

Truth, lies and other perspectives (amended 16/10/17)

I've given up asking rhetorical questions. What's the point?" Alexei Sayle

Where do you find an objective viewpoint or an unbiased version of events?

You don't.

And that is not to say all people lie, or deliberately misrepresent what is happening. We need to go deeper than that to clear the ground.

What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning - *Heisenburg*

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

In other words, people might sometimes be telling you the truth as they see it, and you will receive it according to what you are 'tuned' or conditioned to hear. 'Seeing' and 'understanding' are not simple terms.

We can look at the problem from various points of view, using ideas from a range of disciplines:

History and philosophy of science

Structuralism and semiotics, denotation and connotation

Genre, values and socialisation

Substructure, superstructure, ideology and art

Media analysis and Story Telling

Psychology

Social media analysis (post truth, fake news, media technology and fact-checking.)

In doing so we may consider ideas relevant to students of science, literature, philosophy, sociology, film, media and communication studies as well as history and politics.

First, we can try various ways to clarify how far any viewpoint is capable of being 'objective' then we can look at the different degrees to which accurate records of fact are applied, avoided or abused in modern political debate.

History and philosophy of science

Karl Popper (1902-1994) argued that science must be based on statements that are falsifiable. One researcher makes a statement, perhaps in a published paper, others check it out and, if they can prove it to be false, the statement is rejected. If not, it is accepted as probably true, at least for the time being. A statement that can be tested and proved true or false is scientific. A statement that cannot be tested that way has no place in science.

Of course, that depends what you accept as valid evidence. The last witch was burned in the UK in 1727. We no longer test people to see if they are witches because, mostly, we don't believe in them. It used to be accepted that having an extra nipple or a wart was proof you allowed the devil to suckle from you, but now we discount that as invalid evidence. So we can argue about what each generation, or even interest group, accepts as valid testing and valid evidence. Many people still refuse to accept that climate change is a serious and man-made problem as they refuse to accept 'evidence' which others call scientific. Sometimes, of course, it is inconvenient to accept scientific evidence. Companies making and selling sugar won't be too keen to accept that eating it to excess is a major problem in UK diets and convenience foods.¹ There is a difference between testing scientific theories and making them widely known then publicly acceptable. And 'academic research' may not always be objective and neutral.

But arguing from a self-interested or even dishonest point of view is one thing - arguing within paradigm is another.

A paradigm is a set of thoughts, ideas or assumptions which, taken as a whole, tell you what is valid or invalid in any field of research. There used to be two views of how the sun and planets behaved. The geocentric or Ptolemaic model said the earth was at the centre of the universe and the sun moved around us. This made perfect sense according to what people could see and allowed mariners to make charts and navigate quite well enough to explore the world and get home safely. There was no need to challenge it, especially as it allowed us to believe God made us at the centre of his universe, to be special. The geocentric paradigm ruled and nothing outside it was taken seriously.

When Copernicus (1473 - 1543) decided after extensive observation and modelling that the earth moved around the sun, he knew his heliocentric model would be controversial as it upset the paradigm. Galileo (1564-1642) supported the new model but the church set the Inquisition on him as his ideas seemed heretical, demoting our place as God's special centre of the universe. He was placed under house arrest.

If a paradigm tells us what to take seriously we can only think within its limitations unless we accept a serious shake up of our fundamental assumptions. This is always hard to do and may be resisted for both honest and dishonest reasons.

Then, of course, we have the limitations of our own language.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKKUtrL6B18&sns=em>

Structuralism and Semiotics, denotation and connotation

Structuralism is about structure, the way language is structured and the way it shapes our experience of the world. We create what we call reality through the structure of our language, and structuralists want to know how, and what this implies. Semiotics (from the Greek semeion sign) studies language as a system of signs. Language is a system of signs expressing ideas.

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.

Another way to say this is that we all have certain stories or myths in our head that we use to explain the world to ourselves. We learn them as we learn our language and 'fit' into our culture. The language we learn, including all the stories or myths create a structure in our minds that determines how we see the world from then on. It creates a shape that we can impose on the external world. We do this without realising it and assume that what we see after our act of interpretation, or shaping, is what is really out there. The nature, 'meaning' and significance of the things we see, the relationship between them that makes them more or less important, threatening, useful, true etc, is something we impose upon them without knowing that we are doing so.

