Post-Truth Society? An Eliasian Sociological Analysis of Knowledge in the 21st Century

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Abstract
This article draws on Elias’s sociology of knowledge to delineate the social processes that have culminated in the development of the post-truth phenomenon. It argues that technological and social changes have led to a complex commingling of increased emotion and increasingly ‘rational’ debating techniques. These have been accompanied by an increasing human capacity to consider issues on multiple ‘levels’ and anticipate the varied ways in which different audiences could perceive particular propositions. While these changes explain the polarisation of views characteristic of post-truth, the theory of informalisation is invoked to explain the relative absence of shame at the public exposure of ‘untruths’. The article expands debates in communication and science and technology studies to locate post-truth as an emergent form of knowledge contingent upon new forms of communication, a re-structuring of social interdependencies and changes in modes of thinking. In so doing, it advances the sociological analysis of knowledge.

Keywords
communication, Elias, emotion, habitus, informalisation, knowledge, post-truth, rationality

Introduction
Euro-American cultures are frequently claimed to have become post-truth societies (Blackburn, 2018; McIntyre, 2018). Post-truth has been said to have had a decisive impact on the biggest political issues of our day – from the election of Donald Trump to Brexit – and the scientific debates over the greatest existential threats – most notably climate change and COVID-19. Indicative of the social significance of post-truth, it was named the Oxford Dictionaries’ Word of the Year 2016.

In popular usage, post-truth encapsulates five interconnected ideas. Primarily definitions of post-truth argue that emotion has become more significant than objective fact in
shaping personal beliefs and public debates. Second, post-truth includes the relativisation of truth; the idea that political statements, and even empirically grounded scientific positions, are subject to the manipulation of knowledge producers (Lockie, 2017). Correlatively, politicians can apparently contradict their prior assertions without incurring reputational damage and, hence, a third characteristic of post-truth is the decline of shame when one is exposed for being factually wrong or suspected of deception (Blackburn, 2018). Fourth, this phenomenon has seemingly been accompanied by a tendency to polarise views. Finally, the manipulation of knowledge and the polarisation of views tends to fuel ‘conspiracy’ theories.

Post-truth is generally seen as a matter for concern; born, for instance, ‘from a sense of regret by those who worry that truth is being eclipsed’ (McIntyre, 2018: xiii). This potential reversal of modernist advances in knowledge production dominant since the scientific revolution of the Renaissance and Enlightenment threatens to undermine human control over social and scientific ‘problems’. Post-truth has been associated with a rise in authoritarianism, the blunting of socially progressive movements and the decline of democratic scrutiny (Biesecker, 2018; Collins et al., 2020).

In response, most post-truth analyses advocate a return to traditional ways of evaluating knowledge; the re-assertion of the primacy of truth, evident for instance in the growth of ‘fact-checking’ in the (mainstream) media and by specialist organisations (Waisbord, 2018). Such responses thus invoke abstract and essentialist concepts such as ‘truth’ as ‘reality’, and the ontological primacy of objectivity over subjectivity. Such philosophical absolutism focuses on the individual purveyor/receiver of truth/falsehood and thus sees knowledge as ‘independent of social processes, and definite and certain knowledge as the ideal which can be attained by following certain rules or rationality’ (Wilterdink, 2003: 302). Yet, as we will see, this is an approach which is ‘expressive of a particular strand of rationality . . . of a particular historical juncture’ (Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 148), making it ill-equipped for advancing understanding of what appears to be a historically distinct but relatively dynamic change to the social conceptualisation and mobilisation of knowledge. A sociological re-evaluation is important because of the social significance of the issues raised and, more practically, because recourse to philosophical ideas does not appear to have constrained the development of post-truth.

