vico, in *The New Science* (1725) argued that:

When man perceives the world, he perceives without knowing it the superimposed shape of his own mind, and entities can only be meaningful (or 'true') in so far as they find a place within that shape.

Structuralism is about structure - the way language is structured and the way it shapes our experience of the world. Put very crudely, we learn a language and that tells us how to make sense of the world. It imposes on our mind a way of seeing things, along with ideas about what is real, virtuous, valuable, frightening etc. We create what we call reality through the structure of our language, and structuralists want to know how, and what this implies.

What is really only our point of view or way of looking at things is something we think of as natural or normal. Thus, structuralists tend to look, not at how the world works, but how our language works in telling us what the world 'really' is.

Edward Sapir looked at the way different languages worked to shape perception in their users. He concluded that the language we learn controls how we experience or understand the world:

The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. *The Status Of Linguistics As A Science* (1929)

Myths and popular stories are interesting in this context. They can be analysed to seek out certain structures and relationships of ideas. Myths help us to make sense of the world (to construct reality). They can therefore be 'decoded' (deconstructed) to see how this process works. Structuralism works like an X-ray. One works from the story to the deep structures of the mind/society which constructs reality through such stories.

Language has an 'anaesthetic function'. It makes things familiar to us and we stop having to think about them. Similarly, a naive viewer/reader/listener might assume that our media are a window upon reality, a mere source of information. In fact, of course, they are at best distorting mirrors. We need to consider not just obvious facts, such as the ideology or belief system of the producers, but the effect upon the 'message' of the form it comes in.

It can be argued that different forms will encourage different ways of shaping/interpreting reality. That is not just saying that certain genres have their own conventions. In old fashioned westerns, goodies usually survive and baddies always get shot. The audience can then believe in the reality of justice. The world is obviously a fair place. The good are rewarded, the bad punished, so being good pays. In more modern films, being bad is sometimes more profitable. Our system of reinforcing behaviour is thus weakened.

Now let's consider the world of news, first with ordinary old-fashioned newspapers, t.v. and radio programmes.

## Media analysis

Most people, if they read a paper at all, read only one. Try this experiment. On a single day, walk into a supermarket and look at the headlines on all the papers, including as wide a range as you can find. It will be obvious that:

Not all major stories appear in all papers.

Even when papers make the same choices, they might put stories in a different order of importance.

The way they tell a story may be radically different, leading to very different conclusions.

It is not just a simple matter of party loyalty, with *PM has brilliant idea* in one but *PM does very stupid thing* in another. They have very different views of what the world looks like, how it works, what matters and how we should understand it. They know what their readers want to hear about and that is what they tell them about. They know what their readers tend to like, believe and tolerate and won't, on the whole, want to upset them with radically different views. You might see this as cynical manipulation of a passive market, but (a) the journalists might very well believe what they say because that is also how they see the world and (b) many readers probably know their paper has an 'angle' but they like it, and they believe, rightly or wrongly, they can see through it if they need to.

Now compare those newspapers with the television and radio headlines. Some stories won't be on t.v. because there are no pictures to go with it. Radio might give it much longer as it can just 'phone in a report at the last minute. The way media technologies work will affect what stories appear and how they are told.

And note we are speaking again of 'stories', shape-making stories that ignore some data and present other data in a certain way to make sense of what might otherwise be random stimuli. If a big story breaks (soccer star in bath with his best friend's wife) then other people start looking for stories to go with it, or similar stories. But what does it matter? Because he or she is unfaithful? Because it was the night before the big match? Because he lied and was then caught out? Because he was being blackmailed? First you decide if it is a story at all, then you decide what kind of story it is, then you look for more stories like it or related to it (best friend has had no bath for two months, referee caught in shower with coach etc).

This becomes more serious when we consider, for example, how media outlets owned by rich private individuals can create a sustained attempt to silence a point of view:

To conclude, the degree of viciousness and antagonism with which the majority of the British newspapers have treated Corbyn is deemed to be highly problematic from a democratic perspective. If, as the British philosopher Onora O'Neill (2002) also argued, the high degree of media power needs to be accompanied by a high degree of media and democratic responsibility, is it then acceptable that the

majority of the British newspapers uses its mediated power to attack and delegitimise the leader of the largest opposition party against a rightwing government to such an extent and with such vigour?

