



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Energy Research &amp; Social Science

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/erss](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/erss)

Original research article

# Exaggeration and/or denial: Twin towers of industrial and commercial interests supposedly intended to accelerate energy transition in the United Kingdom

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Truth  
Subsidies/vested interests  
Dubious claims  
Uncertainties  
Precautionary

## ABSTRACT

Over the past twenty years debates on the supply of, and demand for, useful energy have often been characterised by exaggeration on the one part and denial on the other.

Exaggeration has primarily come from vested interests in promoting certain forms of renewable energy. These interests have been pitted against fossil fuel ones in claiming the need for transition to a low carbon world. Such views have often taken insufficient account of locational, technical, and other performance limitations. Their views have increasingly rested upon the politicisation of the climatic change debate, despite this topic's basic uncertainties. Local interests and concerns, and the claims of 'populism', have also intruded.

Denial has come from those who are inclined to dismiss the notion that human activities can change global near surface temperatures, whereas given the uncertainties a precautionary approach is required. Sustainable energy transformation is occurring, but we also see sub-optimal decision-making and exaggerated claims, as is to be expected in an age of "post-truth politics".

"Post-truth politics" need to be abandoned in the genuine pursuit of truth and realism. Failing this, social networking will hinder effective policymaking and its implementation.

## 1. Introduction

This paper responds to an invitation to contribute to issues of sustainable energy transformation in "an age of post-truth politics, protectionism, populism and local resistance". It begins by agreeing that there is evidence for the existence of such "an age". However, this is not to claim that in many respects the past was radically different. Instead, the quarrel is with particular truths that some claim as self-evident and others dispute. One such area where there is a great divide relates to human-induced climatic change, where the dispute is partly between those who accept claims that the scientific basis for concern is sound, and many of those who dispute such claims as either incorrect or an undesirable diversion from more immediate problems. Underlying this division, it has been claimed, is a lack of shared imaginations and failure to converse rationally in order to bridge the gaps between "the arrogance of a detached, all-knowing science" and the doubts and uncertainties of "demagogic populism" [1].

That there is a vacuum between the various bodies of opinion on the prospects for climatic change brought about by human activities and the energy transition needs facing the world reflecting technologies available, the current human condition (especially material well-being

and access to useful energy) cannot be doubted. But with views and conditions varying so widely there is a need to listen to the range of views and the reasoning behind them in order to create a shared knowledge base. However, there is also a need for caution as naïve or poorly based views expressed through the social media raise concerns that they undermine shared perspectives, sound policies and rational discussion as reflected in publications as respected as 'The Economist' (for example, the November 4th, 2007, issue with its front cover emblazoned with the words: "Social media's threat to democracy") and Vyacheslav Polonski's contribution: "The biggest threat to democracy? Your social media feed", World Economic Forum, August 4th, 2016. Apparently Facebook, in happier times, agreed.

This paper is based upon the view that there is plenty of evidence that, in the context of desirable avenues of transition to a lower carbon future in order to reduce risks of undesirable climatic change, there exists a "post-truth age". However, its more precise manifestations, in the use of language, in locations, and in specific energy environments have had strong national features. This paper focuses upon the UK, but some of these features can be found in many other – particularly industrialised – countries. Examples include the siting of wind turbines where mean wind speeds are relatively low or visual intrusion

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.05.008>

Received 1 February 2018; Received in revised form 26 April 2018; Accepted 11 May 2018  
2214-6296/ © 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

disturbing; solar PV schemes where direct and indirect solar irradiation are low; or biomass and biofuel developments which are, or appear to be, contrary to basic sustainable development criteria.

Overlying these more local aspects has been an ever widening expression of concerns about human-induced climatic change. The earlier uncertainties surrounding actual and potential impacts of these emissions, and their interplay with natural climatic variation, have largely been side-lined under political pressures. What all too often ensues is a narrowly-based dispute between “believers” and “sceptics”, the former led by an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stance which – it has been claimed – “implicitly endorses a ‘linear model’ of decision-making according to which ‘scientific uncertainty is seen as a temporary shortcoming of knowledge’ [2]. The authors go on: “This assumes many things including a certain consensus view of science and basic predictability in the climate system.” [2, page 172] They conclude that there is urgent need for a more pluralist approach, rather than narrow science-based models which all too many (and powerful) interests claim represent a consensus whereas a great deal of uncertainty, volatility, and unpredictability exist.

This paper resurrects discussion of these uncertainties before discussing how these presumptions and assumptions have been used and misused by those seeking to invest in schemes and technologies. This paper also provides a listing of occasions and evidence where exaggerated claims have been made for intended or actual investments and/or subsidies, rejection has been attempted in the wake of legitimate objections, and denial of criticism that investments were likely to be - or have been - sub-optimal.