In contrast, a sociological analysis of post-truth which sought to examine the social conditions in which these historically specific forms of knowledge have emerged provides a more nuanced position from which to respond to post-truth developments. It would, moreover, understand post-truth in its own terms, without reducing the debate to the philosophical concepts that, a priori, are being challenged. As discussed in the next section, this account builds on and extends sociological analyses of communication, science and expertise which feed into a more overarching sociology of knowledge. This article provides the first sociological reconsideration of post-truth ‘in the round’ and, in so doing, seeks to initiate a broader sociological and theoretically oriented discussion of this important social phenomenon.

Sociological Responses to Post-Truth

Sociological responses to post-truth have been most prominent in fields which focus on the consumption and/or production of knowledge. To a greater-or-lesser extent these
areas of study have been implicated in the rise of post-truth; each is concerned with an aspect of post-truth rather than the totality. Moreover, their responses have largely aligned with the re-entrenchment of philosophical categorisations of knowledge described above.

First, communication scholars have addressed the widespread correlation drawn between post-truth and the respective rise of social media and the fall of traditional/mainstream media (e.g. Fuller, 2018; McIntyre, 2018; Sismondo, 2017). Finding themselves in the ‘Twilight Zone’ of post-truth politics, these researchers have focussed on the media – or journalism – and media – or the changing technologies of communication (Hannan, 2018: 215). It is argued that technological developments have undercut and weakened mainstream media, and created a greater fluidity of public communication which, in turn, represents a ‘new chapter in the old struggle over the definition of truth’ (Waisbord, 2018: 1868). The expressed concern is the degree to which post-truth problematises journalists’ claims to be reporters or arbiters of truth and thus threatens journalism’s status as ‘one of the most influential knowledge-producing institutions in society’ (Ekstrom et al., 2020: 206). For instance, the New Media & Society 2020 special issue focused on the ‘emerging’ research areas of digital journalism epistemologies and misinformation (Ekstrom et al., 2020). In such accounts therefore there is both a reliance upon, and a reassertion of, journalism’s alignment with philosophical conceptualisations of knowledge.

Science and technology studies (STS) has undergone a similar process of self-reflection. Having explored the processes of scientific knowledge development, and shown that science and society are not separate spheres, STS demonstrated that the logic of scientific discovery ‘is the logic of everyday life’ (Collins and Pinch, 1998: 140). STS has further provided insights into public responses to scientific knowledge, illustrating how social relationships and community identities can provide greater explanatory purchase than notions of trust and credibility derived from ‘truth’ and social status (Wynne, 1992). This challenge to the dominance of positivism and the traditional authority of science launched a ‘second wave’ of STS characterised by ‘unbridled social constructivism’ (Jasonoff, 2003); a turn which parallels the relativisation of truth in societies in which debates about post-truth are prominent. ‘Epistemic democratization’ created the ‘problem of extension’ (Collins and Evans, 2007: 9) – how do you decide which subject positions to include/exclude in informing policy and action? Subsequent ‘studies of expertise and experience’ thus sought to establish criteria for differentiating between scientific and other forms of expertise, and concluded that science is ‘a distinct “form of life” distinguished by the key “formative intentions” of the actors’ (Collins et al., 2010: 186). A ‘third wave’ thus emerged which rejected anti-science/anti-expertise perspectives and extreme forms of relativism, and instead argued for the embedding of technical expertise in political decision making while avoiding technocracy by defining the domains in which science should (or should not) hold sway (for critiques, see Jasonoff, 2003; Wynne, 2003).