*Academic "Report" on "Journalistic" Representations of "Jeremy" Corbyn - p12*  
<https://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/pdf/JeremyCorbyn/Cobyn-Report-FINAL.pdf>

Opinion differs on how far traditional media influence voting patterns, although there is obviously a serious debate to be had here. What is very clear is that the relatively new social media raise more issues of a different kind.

### **Social media analysis (fake news and technology)**

The person who wrote this page once earned some money by writing web pages for a company that sold tiles. They wanted their site to show lots of recommendations from satisfied customers, so the author sat down and wrote 1,000 personal recommendations in different names, from different towns. The tile company sold tiles, the author got paid. But how many people looking at their screen after a Google search actually bought tiles because they trusted those personal recommendations? Possibly not many, as we all know how that sort of thing works. Don't we? Well, it might be worth checking.

Most people assume that Google is a source of 'facts' from sites like Wikipedia, written by people who know their subject and tell the truth. In fact, you can build an interesting picture of a society by analysing Google searches <sup>1</sup> to see what people worry about. But checking on the reliability of that source may not occur to them. After all, if you can't ask Google, who can you ask?

So how can we treat the 'facts' and ideas released into the internet? Who releases them and why? That is a BIG question. It is often argued that Trump became president of the USA partly because of social media influence managed by friends on right wing news sites. It is even argued that Russia is hacking into Western sites to influence elections <sup>2</sup>. Extremist groups are said to spread messages of hate through social media to try to get the population to accept their ideas. <sup>3</sup> This works partly by manipulating what is known as the Overton Window.

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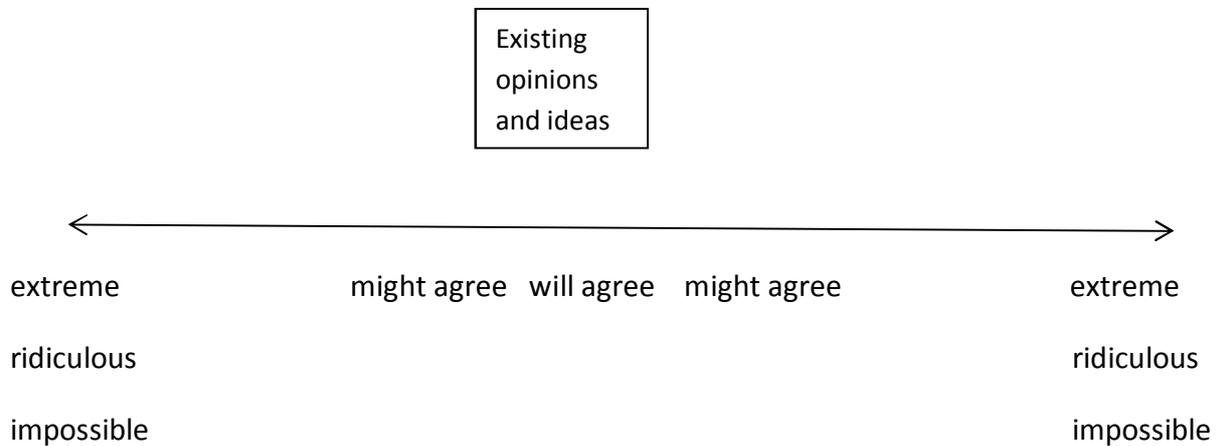
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/09/everybody-lies-how-google-reveals-darkest-secrets-seth-stephens-davidowitz>

<sup>2</sup> <http://time.com/4783932/inside-russia-social-media-war-america/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/01/far-right-networks-nationalists-hate-social-media-companies>

The Overton Window is named after Joseph P. Overton, who pointed out that people can accept new ideas only within a limited range of their existing opinions. Anything outside that range cannot be accepted.

### Overton window



If you started in the year 1800 and argued in favour of votes for women it would be outside the Overton Window of most people in the UK. Slowly, the window moved and it became thinkable, then accepted, then valued. So if you want to bring in a new idea you may need to move that window, nudge it along a little. There are three connected ideas here.