Sapir and Whorf compared the way different languages worked to shape perception in their users. Sapir concluded:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of a particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

Selected Writings in Language, Culture and Personality

As Terence Hawkes put it:

We ... invent the world we inhabit; we modify and reconstruct what is given. It follows that, implicated as we are in this gigantic, covert, collaborative enterprise, none of us can claim access to uncoded, 'pure' or *objective* experience of a 'real',

Structuralism and Semiotics 1977

Allied to this is the problem of denotation and connotation. The denotation of a word is what it means according to the dictionary - a 'student' is one who studies, a 'father' is one who is related in a certain way. But that is not the full meaning as we receive or use it. Connotation is the emotional or cultural association that goes with the word. To one person 'father' means a comforting protector; to another it means a strict controller. Mother might connote comforting or smothering. To some people, a student is a young feckless person with no money who plays loud music. To others it means someone quiet and studious who would make a good tenants or lodger. The connotation of 'politician' is often something like shady or dishonest or at least slippery. A diplomatic answer is careful and well balanced; a political answer is just shifty. Another way to put this is that we have 'hurrah' words and 'boo' words, and often shout one or the other automatically without looking at complex ideas of 'meaning'.

The words 'liberal' and 'cosmopolitan' are interesting in this context. A 'liberal' regime or attitude is one that is lenient, fair, open-minded. That seems to be 'good'. But the word is used as an insult by those who think of it as woolly, weak or too middle-of-the-road. 'Moderation' might be seen as 'good' but always being stuck in the middle when we need firm action is seen as 'bad'. With an upper case L, the Liberal Party claim to represent liberal values but this is either good or bad depending who you ask.

A 'cosmopolitan' town is one with a mixed population and the energy and choice that goes with it. That is good unless you think it means too many immigrants, and think 'nationalism' is a virtue that goes with immigration control - more of 'us' and fewer of 'them'.

Connotations vary with individuals and groups, so a word will be good in one context or group but bad in another. It is possible, with the right propaganda, to attach connotations to a word so it starts to sound 'bad' instead of 'good' or vice versa, but each of us grows up with a set of connotations that will determine the real meaning we give to any sentence. Thus 'he has progressive / liberal opinions' will be praise or condemnation according to connotations attached during our upbringing.

'Libertarian', of course, is quite different to 'liberal' and might be seen as a form of anarchism. In both cases, there is a heavy emphasis on the right of an individual to act without any government interference in their lives. Anarchists tend to emphasise our duty to act responsibly as a collective so we don't need governing from above. If you invite them to a meeting they willingly clear up afterwards, but won't like being told to. Libertarians can

be either left or right wing and both emphasise the dangers of allowing the state to control an individual, but in the USA it is more often a right-wing movement against gun control, Obamacare etc. A libertarian might emphasise individual rights but refuse to acknowledge group rights (e.g. women's rights) if it means having rules imposed to protect the group. In that sense it is a negative meaning for 'rights'. You can have them but you have to protect yourself when you exercise them. Libertarian sounds like a better word because it comes from liberty whereas anarchy has negative connotations because it is used colloquially, assuming lack of imposed rules = chaos.

Populism has been characterised as offering simple solutions to complex problems - being popular with a crowd by offering slogans that attract them. Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are examples of a populist politician - superficial analysis tied to loud cheers at rallies, mainly because superficial analysis is more popular than hard thought and difficult choices. That statement implies that many voters are easily swayed and lack judgement. See below.

Democracy left right and centre.

Two very difficult terms will be 'democratic' and 'socialist'. Democracy is a simple 'hurrah' word - always a good thing, whatever it means. Socialism is either 'hurrah', 'boo'.