Post-truth has both rekindled and raised the stakes of these STS debates. Sismondo (2017) rejects the implication that STS has contributed to the rise of post-truth, citing the community’s fact-checking activities and pursuit of truth. Conversely, Collins et al. (2017: 580), identify a ‘clear resonance’ between STS and post-truth, citing previous
analyses of ‘the dissolution of the boundary between scientific knowledge and politics’ (2010: 186). However, they argue that STS should not be a political agent for the democ-
ratisation of expertise, but rather emphasise the subject’s distinct value as a source of
expertise about expert knowledge (Collins et al., 2017). Collins et al. (2020) further note
how attacks on scientific expertise have grown with the recent rise of right-wing pop-
ulism. Such political shifts not only illustrate the polarising tendencies of post-truth but
also undermine the important role of science as a check/balance on elected political
power. In light of this, Collins et al. (2017: 584) argue that post-truth represents a signifi-
cant threat to modern democracies, and that STS has a distinct role to play in addressing
the ‘now urgent problem’ facing knowledge and expertise in post-truth societies. ‘Third
wave’ studies, the authors believe, can be seen as a move which pre-empt later concerns
about post-truth (Collins et al., 2017).

Understanding the changes in communication, the process of creating and using tech-
nical knowledge, and the relationship between the public and knowledge elites are all
important building blocks of an account of post-truth. But as a society-wide phenomenon,
post-truth requires a more holistic sociological understanding of knowledge per se.
Fuller’s (2018) philosophical-cum-sociological analysis of post-truth comes closest yet to
providing an overarching framework. This historically sensitive account concludes that
the greater relative influence of emotion is not the decisive characteristic of the post-truth
condition. Specifically, Fuller argues that popular definitions of post-truth are distinctly
pejorative and that the focus on emotion relative to fact reflects a wider power game, as
socially dominant groups resist political and status challenge from below. Consequently,
the core characteristic of post-truth is the spread of the propensity to go ‘meta’ (Fuller,
2018: 3); to shift from debates over specific facts, to questioning the structure or rules of
the broader debate. This, for instance, may entail constructing a meta-narrative by draw-
ing attention to the underlying ideological motivations of those holding opposing views.
While Fuller (2018: 181) rejects the radical rupture depicted by the term ‘post-’ and argues
that this rhetorical strategy – contesting the rules or premises of a debate rather than ‘facts’
– is ‘endemic to the history of Western thought’, he attributes its relative prominence of
post-truth societies to the rise of social media and 24/7 rolling news coverage. Distinctively,
Fuller (2018: 181) evaluates the current manifestation of post-truth in positive terms as
‘the growing pains of a maturing democratic intelligence’.

This article builds on these communication and STS analyses and accepts much of
Fuller’s conceptualisation of post-truth but explains these developments in relation to a
wider pattern of underpinning social processes. It argues that the social fund of knowl-
edge and predominant modes of human analysis vary in time and space according to both
their range and scope of understanding, and their structural characteristics (Elias, 2007
[1987]). It conceives of a commingling of increased emotion and increasingly ‘rational’
debating techniques within post-truth which is based on the human capacity (itself
becoming more socially pervasive) to consider issues on multiple ‘levels’, and anticipate
the varied ways in which different audiences are likely to receive and perceive particular
propositions. Most distinctively, however, it rejects the ‘fundamentally flawed’ idea
implicit in most existing accounts ‘of an unchanging mind shared by all people and all
classes in all historical periods’ (Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 113), and locates post-truth
as the product of the interdependence of new forms of communication, a re-structuring
of social relations and a change in the modes of thinking evident in human habitus. Using a synthesis of Norbert Elias’s ideas enables an overarching examination of post-truth as a society-wide phenomenon, but the analysis of post-truth also produces a refinement and advance of Elias’s sociological analysis of knowledge.

**Elias’s Sociology of Knowledge**

Elias’s sociology of knowledge has been described as ‘a long term sociological approach . . . which contained power, social conflict, competition and interests at the core of its explanatory apparatus’ (Kilminster, 2011: xiv). Elias located his sociology of knowledge in contradistinction to philosophical and historical approaches; the former which he saw as falsely de-contextualising reasoning and consciousness from the structure and development of human societies, and the latter which tends to emphasise individualistic discovery over social structural contingencies (Dunning and Hughes, 2013). Characteristically, Elias reformulated the ‘research question’ guiding these studies, asking not what the nature of ‘truth’ is, or how we can come to ‘know’, but how can we account for changes in the ways that humans have produced and used knowledge over time? Elias was centrally interested in developing an explanation that is both processual in orientation and informed by an understanding of human interdependence. In this respect, he drew attention to the mutuality of social structural and psychological dimensions of human thought, the institutional and lay forms of knowledge development, and the relationships between communication technologies and psycho-social development. This approach, therefore, is distinctively different from existing sociological analyses of post-truth.