1) The combined effect of many small nudges from many sources may eventually move people's Overton windows and make an idea acceptable. Messages on social media can be spread by the thousand using robot systems, gently dropping hints and nudges, targeted at potential supporters using data from other sites that captured our preferences, buying habits, opinions etc<sup>4</sup>. The process can be hardly noticed but very effective. It is not unusual for racist groups, who would be denied access to someone's Overton window in ordinary argument, to post snide comments, jokes, fake statistics and news stories to slowly poison the atmosphere and nudge the window along, so eventually racism becomes more acceptable in day-to-day conversation.

2) The centre ground is a modern myth. It is common to hear words like moderate and centre used approvingly and extremist disapprovingly, but who decides where the centre is located. The government of Margaret Thatcher was remarkable in many ways and one of them was the way it shifted the Overton Window to the right. Previously mainstream conservatives became 'wet' and were cast out. Moderate union leaders became 'extremists'. Tony Blair inherited that window and instead of moving it back again he accepted the new limitations and tried to fit the Labour party into it, so the left moved to the right in order to look more like moderates and less like extremists. In 2016 the window

<sup>4</sup> You will have noticed that Amazon and Facebook know what you buy and what you like. Detailed information about you is for sale to people seeking votes or influence.

started to move back again, but the centre ground in the UK is still a lot further to the right that it is in most other Western European countries. Modern voters are just not aware of it.

3) When people are offered information they will believe it if they want to and not if they don't. Its 'truth value' often counts less than its value in confirming their own prejudices. That is why we need also to look at psychology, logic and syllogism

### **Psychology, logic and syllogism**

The Behavioural Insights Team, also known as the Nudge Unit, was set up as government body but now operates independently.<sup>5</sup> The key element in their description of their own purpose is "improving outcomes by introducing a more realistic model of human behaviour to policy". In other words, if governments want people to eat less sugar, take more exercise, pay their road tax on time etc, just passing laws won't help. You need to know what makes people tick then do something to nudge them in the right direction. What words should you use to make sure a letter asking for a parking fine actually makes people pay up?

Knowing how our minds work enables governments to manipulate us more effectively. This saves money so is considered a good thing.

But that kind of manipulation, knowing what buttons to press to get a reaction, also enables advertisers to sell us high priced rubbish and propagandists to sell us dodgy ideas. It works because we don't even know we are 'buying' them.

One useful way to test any proposition is to try to form a syllogism. That is an argument with three sections:

- 1) wood burns
- 2) this table is made of wood
- 3) therefore this table will burn

The first line is a statement of general principle, a truth we know.

The second line is a statement we can test by research.

The third line is an inference made by putting the first two together.

If line one is true and line two turns out to be true then, if we are being logical in our conclusions, line three will also be true.

But the first line may be true, or an assumption we make every day and assume to be true. The second line may be untrue as well. But if the third line is something we want to believe it takes mental discipline to accept that it is nonsense.

Lines one and two can be swapped over.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/>

- 1) David is a hairdresser (research proves that true)
- 2) All hairdressers are effeminate (a belief held that is not necessarily true but widely accepted as a stereotype)
- 3) Therefore David is effeminate (would be a logical conclusion if the second line were also true. And note that 'effeminate' here seems to be used in a way that is implicitly negative - a 'bad' word. There can be more than one problem in the three lines.

Try these:

Homework is a nasty experience  
Reading is homework  
Therefore reading is a nasty experience

Facts are useful  
This book is full of facts  
So this book is very useful

Daphne likes men  
I am a man  
Therefore Daphne must like me

Seagulls are mainly white  
That bird is mainly brown  
So that bird is not a seagull

Athletes sweat when they run  
You are sweating  
Therefore you are an athlete.

If an argument strikes you as dodgy - or maybe as so good it has to be obviously true - try to test it out by turning it into syllogisms.

