P04 / Post-Truth and Alternative Facts: What Role for Critical Policy Research?

Topic : POLICY DISCOURSE AND CRITICAL POLICY RESEARCH

Chair : Frank Fischer (Humboldt University in Berlin)

Second Chair : Doug Torgerson (Trent University, Canada)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Post-truth and “Alternative facts” have become a noticeable feature of politics and public policy. Scientists have stepped out in the March for Science to assert that alternative facts have no place in science. Scholars have sought to understand whether alternative facts influence public opinion and in what ways. Critical Policy Studies can contribute by asking a different set of questions about truth and alternative facts and the role that they play in politics and public policy debates. Namely: what do alternative facts do? Do post-truth politics affect the relation between knowledge and power and if so, how? How do alternative facts shape policy discussions and ultimately policy formulation?

Critical and deliberative policy scholars have long challenged empiricist and technocratic assumptions that policy analysis should strive to separate “facts” from values, ideas and meaning in order to provide politics with an allegedly objective, solid and neutral knowledge base. Post-truth politics challenges interpretive researchers to become clearer on how and why facts matter, even as they continue to challenge these mainstream assumptions. For instance, one interesting commentary on Donald Trump’s post-truth politics asserts that if we focus on what is true versus what is not true we will miss the point. That is so because the use of alternative facts reveals a much deeper problematic: alternative facts are about claiming the authority to determine what is truth and what is reality, and especially troubling, regardless of any connection to verifiable evidence or experience. What are the chances of and the challenges for interpretive, pragmatist and deliberative approaches in policy analysis concerning these developments?

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel aims to understand what “alternative facts” do in policy controversies, how political actors use them, and to what effect and how alternative facts challenge critical policy studies.
We invite submissions that draw on critical and interpretive theoretical frameworks and methodologies to address such questions as:

- What are alternative facts? How can they be distinguished from framing processes?
- Are alternative facts expressions of ideological discourse and as such open to critical interpretive analysis? Or are alternative facts more aptly conceptualized as strategic tools used to influence policy discussion more directly?
- How do alternative facts operate? How do they shape discussions about policy issues such as climate change or immigration (among others)? What are the practices of producing alternative facts?
- Have the chances of deliberative politics diminished in the era of alternative facts? How can deliberative democratic processes respond to this challenge?
- Are alternative facts only tied to right-wing populist movements or do they also find expression in progressive social movements seeking to make social change?

We also encourage researchers to address the charge that interpretive researchers are responsible for creating a post-truth world because of their focus on the social construction of reality through narratives and discourses, and by observing that alternative knowledges can be created to justify different courses of action.

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Session 1Post-Truth and Alternative Facts: What Role for Critical Policy Theory? (I)

Thursday, June 27th 10:30 to 12:30 (MB 3.210)

Discussants

Doug Torgerson (Trent University, Canada)

Post-Truth and Cimate Denial: In Defense of Social Constructivism

Frank Fischer (Humboldt University in Berlin)

Often in the debates about post-truth and alternative facts social constructivism is blamed as laying the groundwork for post-truth politics, especially in the case of climate change denial. This presentation argues that this rests on a misunderstanding of knowledge production and the theory of social constructivism, in particular as laid out by scholars such as Karl Mannheim, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The argument here is that rather that being the source of the problem, social constructivism offer the best way of understand the dynamic of the post-truth debate.

Understanding emotions in post-factual politics. the rage against science.

Anna Durnová (University of Vienna)

Postfactual politics has united scientists and civil society in a public defence of truth, however, the battle may already have been lost to a binary of facts and emotions. Analysing and comparing scientists' protests against the Trump presidency with famous scientific controversies in modern medicine, this book redefines truth as a negotiation in public discourse between the interplay of values, beliefs and facts. The way our societies treat factual knowledge as opposed to emotions and the way we talk about emotions in science and politics evaluate the range of actors, entitled to pronounce public concerns, and to negotiate truth. The book shows that in order to understand post-factual politics we must unveil emotion's role in discursive registers through that politics is made and through that knowledge gets legitimized.

Tools of Influence

Carolyn Geiser (Colorado Technical University)

Vulnerabilities of "Alternative Facts"

As tools of influence, "alternative facts" are linguistic gymnastics, creating alternative realities and ushering in the rise of populism across the globe. The Orwellian proposition of truth subsumed by denying reality maintains the powerful in their positions; using "alternative facts," those in power can create polices that further the agenda of the powerful while sewing discontent among the populace. Populism is divisive, has no clear policy agenda, and fosters dissatisfaction and discontent. Those who believe that the political system is unresponsive to their needs are most likely to be the malcontents who can fracture democracy through political action. "Alternative facts" feed the discontent and limit and disrupt the deliberative process on policy issues. Emotion-based populism and "alternative facts" challenge policy makers to move beyond both in this era of "post-truth" politics. Writing in Scientific American (27 January 2017), Martinez-Conde and Macknik suggest using the scientific method to eliminate the "alternative facts" from policy making. "A

fundamental tenet of science is that, whereas no amount of data can verify a hypothesis, a single contradictory observation will refute it" (Martinez-Conde and Macknik, 2017). Using the scientific method, policy makers can reasonably respond to the challenge of "alternative facts," tackle populism's alternate reality, and return to a deliberative democratic process.