We may still contrive to raise three cheers for democracy, although at present she only deserves two. - E M Forster

The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter. - Winston Churchill

One of the more intriguing results of the vote on leaving the EU was the attitudes displayed towards the voters once the results were known. Some of those who wanted to remain argued that the Leave voters acted in ignorance, unaware of what they were voting for, so the vote was in some way invalid. In fact, since the result, it appears many of the claims made by the Leave camp were untrue and a number of voters have admitted they had no idea it was going to be that unpleasant or expensive. But is that the point? Can we argue that a vote made in ignorance, or in response to lies, is invalid? How can we apply that rule to ordinary elections? It could be argued that some candidates or parties lie to voters at every election, and certainly some people vote without a fully informed appreciation of all the issues and potential consequences. So democracy is at best a vague hope that at least some people know the truth and know what they are voting for. How many are enough? It may also be the case that democracy is strengthened by voter education. Whatever we mean by that.

Does democracy actually work and how is the word abused in elections?

We might describe it as a system of government by all eligible² citizens through representatives who are elected to make decisions on their behalf. You get to choose your representative.

You have to be registered. How many people eligible to register don't actually bother is a difficult question, but within one month of Theresa May calling a snap election in 2017 more than two million people suddenly applied. A quarter of a million under 25 year olds applied in a single day. So one element of democracy that can be manipulated is to make sure lots of your potential supporters get registered, and one element that can distort a 'democratic' result is if a certain segment of the population is proportionately more or less likely to register.

Then, of course, you have to bother to vote. In the 2017 general election 31.2% of registered voters didn't. The referendum on EU membership was decided by a 3.8% majority but 27.8% didn't bother to vote at all. In local elections turnout can be less than 30%. So democracy is rule of a variable section of the population, and never more than that. Those who organise efficiently to harvest votes can make a big difference.

And how do votes get counted?

In the last general election the conservatives got 42.3% of the votes cast. So a majority of the votes wanted to avoid a conservative government, but they didn't get what they want. Sometimes this happens because the opposition is split, sometimes because of the uneven numbers in a given constituency. Conservatives got 317 MPs for their 42.3%/ Labour, on 40% of the popular vote, got 262 MPs. Liberals, for their 7.4%, got 12.

There are other systems. The single transferable vote gives weight to second choices so you get a government with the least objections to it. Proportional representation takes in all the votes then hands out seats in government according to the proportion of the vote each party got, after which they all manoeuvre to make up a workable majority, often in coalition.

In our 'first past the post' system, a government can be formed by a party a majority of voters did not want. Then a Cabinet dominated by a strong Prime Minister can behave more-or-less how they choose for 5 years. That can be an 'elected dictatorship'.

Other systems might be more likely to lead to a coalition. That might sound more 'democratic' but suppose two large parties get 45% and 48% while a small party gets the rest - 7%. Added to 45%, that allows one party with 52% to form the government. But they

² <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/faq/voting-and-registration/who-is-eligible-to-vote-at-a-uk-general-election>

small party holds the balance of power and thus has far more influence than the voters asked for.

Whatever you think of the various ways to count votes, for now what matters is to remember that how you permit and then count votes is a political decision and 'democracy' comes in many forms, all of them imperfect, some of which we may be able to improve with education.

Meanwhile, the word is often abused.

Is the Democratic Republic of North Korea a democracy? Was the German Democratic Republic? Democratic Republic of Congo? People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka?

Your answers in each case will depend on what factors you include and how you weight them, but simply having a vote is in itself a small element of the equation. It sometimes seems that the more people use the word "democracy" the less likely it is that ordinary citizens actually have any influence on how they are governed. And even if you are free to cast it how you like, and most people vote to do so, there is the vexed question of where you get the information, ideas and logic you use to make up your mind.

We like to think of ourselves as rational beings who can use reason to form a judgement. But all reasoning starts with an initial premise, a statement or assumption from which we move outwards. Whilst our stages of reasoning might be fair, our premises are often inherited and may be unconscious. For example,

All Scotsmen are careful with money

He is Scottish

Therefore he will be careful with money

The reasoning is logical but the premise is a false stereotype. But how hard is it to reject something that everyone around you has always believed and reinforces with jokes? What matters in political debate is often not what is true but people wish to believe or can afford to believe. That is why it is hard to shift political loyalties with logical argument, and why other, less obvious or honest means are often used instead.

Very often, these values tied to basic terms are inherited and used uncritically.

