



Reply

Letting the Gorilla Emerge From the Mist: Getting Past Post-Truth



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We welcome the nine constructive and insightful commentaries on our target article. The commentaries proposed a number of creative, evidence-based applications of the principles we proposed. Here we identify common themes among the commentaries, including one relating to the political intentionality underlying much disinformation that we only partially addressed and that thus had remained shrouded in mist. We synthesize the suggestions from the commentary into a proposal that may help overcome the post-truth malaise, provided a final obstacle can be overcome. This obstacle is the gorilla in the room: Policy making in the United States is largely independent of the public's wishes but serves the interests of economic elites.

At the time of this writing, questions about whether a hypothetical new strain of avian flu is contagious to humans would be resolved by medical research. Although the reliance on expertise and science in such matters appears obvious it need not be taken for granted: Our target article (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017, LEC from here on) raised the specter of a dystopian “post-truth” future in which questions about viruses or the laws of physics are resolved not by “elitist” experts but by an opinion market on Twitter.

Although this possible future is still fictional, we argued that we already live in a post-truth era in which people's misconceptions can no longer be considered isolated failures of individual cognition that can be corrected with appropriate communication tools. Instead, we argued that any response to the post-truth era must recognize the presence of widespread alternative epistemological communities that defy conventional standards of

evidence. In those communities, climate change is seen as a hoax perpetrated by corrupt scientists, the Democratic party traffics child sex out of the basement of a pizza parlor in Washington D.C., and NASA is operating a slave colony on Mars.

Because such alternative epistemologies arguably arose as a consequence of societal mega-trends such as growing inequality or the decline of social capital, we suggested that solutions to the post-truth crisis must also look beyond individual cognition. We proposed one avenue forward based on the blending of insights from cognitive science with technology, an approach we called *technocognition*.

Table 1 summarizes the nine commentaries on our target article (LEC; see Table 1) and identifies the code that we use to refer to individual contributions from here on. We structure our response around the main themes that emerged from the commentaries.

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Table 1

Summary of Commentaries on the Target Article by Lewandowsky et al. (2017)

Citation	Code	Synopsis
Boussalis and Coan (2017)	BC	The role of elites was crucial in creating the problem but will also be crucial in solving it.
Garrett (2017)	G	Disinformation campaigns, not echo chambers, are the real problem.
Hyman and Jalbert (2017)	HJ	We must address the worldviews that lead to the acceptance of misinformation.
Marsh and Yang (2017)	MY	We must foster information literacy.
McCright and Dunlap (2017)	MD	Misinformation is intentionally promoted by a powerful conservative echo chamber.
Rapp and Donovan (2017)	RD	Drawing attention to implausibility or providing refutation-based explanations can correct misinformation.
Seifert (2017)	S	The problem of misinformation used to be “in the head” but it is now “in the world.”
Vraga and Bode (2017)	VB	Media literacy training must be taken out of the classroom.
Webb and Jirotko (2017)	WJ	We need to understand the different types of misinformation.

Cognition by the People and of the People

Virtually all commentaries support our contention that the “post-truth” world is best understood as a phenomenon that goes beyond individual cognition and instead requires some form of collective analysis and understanding. Seifert put this elegantly: “The problem of misinformation ‘in the head,’ where individuals struggled to maintain inconsistent facts in memory, has been replaced by a problem of misinformation ‘in the world,’ where inconsistent information exists across individuals, cultures, and societies. Now, misinformation can be so ‘good,’ it is presented simply because it *should* be true. . .” (S, p. 397).

There were, however, dissenting voices. At the most divergent end, RD focused entirely on individual-level cognition and made several helpful suggestions about how those can be harnessed for corrective efforts. We return to those suggestions later, but like the remaining commentators, we believe that the full social context must be considered before we can tackle processes based on individual cognition.

VB endorse our contextual approach but caution that the picture about politically-asymmetric susceptibility to misinformation is far from clear. VB acknowledge that there are some studies—which we cited; for example, Pfattheicher and Schindler (2016)—that suggest that conservatives are more susceptible to being misled than liberals. However, they note that other studies show the opposite (e.g., Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). We agree that the issue is not fully settled. For example, there are some potential inconsistencies between the finding that conservatives exhibit greater credulity for information about hazards than liberals (Fessler, Pisor, & Holbrook, 2017) on the one hand, and the well-established “white male” effect, which shows that white men (and in particular conservatives) downplay a number of risks (Kahan, Braman, Gastil, Slovic, & Mertz, 2007). We are, however, quite confident that the rejection of scientific findings is mainly focused on the political right: the preponderance of survey and public opinion data supports this conclusion (Lewandowsky & Oberauer, 2016).¹ We are equally confident that overall, there is asymmetry between

left and right on a multitude of cognitive variables (Jost, 2017), although it remains to be seen which of those variables are most pertinent to the post-truth world.

Filter Bubbles or People Filtering?

Commentators generally saw our proposal for “technocognition”—that is, cognitively-inspired design of information architectures that are more resilient to spreading misinformation—as providing a useful contribution, although some expressed skepticism that it was sufficient to act as a solution to the crisis. For example, MD fear that technocognition would be “insufficient in countering systemic lies in the US” (MD, p. 389), and HJ are concerned that triggering people’s worldview defenses via technocognition (e.g., automated fact checking) may be counterproductive. Perhaps the most strident criticism was offered by Garrett, who disagreed with our uncritical acceptance of the ideas of echo chambers and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), and also with the idea that techno-cognitive approaches could serve to break down those echo chambers and broaden filter bubbles. Garrett cites evidence that news audience fragmentation is, arguably, not as great as is often assumed (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). Indeed, some researchers argue that face-to-face interaction is *more* segregated now than is online news consumption (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). To the extent that there is online segregation, it is said to be driven more by people’s personal choices than by algorithms (Bakshy et al., 2015).

We accept that if exposure is used as a metric, the fractionation of the information landscape may be less severe than some critics have feared. However, in line with Garrett’s further comments, we believe that the crucial metric is engagement with content. The appearance of an item in one’s Facebook news feed is of little consequence if it is ignored—what matters is whether it is read and processed. When engagement rather than exposure is considered, Garrett seems to be in agreement with us that the evidence for echo chambers is robust (Schmidt et al., 2017; Zollo et al., 2017).

The debate about whether exposure or engagement is the correct metric with which to approach echo chambers is not a mere intellectual curiosity. One of the points Garrett is making is that, if exposure defined echo chambers, then a different form of technocognition would be needed to dilute them than if fractionation arose from engagement instead. He proceeds to propose a

¹ VB suggest that the selection of scientific issues we put forward was biased against conservatives. This is not the case. At least two of the issues, vaccinations and genetically-modified organisms, had been anecdotally—but erroneously—thought to be subject to denial by the political left (Kloor, 2012; Mooney, 2011; Shermer, 2013).

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