The central concept in Elias’s sociology of knowledge is ‘involvement and detachment’. Elias (2007 [1987]) argues that over the course of (Western) human history there has been an empirically discernible move away from the predominance of more involved forms of thinking towards greater reliance on detachment. These developments are fundamentally interrelated with Elias’s (2012 [1939]) ‘central’ theory of civilising processes in that relatively higher levels of human control over non-human nature (e.g. more consistent food supply, greater resilience to environmental threats) enable humans to increasingly and more evenly regulate emotions. As the relationship between danger, fear and involvement and detachment is ‘not simply causal . . . [but] circular and spiral in character’ (Elias, 2007 [1987]: 24), so the increasing influence of conscience, modesty and shame develops alongside an enhanced capacity to distance oneself from one’s objects of study. Humans have become more reflexive about their social encounters including their role as producers of knowledge. ‘According to Elias, the “scientification” of human knowledge [e.g. seeking to repeat and refine knowledge through experimentation] involves the same movement towards greater foresight seen in the social constraint towards self-constraint, “psychologization” and rationalization’ (Mennell, 1989: 163) evident in civilising processes.

Consequently, Elias (2007 [1987]) argued that the benchmarks against which human knowledge is normatively judged stem from the degree to which ideas are continually shown to work (or not) ‘in the crucible of experience’. Not only does knowledge ‘work’ because it is ‘true’ (i.e. predictions prove accurate), but in particular social contexts it can
'work' because it is emotionally gratifying (or at least not emotionally disruptive). To escape the trappings of traditional conceptualisations of truth/objectivity, Elias introduced the terms ‘reality-congruence’ and ‘object-adequate’. However, Wilterdink (2003) alternatively proposed ‘relative adequacy’ to more explicitly emphasise the degree to which humans find knowledge useful (as opposed to being externally and abstractly knowable) and thus this is the term used here.

Elias conceived of a positive feedback loop as more reliable knowledge facilitates greater emotional regulation which enables the psychological distanciation which has (historically) been fundamental to the development of more reliable knowledge. However, his position is as distinct from a unilinear theory of progress as it is from a postmodernist emphasis on ruptures (Dunning and Hughes, 2013). Elias recognised that degrees of involvement and detachment vary between different individuals/social groups and for particular individuals across different social situations. He wrote, for instance, of the role of nostalgia, and concomitant processes of knowledge loss and gain, and rejected the idea that some final stage of truth or holistic understanding was conceivable. Similarly, he rejected the ‘misleading Romantic dichotomy between reason and passion’ (Kilminster, 2004: 34), seeing involvement and detachment not as a zero-sum game, but existing in contextually specific blends.

Elias’s core notion of involvement and detachment was developed through two additional conceptual considerations and two direct applications. First, and of direct relevance to STS, Elias argued that the development of the psychological capacity to produce more adequate knowledge was interdependent with broader social structural factors. Specifically, Elias pointed to periods of relative (physical and social) security, and conditions of relative scientific autonomy over heteronomous evaluations as particularly conducive. Emotion, self-regulation and the relative separation of the subjects and objects of study are enabled or constrained under specific social conditions. What Elias (2011 [1991]) described as a modern ‘compulsion’ to find causal explanations, he conceived of as an aspect of habitus characteristic of a particular period of human social development.