'British' can be difficult. In arguments about immigration some people use it to mean legal rights of citizenship but others attach connotations of race (British = white or Christian).

Arguments about teaching 'British Values' in schools tend to assume we mean values like fairness and tolerance, but this implies that the Belgians or Irish might be unfair and intolerant and the British uniquely civilised. What they really mean is that some forms of pressure - families or private schools - are teaching values we consider dangerous. That gets translated as Beware of Islamic Schools and then into Beware of Muslims. Which is, of course, very unBritish (unfair and intolerant).

'Socialism' is particularly knotty. We could define it as a theory that the means of producing and distributing goods should be in the hands of society as a whole. We, as a society, have a collective responsibility to each other and we should make sure that water, electricity, railways, the benefit system, tax system, price controls etc are controlled by and work for the benefit of the UK citizens, not for large international firms or small powerful groups.

It is distinct from communism as that is collective (communal) ownership whereas socialism can allow private ownership so long as the private owner does not work for the disadvantage of citizens - e.g. by acting dishonestly or fixing very high prices. Where they get confused is that communism usually meant the state owning everything on behalf of the citizens, often within a one-party state, so governments owned everything and citizens lost the means to influence them. 'State socialism' was a term that described that form of government ownership. Democratic socialism is often used as a term in opposition to state socialism, making governments accountable within a state where citizens have the rights to vote for any party. It is based on a capitalist system of private ownership, but regulated to keep it behaving for the common good.

The degree of state ownership is one argument, e.g. should we nationalise the railways? The degree to which any government is accountable to voters is a quite different argument.

What tends to happen in UK political debate is that those who disapprove of any nationalisation and favour a great deal of freedom for private firms to behave as they wish tend to use 'socialism' as a 'boo' word to frighten voters, with connotations of state control that mean 'loss of freedom', and often equate it with communism to frighten people away.

Those who favour socialism argue that giving large firms too much freedom actually reduces the freedom of the voter, as they can't vote for who runs the firms or how they behave. Then it has connotations of 'control' tied to 'fairness' that are favourable.

Similarly, moderate and extremist are, of course, relative terms. Moderate and centre ground are usually hurrah words, extremist a boo word. But what if the centre moves? In the UK you could argue that public opinion moved to the right under Margaret Thatcher so that what used to be right wing became centre ground, with centre ground, moderate ideas suddenly becoming left wing. It is now considered radical, extreme, left wing, socialist etc to want to raise tax to pay for public services. The British tax rate is 20% up to £45,000 per year, 40% up to £150,000 and 45% above that. In Norway the lowest rate is 39%. It is over

56% in Sweden and over 60% in Denmark. We find those figures staggeringly high because we are used to paying less, but in the 1950s and 1960s the top rate of tax in the UK was 90%. That was considered 'normal'. In 1971 it was still 75%.

Voters rarely think with a knowledge of history, even as far back as their parents' day. To lack that perspective is to lack judgement.

Genre, values and socialisation

By Level 3 you will be familiar with the idea that children are 'socialised' in the sense that they have to learn what is true, acceptable and normal within their society at a given time and place. Once they learn the rules they internalise them and think of them as 'natural'. That is the way things are and ought to be.

There are many agents of socialisation, including comics, films and novels.

Students of literature will be familiar with idea of genre. Any novel will tell a story using certain literary conventions and will also assume certain social norms and values to be natural. It might be critical of some aspects of society (like Dickens and his sympathy for the poor) but other aspects will be unquestioned (e.g. the right of some individuals to be better off than others so long as they give the poor a bit of charity from time to time).

Barthes, in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) argued that a given style of writing, even though we may see it as 'natural', is in fact developed in a particular time and place, It is chosen, and it reflects a certain ideology. The classical French style of writing made 'bourgeois' values seem natural. If we accept the style, we accept the values. This may be a matter of tone, vocabulary, or stylistic devices.