## 2. "Post- truth" politics in localised language and philosophical context

For the past twenty-five or so years the term "post-truth politics" has gained wide currency. This is a period during which there has been increasing concern, ever more histrionically expressed in some quarters, about human-induced climatic change. Despite the ongoing uncertainties surrounding the causes and likely future extent of climatic change, where past variations due to natural causes are frequently overlooked or side-lined, debate has been largely framed by appeals to emotion or undesirable outcomes often disconnected from uncertainties. Concurrently, strident objections have come from those who deny the causes or likely extent of future near-surface global warming - again denials often couched in terms which fail to recognise the uncertainties. Both sets of views are continuously repeated with little or no recognition of exaggeration or falsehood on either side. Reinforcing these characteristics are competing interests which now lie at the heart of ‘post-truth’ politics more widely defined.

The role of what has been termed "professional social inquiry" (PSI) has long been recognised by those engaged in behavioural economics and the academic social sciences more generally. But with this recognition has gone the issue that those who seek to grasp analytical problem solving "frequently neglect all forms of interaction except politics" [3, page 32]. What is still insufficiently pursued are the need for, and pursuit of, complex guidelines and new understandings of interactive processes [3, page 97]. This is clearly a goal of the editorial team of *Energy Research & Social Science*. The subject of energy transitions has been covered quite intensively in *Energy Research & Social Science*, especially in its December 2014, and December 2016, issues, although little has been written there about vested interests except brief mention of vested fossil fuel interests.

It was Leibniz who wrote that: "There is nothing more necessary than truth, and in comparison with it everything else has only secondary value." And in answer to the question what is this absolute will to arrive at the truth his answer was: "the will not to allow ourselves to be deceived." Many other philosophers, from Aristotle and Plato down to recent times, have been concerned to focus on the search for, and statement of, the truth. Few, perhaps, more doggedly pursued the

notion of truth than the English philosopher F.H. Bradley (1846–1924), and his fellow members of the British Idealist Movement which guided discourse – not just in philosophical circles – in the UK between the mid-19th century and the early years of the 20th-century. The ideas behind the British Idealist Movement have been extensively considered, and a few relevant references are provided here for the interested reader [4–11]. At least three writers on Bradley's works have considered his views "obscure" [6,7], and indeed in some of his works he suggests that a distinction between absolute and finite truth is needed. Yet certainly on style others have disagreed. T. S. Eliot regarded Bradley's "Principles of Logic" as "the perfect style". Behind the British Idealist movement was concern that the sense of self and moral value was under threat from growing materialism. A late product from a supporter of British Idealism reveals in its title the sentiment of its author G.R.G. Mure: "Retreat from Truth", where he argued against the assumption that the object of knowledge is value free, and concluded the insecurities, materialism, and controversies of modern life have caused the retreat from truth [12].

Although in the wake of the decline of logical positivism the rise of linguistic philosophy saw many papers and some books published where the word “truth” appeared conspicuously – alongside such names of Oxford University academics as J.L. Austin, Peter Strawson, and Michael Dummett – their works shed little or no light on discussion about a ‘post-truth’ age [13–15]. Their works mostly appeared between 1950 and the 1990s, with some books published later, but Geoffrey Mure was already scornful of such works in his 1958 publication, ending “Retreat from Truth” with the words:

“Yet at present if I had an intelligent son coming up to Oxford, I should not regret it if he turned his face away from all the three Honour Schools that include philosophy, even from Greats” [12, page 250].

A recent assessment of the relevance of the ideas behind the British Idealist Movement, and of F.H. Bradley in particular, is that it is the social context of the individual which sets the framework within which they act morally and realise their potential as a human being. In practice this means doing one's duty, pursuing the truth, and acting in accordance with this. But Bradley emphasised that the individual is the product of where they were born, educated, and built up relationships. Thus it is not helpful to refer to global citizens, but in the present chosen context of: “actual British people, moulded to the deepest level by the fact of their being brought up within a British social milieu” [16]. How well that would gels with others elsewhere raises issues not covered in this paper.

The emphasis on British here also derives from this author's belief that, although many issues and forces in human discourse and outlook have multinational correspondences, they are not infrequently of more local application and therefore truth. Take, for example, “place attachment”. Robert Briley has written about attachment to the ordinary landscape in the USA [17], yet there is a considerable literature suggesting that “place attachment” is particularly marked in the UK as compared with Germany, The Netherlands, the USA, and some other countries [18]. There are also numerous definitions or perceptions of “populism”, from the “right-wing” populist phenomena usually associated with many of the supporters of President Trump in the USA, to the more nuanced and diverse label of “populism” as perceived in Europe generally, and arguably more particularly in the UK.

There are two further important considerations here relating to energy transformations. We cannot ‘foretell’ the future, for – as Shell's scenario planners in the 1970s constantly reminded themselves and others: “those who foretell the future lie, even when they tell the truth.” Even alternative scenarios might not be sufficient to do so – despite Daniel Kahneman's belief that choice of 100 scenarios would encompass at least one [19]. “Unforeknowledge” was the ultimate barrier in seeking to foresee possible futures, as George Shackle put it in so many of his works [20]. His viewpoint and that of Shell's scenario team in the 1970s were closely aligned [21,22].

On November 30th, 2017, the Chairman of Shell wrote in “*The Daily*

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