Second, and of greater relevance to communication studies, Elias (2011 [1991]) explored what he called ‘symbol emancipation’ or the development of the ‘tools’ which facilitate the interpersonal and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Specifically, he advocated a theory of knowledge which replaced the traditional subject–object dyad with ‘the triadic constellation of subjects, language, and objects’ (Elias, 2011 [1991]: 26). Language, and modes of recording (writing) and storing knowledge (books) are inextricably linked with the distanciation of the subjects and objects of study. These ‘tools’ also further extend and elaborate human interdependencies to shape knowledge production as a collective rather than individual practice.

Applying this sociological model of knowledge, Elias examined the development of the sciences. He argued that the existing hierarchy of scientific disciplines stemmed from the respective fields’ degrees of complexity and levels of integration (Dunning and Hughes, 2013). Disciplines spanning the natural and social sciences are thus arranged according to whether their predominant theories are individualistic (e.g. atoms), systemic or processual. The greater complexity of processual theories requires different claims to knowledge certainty and reduces the reliability of ‘law-like’
statements. Equally, cause–effect explanations are replaced by less precise (but more adequate) accounts of mutually interacting factors. In turn this reduces the relative status of processually oriented (social) scientific disciplines, and leads to what Collins and Pinch (1998: 141) call ‘physics envy’, because the degree to which knowledge ‘works’ in social application is relatively limited (both in terms of predicting outcomes and because of the greater influence of ideological/political divisions and emotional gratification).

Second, in *The Established and the Outsiders* Elias and Scotson (2008 [1965]) examined the lived experience of ‘truth’ in everyday social contexts. This community study demonstrated the prevalence of seemingly irrational behaviours and illustrated how the ‘wish dreams’ of many group identities remained relatively static due to a ‘drag effect’ exerted by ideas inevitably rooted in the past (Crow and Laidlaw, 2019). The work further highlighted how the power imbalances between different groups determined what Elias (2007 [1987]) called the ‘social fund of knowledge’. He and Scotson specifically drew attention to the respective ability of members of ‘established’ and ‘outsider’ groups to use gossip to police behaviour. The different abilities of these groups to accept or reject the ‘group fantasies’ associated with them via ‘gossip’ shaped what became accepted as ‘truth’. For instance, the outsider group, because it was more internally divided and contained fewer socially influential individuals, were relatively powerless to resist a characterisation of themselves based upon an extrapolation of empirical evidence relating to the group’s ‘minority of the worst’. While Elias and Scotson described a relatively high degree of consensus over visions of group charisma/disgrace, in other contexts contrasting beliefs may ‘work’, or have relative adequacy, for different groups (note the benefits of this term relative to Elias’s ‘reality congruence’). Encapsulated in *The Established and the Outsiders*, therefore, was the interdependence of involvement and detachment, the fusion of emotion and fact in shaping beliefs and a broader social structural analysis of the way power relations influence the relative acceptance of different explanatory accounts. The conclusion to *The Established and the Outsiders* illustrated the broader applicability of these ideas by drawing parallels to the behaviour of other groups such as nobles at royal courts (Crow and Laidlaw, 2019).

While Elias thus makes a unique contribution to our understanding of knowledge, he advocated testing such theories through empirical examination (Dunning and Hughes, 2013). In this regard, contemporary developments offer a timely opportunity to reconsider Elias’s ideas, as post-truth appears to fundamentally challenge both his ideas about knowledge and the theory of civilising processes more generally. First, while recognising that Elias embraced the reversibility of social processes, the trajectory of the long-term developments Elias identified seems diametrically opposed to definitions of post-truth which signal the rising significance of emotion (and hence involvement over detachment). Second, the relative lack of shame in relation to factual error or ‘untruths’ seems counter to Elias’s (2012 [1939]) historical account of human responses to violations of social taboos. Accordingly, the following sections seek to more adequately understand the current ‘post-truth’ condition and, in so doing, both address the implicit critique of Elias’s ‘central theory’ and extend the conceptual framework of his sociology of knowledge. The main foci of this analysis are the tools humans have created to facilitate knowledge development, changing social interdependencies and habitus.
A Sociological Understanding of Post-Truth