Modern writing (since and including Joyce, Becket, Proust etc) often draws attention to the very activity of writing. The text might actually remind you as part of its 'message' that it was made by a writer and read by a reader, so together we are creating a world. But even here, language can have an anaesthetic function. It not only reinforces certain values but makes things familiar to us so we stop having to think about them

If you wished to push a particular political point of view, it is immensely helpful to have a set of films and novels and jokes supporting your values and perspective. It may be easier to start wars if the population is addicted to war films and war games on their I-pads. If lots of cops-and-robbers films persuade the audience the world is very dangerous and we need strong policemen to protect us, we are more likely to vote for increased powers for the police. In the seventies the audience usually knew who was guilty in the opening shots, as they saw the crime committed, but the police hero needed to prove it. They sometimes bends the rules to get proof, with a good measure of physical violence, but we knew who

was guilty so that was OK. That plot model is now less popular. Instead, we have got used to false trails where everybody thinks they know who is guilty but often turn out to be wrong. We are learning to question evidence, as an audience and thus as a citizen.

Substructure, superstructure, ideology and art

These are terms used by Karl Marx (1818 - 1883).

What is Marxism? It depends who you ask, and in what context. It's a bit like asking "What is Christianity?" and getting answers from a Catholic, an Anglican, a Pentecostal and an atheist.

Many of his ideas have been interpreted in various ways and in some cases turned into a belief system that promises a certain kind of future if you follow the recipe. But others are forms of analysis you can use to describe how society works, open to testing and analysis. Here, we are concerned with the simple idea of substructure and superstructure, which will fit very easily with ideas described in previous pages. Here is his version:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, *relations of production* which correspond to a definite stage of development of material productive *forces*. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. 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)

So the forces and relations of production (how we make and consume things, and relate to the making and consuming structure) are a base or infrastructure. From it emerges a superstructure with important functions and properties. It has laws and political structures which exist to

legitimate the power of the social class which owns the means of economic production - *Marxism and Literary Criticism, Terry Eagleton*

and it contains an ideology (political, religious, ethical, aesthetic ideas) with the same function. Thus:

the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class (ibid)

Note that to Marxists, ideology is defined as 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 (Ibid)

For example, most of us have heard the old hymn, All Things Bright and Beautiful, but how many school assemblies still include this verse, once considered unexceptional:

*The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate,*

*He made them high and lowly
He ordered their estate*

In this context, we might also re-examine the term 'ideology'.

In colloquial use, it usually means a set of belief people hold. It is often used in abusive ways, to say that a person's ideology blinds them to facts they cannot see because of what they believe. An ideologue is thus a fanatic, blind to what we call 'reality'. Of course, from their point of view, they know the truth and everyone else is blind.

Marx's idea of superstructure tries to explain ideology, which is a form of blindfold, and thus to liberate us from the its effect.

In the same way that some works of art can express and strengthen a set of values we think of as 'natural'. Others might try to challenge it.

Althusser (1918-1990) argued that art cannot be simply reduced to ideology, it has a particular *relationship* to it. It might, for example, distance itself from the ideology and permit us to perceive and feel the ideology from which it springs. It helps us experience a situation and by doing so helps us to see it directly, and to see the ideology directly. In other words, some artistic experiences reinforce our blindfold and some try to remove it. I am not referring here to simple propaganda - it might be a complex process. When Milton wrote Paradise Lost he thought he was supporting his religion:

I may assert eternal providence,

And justify the ways of God to men (Line, 26).

In fact his imagination made such a good job of creating a 'real' Lucifer that many readers were able to experience his feelings and then took Lucifer's side. The artist need not be consciously aware of what he or she has achieved for us as readers.

So, in summary, superstructure allows the ruling group to convince both themselves and the ruled that their power is natural, their values normal and neither open to question. Art, consciously or unconsciously, can remove the blindfold. So can serious analysis of history and modern society.

A minor strand within this context allows certain voters to think that being a conservative is

a normal thing to do and being a socialist is abnormal, so that voting conservative is not being political but voting Labour is, because 'being political' is being awkward, wanting change, questioning the norm. Refusing to change is then not 'political'. This can be believed even if a conservative party brings in radical new policies, like leaving the EU, as it is the 'natural' ruling party who did it.