That party wants to reduce immigration  
Immigration is causing unemployment  
Therefore that party will solve unemployment

That immigrant has a job  
I don't have a job  
Therefore that immigrant took my job

He is working as a nurse  
I have no qualifications  
Therefore he took my job

She is working as a fruit picker

I don't want a low paid job picking fruit  
Therefore you should  
(a) pay her more  
(b) send her home  
(c) fill in your own answer.

### **Substructure, superstructure and ideology (watch out for boo words)**

The final set of terms comes from Karl Marx.

He has mentioned Marx

Marx is known as founder of communism

Therefore he must be a communist (and dangerous and I should ignore him)

Steady. Marx was an economist and historian who said a great deal about how society works. He also had political beliefs. His influence was so wide reaching it is part of our general education to know at least the basis of one of his most important ideas about how society works. It is possible to agree with some and disagree with others - many people do. It is easy to accept some of his social analysis without sharing his political aims. But attacks on left wing ideas tend to use 'Marxist' like a general 'boo' word to scare the children and avoid serious attention to what is actually being said, and that is why we needed this prologue. Also, I am going to make this very, very simple, to save time.

Now, what makes society tick? We all go to work to make and buy and sell and use stuff and that makes an economy turnover. In the process, we form relationships - employer, assistant, trainee, owner, customer etc. This might be done in an agricultural society (all farmers and landowners) an industrial one (coal and steel and car makers) or whatever follows now we have lost much of our industry and rely on software engineers, special effects merchants and dress designers to keep us all afloat. But those relationships are the substructure. We fit into it at some point - top, bottom or middle - doing whatever we are trained to do in the way we are trained to do it, accepting our social position.

To keep all this activity in order we need a set of rules and values, laws and moral codes. They do not just appear as if by magic or at random. They are made to support and strengthen the substructure. To use his own words:

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. -

*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859)*

That superstructure of laws, beliefs, political systems and moral codes will tell us what is normal and what is right. As it is created by the people in power, it will start by making it clear they deserve to be in power. It will present their being the owners and rulers as 'normal' and 'right'. Superstructure is thus a:

complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of society as 'natural', or not seen at all. - *Marxism and Literary Criticism, Terry Eagleton (Routledge 1989)p5*

You might consider in this context a now suppressed verse of an old hymn:

The rich man in his castle  
The poor man at his gate  
He made them high and lowly  
He ordered their estate

Singing merry hymns in church was also a way to remind yourself you are in your proper place. It isn't sung much now, but when it was nobody considered it odd. The whole point of defining something as normal is so that it doesn't get questioned. The point of a superstructure is not to be noticed, just accepted.

It is in this context we can look at the word 'ideology'. In simple everyday terms it means a set of ideas or principles on which we base our reasoning or plan of action. It is sometimes used in a negative sense to say that someone is so blinded by their ideology - a set of beliefs they hold fast to - they won't compromise or adapt to new circumstances. An 'ideologue' is then a stubborn, unrealistic person.

But in the context of substructure it means a set of beliefs you and the people you know all share which is taken to be so obviously true you don't need to question it. In fact, you don't even call it a belief, but a fact. Once, it was a 'fact' that the world was flat, that women existed to get married and pregnant and that one class of people should rule in a castle while the others did what they were told, or else. And an ideology, wrapped up in or expressed through religion, songs, stories, jokes etc. is shared by everybody, including those at the bottom without power, who believe that is where they belong. It is 'natural'. To object to the 'natural' order is to be unnatural, an extremist, unbalanced. So you don't have to take their ideas seriously.

The whole point of Marx's thought is to make people question what they think of as natural, and to see that what is believed in need not be true, and could be conditioned.

It is, or course, quite possible that Marx was wrong. But his influence is such that you cannot ignore him. You may well have agreed with Marxist arguments in the past without even knowing what they were. At least now you might recognise the source.

And speaking of sources - where do you go for your information?

### **Fake news and fact checking**

It is obvious, but sometimes forgotten, that most people choose a flattering Facebook profile and send out news of how successful they are. Others, sitting at home looking at other people's 'successful' lives, might think most of them are happier and more talented than they are, having more fun. The more time you spend looking at the fantasy world of Facebook lives, the less time you spend in the real world, where it is obvious they also have bad hair days, but don't publicise them.