Tools

For Elias, symbol emancipation and the capacity to learn language are both unique to, yet effectively universal among, members of the human species. He argued that: (a) ‘knowledge cannot be regarded as such if it cannot be produced in linguistic form’ (Elias, 2011 [1991]: 27); and (b) more sophisticated forms of language relatively enable the transmission of knowledge across generations. Language thus facilitates the lengthening of human interdependencies and more sophisticated forms of symbol emancipation enable humans to spread more complex bodies of knowledge across both time and space. Communication and capacities for knowing and remembering are, according to Elias (2011 [1991]), distinguishable but inseparable.

Elias illustrated the interdependence of modes of communication and thinking in his discussion of Renaissance artists. He described how perspectivist painters such as Velazquez developed techniques to both more realistically depict three-dimensional space and evoke nuance and implication rather than ‘simple’ literal representation (Elias, 2007 [1987]). The techniques stemmed from the artists’ greater relative detachment. For instance, Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* showed ‘at the same time’ the painter’s ‘pride and his humility. It shows how he saw himself and how he wanted to be seen by others’, which itself was predicated on ‘a high capacity for seeing oneself from a distance as one might be perceived by others’ (Elias, 2007 [1987]: 52 and 62). These paintings appealed to the audience’s parallel development of sensibilities and thus for Elias these were artistic manifestations of the relatively intensified civilising processes occurring as part of the Renaissance.

Viewed through this lens, we can see that previous post-truth analyses correctly identify the role of social media in the rise of post-truth (Fuller, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). The commonplace linkage to the decline of traditional media is however misguided, partly because the social/mainstream media distinction returns us to the problematic truth/falsehood dichotomy and partly because it nostalgically venerates the truthfulness of television and newspapers. Postman (1985), for instance, argued that by the 1980s television had normalised discontinuity and fragmentation and thus ‘rendered [Americans] insensitive to contradiction’ (Hannan, 2018: 217).

Rather, social media is important because it engenders more complex forms of symbol emancipation. While communication has developed from firstly purely physical and oral forms, to pictures and text, and latterly a combination of moving pictures, sound and text (i.e. film), social media extends the progressive development of forms of human expression in three ways. First, the use of filters and hashtags provides a shorthand summary of potentially more complex sets of ideas, and has been shown to help build ‘filter bubbles’ or ‘echo chambers’; “ad-hoc” publics – spaces where a diversity of experience and expertise can co-exist around a topic of shared interest’ (Myrick et al., 2016: 603). Similarly, hyperlinking is understood to have fundamentally changed communication, helping to structure and expand human networks and being ‘loaded with symbolic and social power’ (De Maeyer, 2012: 737). Third, emoticons, which are mostly used to express emotion, humour or for emphasis (Derks et al., 2008), entail increasingly involved and less detached communication.
Social media also expands the use of pictorial/film communication via memes, vines and gifs. Van Dijck (2008) argues that the primary function of photography has shifted from representation to self-presentation and social communication; from the sharing of objects to the sharing of experiences. The rise of the ‘selfie’ has democratised the shifting blend of involvement and detachment evident in Elias’s perspectivist painters example, as camera phones enable repeated placement of the self in social context and evoke self-reflection. Van Dijck (2008: 69–70) cites the example of the photographs posted by US military at the Abu Ghraib prison to illustrate how new communication tools explicitly engender the kind of more emotionally oriented forms of communication that characterise post-truth, as ‘pictures casually mailed out . . . meant to be thrown away after reading the message, became permanently engraved on the consciousness of a generation . . . painful visual evidence of its [the USA’s] military hubris’. Social media is therefore important to post-truth because it represents an emerging and more complex stage of symbol emancipation.