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Session 2Post-Truth and Alternative Facts: What Role for Critical Policy Theory? (II)

Thursday, June 27th 16:30 to 18:30 (MB 3.210)

Discussants

Frank Fischer (Humboldt University in Berlin)

"Social" Media and Violence in India: Post-Truth constructions of Deviance in India

Navdeep Mathur (Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad)

India has seen a new era of graded citizenship under a ultra-nationalist right-wing government for the past 5 years. The promise of technology and integration into the 'digital' world led millions of Indians to believe that inequality, deprivation, and deep distortions in concentrations of wealth and power had been erased or would be erased as more people got on board. To help with the transition, India's largest scale biometric identification and surveillance system called Aadhaar was made conditional to access social services, banking, and mobile phones. Prime Minister Modi, led this narrative with the largest cancellation of high value currency, and promoted the services of a few corporations offering solutions to replace the cash economy. Accompanied by a surge in violence towards "others" fueled by social media rumor -mongering, the government led by Modi engaged in a slew of unsubstantiated creation of 'facts' regarding the success of its initiatives and spreading of these alternative facts widely criticised by scholars and researchers across the board. This paper offers a critical discursive examination of how post-truth governance emerged in India to assuage the anxieties of supporters of the ruling regime, while diverting attention away from the way in which nationalism was re-imagined to undermine the constitutional foundation of equality in a population diversified in terms of ethnic, caste and economic groups.

Fear and the Affective Politics of Vaccine Hesitancy

Michael Orsini (University of Ottawa)

It is difficult to ignore the frightening headlines. A measles outbreak in Oregon is linked to a number of kindergarten children in the area who were not vaccinated. The World Health Organization has become so concerned about ‘vaccine hesitancy’ or refusal that it has listed it among the top 10 global health threats of 2019, along with Ebola.

Vaccine hesitancy “refers to delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite the availability of vaccination services”, and “Includes factors such as complacency, convenience, and confidence”, according to the WHO. Public health advocates worry about decreasing rates of vaccination uptake, and the impact it will have on our ability to control childhood diseases such as measles. Epidemiologists point to the importance of “herd immunity”, which suggests that individuals who are unable for medical or religious reasons to be vaccinated need some protection from the herd (the general public). When rates of vaccination drop below about 90 per cent, that protection can be in jeopardy.

So, is vaccine hesitancy simply the residue of a post-truth politics or something deeper? I argue here that we need to challenge our own assumptions about vaccine resisters, or anti-vaxxers as they tend to be dismissed. Some of the most high-profile critics of vaccinations are celebrities, including Jenny McCarthy, most famous for her opposition to the MMR vaccine, which was linked to autism and later debunked, over and over again.

Experts will tell you that members of the public are easily swayed by even the whiff of celebrity, even if they would never admit that they are so gullible. They would also point to her inability to defend her arguments with the benefit of sound scientific facts. When she has been asked in the past about how she was able to “cure” her son, Evan, of autism, she wrote: ‘Who needs science when I’m witnessing it every day in my own home? At home, Evan is my science”.

In an era in which the truth is elusive, we should be cautious in dismissing anti-vaccination advocates as irrational. Some of them are highly educated, in fact, and made their decision after careful consideration of the facts. One can dispute their decision on ethical grounds – as public health advocates often do – but presuming that they lack the proper information is wrong-headed. The so-called “information deficit” model, which presumes that otherwise ignorant people will see the error of their ways when presented with hard facts or knowledge – misses the point. Many parents are not lacking in information – they are swimming in it!

What we need to understand in the post-truth area is how members of the public consume the knowledge with which they are bombarded, and how they reason with emotion. Dismissing vaccine-critics as part of a lunatic fringe does little to advance debate on pressing public health issues, and neglects an important trend away from unquestionable faith in scientific progress and expert advice.

Post-truth from a Brazilian Perspective

Rosana Boullosa (University of Brasilia/Brazil and Enap/Brazil)

The post-truth became a diffuse object of discussion in Brazil with the last elections for president. With only 8 seconds of television, a radical right-wing candidate won the case supported by a massive network of instant messaging through social networks. On their day of ownership, organized groups focused on television cameras shouting: whatsapp yes, facebook yes; Television not! This seems to be a definite post-truth in Brazil: the belief that truth comes only through a point-to-point relationship, almost virtual neighborhood, without mediation of the big media ... without knowing that this virtual neighborhood network is still much more mediated and without limits with narratives not anchored in concrete facts or explicit value matrices. And this may be exactly one of the ways to broaden the post-truth discussion from a critical perspective.

Policy interventions under climate denial and post-truth: The challenge for critical policy research

Piyapong Boossabong (Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy)

By drawing a lesson from haze policy in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the policy intervention here is based on blaming rural farmers as a cause of the problem as some of them burn agricultural wastes after harvesting. The main policy instrument, thus, is to prohibit farmers to burn by avoiding mentioning about urban activities driven for boosting tourist industry which can also create haze. Scientists point out that this complex problem is related to climate change, however no one really cares about the contribution of each person to the problem. They feel better to see the governmental agencies cope with it by victimizing farmers as it is clear in the (empirical) evidence-based perspective who, where and when the problem arose. The policy makers have also no idea how to deal with environmental changes and end up with blaming and using the basic instrument as prohibition, although some farmers claim that in many cases there are not human-caused fires. This climate related problem, thus, is replaced by the problem of the irresponsible farmers, which is the challenge for critical policy research to cope with the misleading of the alternative fact that is politically and socially constructed.