Some profiles are downright lies, with middle aged men posing as young children to entrap victims. The author of this page once posted a fake profile as a test, using his great-grandfather's face, and within a few days had lots of new friends, none of whom he had ever heard of, many of them with very flattering and provocative images.

So Google might be relatively more honest, but how reliable is it? If you type in "what is the best tile for my bathroom?" will you get an honest answer? And how would you know? How do you know who to believe and how influenced are you by the answers?

These questions are especially important because social media are now so widespread and so heavily consumed, all day every day, that they have become one of the best ways to influence voters. Not by offering facts or arguments that can influence them honestly, but by spreading false stories, hints, innuendo and jokes to try to push people away from their usual ideas, the confines of their Overton windows, towards accepting something they would normally reject. For example, racism is something most people would reject, or say they would. Then a Facebook page appears asking "Isn't it weird that our flags offends so many people but our benefits don't?" This comes from a site asking us to make St George's Day a public holiday (ordinary patriotism?) but it also has entries in which a story about Muslims is very critical of Islam.

Another one says "British Schools should Fly the British Flag, Teach British History, Celebrate Our Heritage, Support our Armed Forces. Share if you agree." Ordinary patriotic people would wish to support our armed forces, but who sent the message? The site is labelled British and Proud and among stories about how we love the Queen and Princess Diana is another story criticising Muslims.

Slowly, beneath the obvious patriotism, a diet of 'facts' and ideas that make Muslims seem unBritish are being fed into our minds. The Overton window is being nudged in a certain direction so we might unconsciously start to find certain ideas or statements more acceptable, or less unacceptable. Together, they oppose the Union Jack and ordinary decent people to The Others, of whom we need to be afraid, or wary.

Being on Facebook, it may be read in a lazy, uncritical way and shared by people who don't really understand exactly what they are sharing, the hidden message below the headline.

One answer is the range of sites that has appeared to look into abuse of the internet and the use of 'fake' stories', Here are just a few:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/267ada11-b730-4344-b404-63067c032c65/reality-check>

<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/rise-fact-checking-sites-europe>

<https://fullfact.org>

<http://www.snopes.com>

<http://www.factcheck.org>

<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174>

<http://www.itv.com/news/2017-04-06/how-to-spot-fake-news-on-facebook/>

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_fake\\_news\\_websites](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fake_news_websites)

<https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck>

Even old-fashioned mainstream media can be lazy and need checking. In 2017 a story about a small girl put into foster care became very popular. Apparently she was a Christian but was fostered with a Muslim family who veiled their faces, refused her bacon and told her she was wicked.<sup>6</sup> Except that none of this was true. Which did not stop many newspapers spreading it.

So, Facebook can be abused and Google seems a better place to look for facts or truth, but we already know it contains some lies. Maybe the best we can do is admit that all publicly available information could, in theory, be tainted, and work out the best way to recognise when it is. Polish your crapometer.

### **Is truth possible?**

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<sup>6</sup> <https://tompride.wordpress.com/2017/08/31/how-the-press-lied-about-the-little-girl-staying-with-muslim-foster-parents-here-are-the-facts/>

The French writer Flaubert just gave up and said “there is no truth, there are only ways of seeing”. But that is dangerous. We all see things from our own point of view, but some do it honestly, looking for the facts and trying to be reasonable. Others tell lies and use their power to get us to vote for what is only in their interests and not in ours. It may not be easy to spot the liars, the lazy arguments, the underhand manipulation and the hidden messages. But if we don’t spot them we just become slaves to those who make more effort than we do. And by the time we wake up to the fact it may be too late to object.

The problem is that ‘facts’ or ‘the truth’ are often more complex than most people want to admit. They want their facts in twitter-size bites and it gets twisted as it gets simplified.

As Aristotle said, in his book on Ethics,

It is the mark of the educated person to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject permits.

It is harder in politics as so many people try to use grey areas to confuse and manipulate. But it is also more important because there is no point having a vote if you let someone else use it without your even knowing how it happened. And if you don’t vote at all you have no right to complain when your other rights slowly disappear.

**<https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote>**