Media analysis Story Telling

Opinion varies on how far newspapers and television affect voting behaviour. Many people don't believe they are affected by advertising. They may also claim they can tell what is true and what is not regardless of the paper they read. This claim deserves examination, but so does the cliché that newspapers tell lies. Some may do, but that is not the main problem. Or, at least, not the only one.

Donald Trump tells lies but if you try to say that to his more dedicated followers they won't listen. Not because they think he necessarily told the strict truth on every occasion, but because they don't care. His general attitude expresses a belief they have that he is listening to them and nobody else is, so his general attitude is 'true' and anything he does to get power is justified. We need to distinguish between individual small facts and a general narrative, a way of telling stories that shapes perception and reflect emotional states.

Journalists tell new stories. What counts as news and how a story will be told are decided by the style of their paper, which reflects a world familiar to their readers. What they choose to talk about and how they choose to present their story depends on what their readers are used to, what they are interested in, what they expect and what they will accept. You could call that reflecting and reinforcing bias, but that is too simple. It is providing information of a certain sort for a certain purpose, selling papers so you can sell advertising space.

Advertisers need to know what sort of audience they are buying so newspapers need to keep a certain kind of audience ready to be packaged and sold to them. Some have party political loyalties, but they are a business, not a political party. Their selection and presentation will obviously reinforce a set of values, assumptions and prejudices, but that is usually only considered a problem with other people's newspapers, not the ones 'we' read. It is not the job of a newspaper to be neutral or objective but to tell the story as their readers wish to hear it.

That is not to say all journalists fail to tell the truth as they see it. In broadsheet papers and on the BBC, for example, we might expect a level of enquiry and presentation that is rigorous and honest. That does not mean they are immune from following a house style and a general narrative tendency. If the story of the day is that an Arab Spring is bringing democracy to the Middle East some may be tempted to look for and/or present stories that support that line. Until they discover it is not going to happen that way. If the story is that Jeremy Corbyn is a weak leader who will never win an election then that is the assumption they are likely to accept. Until he starts getting more votes. The 'truth' will out eventually from some sources, but there may be a time delay while the accepted narrative changes.

We also have to allow for the technologies of news outlets. A story featuring on radio may not appear on t.v. at all because they don't have any pictures. That is not bias, just doing what they are best at. A Free Press is able to investigate and hold powerful people to account, but it is free to say what it likes within the law.

In 2017 a story was widely reported that a young girl from a Christian family was given to foster parents who were Muslim. They took away her crucifix, refused her bacon, spoke Arabic at home, hid their face with a niqab and told her she was wicked. It started in The Times and quickly spread to other respectable outlets. Not a single element of the story was true, but it served to fuel anti-Muslim feeling. Some newspapers did not intend that effect and were embarrassed by their mistake.

Psychology

Once you are able to speak the unspeakable, people will begin to think the unthinkable and that is how you beat the establishment.

- Nigel Farage, speaking to a German right-wing rally in Berlin Sept 2017.

If a new idea or opinion is presented to our conscious mind we will normally evaluate it and might reject it, or at least modify it before we 'let it in'. But if it can by-pass the conscious go direct to a lower level of consciousness, it won't be evaluated, because that is not what the lower level does. If the message is 'subliminal' or we are distracted we may adopt new ideas without even knowing we have done so.

An Overton Window (after Joseph P. Overton 1960 – 2003) is a range of opinion considered acceptable in a given context. Slavery was once normal but is now considered immoral - outside the window. Racism or anti-semitism are usually outside the window but in some groups it is accepted. If you hold ideas that are outside the normal window and want people to agree with you, then you need to 'nudge' 'nudge' their windows in a certain direction so that what was previously unthinkable becomes thinkable, then accepted, then normal, until it is so 'natural' you don't have to think about it at all. The most effective propaganda tends to work like this, in stages, trying to sneak round the conscious 'goal keeper' and nudge the Overton window along in the subconscious. Social media is very useful for that purpose.

Social media analysis (post truth, fake news, media technology and fact-checking.)

Any advertising or campaigning undertaken by someone trying to get elected has to be declared so we know how much they spent. There are limits on how much any candidate is allowed to spend and it is easy to check their accounts. But messages supporting them on social media, directly or indirectly, are usually free and even paid for ads can be shared for

free. If a message goes viral millions read it and it costs nothing. It is not surprising that social media gets a lot of attention from anyone seeking power.

But not everyone wants power for themselves. Or, at least, it is not always that simple.

Breitbart News is a very powerful organisation in the US that supports parties or candidates who it thinks will implement the policies they believe in. They are skilled in using 'fake' or manipulated 'news' to move public opinion further to the right and thus support radical right wing candidates who might otherwise be considered too extreme to get elected. If such an organisation were operating in the UK would you know? Would you spot their output?³

In the US, Facebook is under pressure from investigators trying to find out how much was paid by Russian sources for ads supporting US candidates. It is alleged that 3,000 political ads were bought, perhaps to destabilise the US as an act of foreign policy - warfare by Facebook posts.

Most people reading Facebook or Twitter are not really paying attention. Ideas, images, assumptions and values flash by at speed, with popular stories being spread quickly and uncritically, liked and shared long before anyone finds they are not true. A denial or proof they are not true may or may not follow but by then the unspeakable has been said and the Overton window might be moving. There are two distinct elements to this; untrue stories and damage by implication.

Untrue stories are easily spread. If they are shocking and thus interesting they will be shared and if they confirm what people already wish to believe they will be accepted as facts. They may later be challenged but by then it is too late - they will still be repeated and believed by those who wish to believe them. And for those who are 'undecided' or 'not political' they may just tip a decision to vote in one direction.

There are fact-checking sites (see below) but how many people bother to check stories they casually meet on Facebook or hear in the pub? Especially if you find it interesting and it confirms your prejudice. Was it ever true that Obama did not have a US passport? Of course not, but many Trump supporters still believe it. If a fake story gives it will be repeated even by people who know it is false. Everyone seems to love a conspiracy theory and the Middle East is made more unstable because of the way fake news is used.⁴ How much influence did

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/307ce1b0-9d21-11e7-8cd4-932067fbf946>

⁴ <https://edition.independent.co.uk/editions/uk.co.independent.issue.110917/data/7937171/index.html>

the Russian state have on Trump's election?⁵ How much influence could a lobbying group have on UK elections? And how would you know it was happening?

The problem is so widespread that a generation brought up on such a diet may often start to assume all news is fake, giving rise to a scepticism that rejects all important information on the assumption it is probably 'fake'. This leads to a disengagement from the political process so they are in effect, disenfranchised. And, of course, easier to manipulate, as they have no foundation from which to examine influences. The less you 'believe in politics' the more you are pushed around by those who do.

Another potential result of being disenchanted with the political system is that voters don't vote on simple family loyalties or from habit anymore. Instead, they look at polls and predictions about who is doing well and try to switch parties, voting tactically, perhaps on a single issue, to keep a party they don't like out of power or even just to make a point that they are fed up.

Meanwhile, those who might benefit or suffer from a certain proposal in a manifesto might form a pressure group or hire a lobbying firm to try to influence both parties and voters, taking advantage of the new instability.

Not all attempts to influence are easy to spot or even very direct. When Hilary Clinton published her book on how and why she lost the US election to Trump, it received thousands of reviews on Amazon within a few hours. 50% of those reviews gave it one star out of five, which spoils her reputation and discourages people from reading it. Another 45% gave it five stars, supporting her. It is very unlikely any of those people had time to actually read the book - they just wanted to express an opinion about the author. They were all removed by Amazon. How much influence any of this had it is hard to know. What we do know is that comments on social media can be posted quickly and cheaply by robots and are, at the moment, largely unregulated. The problem with free speech is not that someone is free to call you a fool, but that they can convince others you are a fool in ways that are hard to fight.

Conclusion?

In an uncertain world, where even the best of our knowledge might be relative and temporary, we still need to have principles we can act on. How you select them is a personal choice, possibly a lifelong journey. What matters is that you choose them. We hope this site has encouraged a more critical process. As we asked at the start - are you a consumer or a citizen?

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

⁵ <https://edition.independent.co.uk/editions/uk.co.independent.issue.070917/data/7933541/index.html>

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

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

<https://www.talkingpoliticspodcast.com/>