The effectiveness of new forms of communication varies as they undergo a relatively rapid phase of development (akin to what Elias termed the ‘drag effect’). The symbols humans use for communication ‘can become more – but also less – reality congruent than they were at an earlier stage’ (Elias, 2011 [1991]: 16). New forms of symbol emancipation require new interpretative skills. Indicatively media researchers talk about the importance of media generations, defined by the dominant media technology of one’s formative years, and have even suggested that media relationships should replace the traditional concept of generation (Bolin and Westlund, 2009). Consequently, concerns about the impact of social media can be explained in relation to the relatively unrefined use of new communication technologies and the varying rates at which populations adopt these rapidly developing communication tools (Bolin and Westlund, 2009). In contrast with past developments, contemporary symbol emancipation is a distinctly more widespread movement, illustrative of the ‘growing pains of a maturing democratic intelligence’ identified by Fuller (2018: 181).

Interdependencies

In addition to facilitating symbol emancipation, social media changes the relations underpinning knowledge production and consumption. Significant recent developments include ‘ordinary’ people generating ‘news’ alongside specialists (journalists) within a ‘publicity driven culture’ (Murthy, 2012: 1065), and the democratisation of audio and photographic communication through smartphone ownership. Changes in the way knowledge is socially produced and consumed, and the impact this has on we–they group relations (including groups of scientific expertise), are central to the development of post-truth societies.

A distinguishing feature of contemporary developments is the degree to which social media has the capacity to create specific audience configurations or communities. While some platforms enable individuals to determine who receives the content they produce (Facebook and WhatsApp), others create a relatively open, unpredictable, audience reach (Twitter and Instagram). For instance, retweeting extends the impact of our communications to previously unknown populations (consider thus the term ‘gone viral’). Similarly,
social media has ushered in new and contextually specific meanings for terms such as friends (Facebook) and followers (Twitter). As many Facebook users have literally hundreds of ‘friends’, relatively weak social ties tend to dominate (Sutcliffe et al., 2018), and those with larger networks tend to be ‘less emotionally close to each network member’ (Pollet et al., 2010: 254). Similarly, while many ‘followers’ are motivated by interest and admiration, ‘fake followers’ are prevalent enough to warrant prohibition and sanction by Twitter (Khalil et al., 2017). Previous pillars of community identity – established networks of local relations, a sense of belonging rooted in place and a sense of status instilled through socialisation (Crow and Laidlaw, 2019) – are inevitably diluted as social worlds move online. Thus, what is significant about the rise of social media vis-a-vis post-truth, is that these new technologies enable a lengthening of the interdependency ties which shape knowledge production and consumption, and thus reconfigure the type and scope of human relations.

The changing social interdependencies affecting knowledge consumption impact on post-truth in two main ways. The first is the declining confidence in those traditionally held to be experts (note Michael Gove’s retort during the Brexit referendum campaign that Britons have ‘had enough of experts’). Collins and Evans (2007: 2) attribute this to ‘epistemological weaknesses and short term political impotence’. Epistemological weaknesses are evident in movements towards the relativisation of truth (McIntyre, 2018). The problems of legitimacy encountered by experts (Collins and Evans, 2007) can be seen in social scientific developments towards verifying research findings with the communities within which they were created (Kilminster, 2004) and latterly the focus on the co-production of knowledge in scientific research. Thus, the retreat of expertise is both real and perceived. Centrally the structural advantages that ‘experts’ previously had in relation to access to knowledge has been undermined by the development of digital information platforms and retrieval systems which have revolutionised the social fund of knowledge in both quantity and accessibility (Dunning and Hughes, 2013). Although these technologies can pose a challenge to expertise in the sense of making knowledge ubiquitous rather than esoteric, experts remain distinct due to the hallmarks of systematic enquiry underpinned by formative intentions and norms of ‘honesty, integrity and disinterestedness’ (Collins et al., 2020: 51). However, in the contemporary era the practices of creating expert knowledge, ‘the feats of fudging, complicating, backtracking and all round “adhockery” that [a scientific community] . . . must routinely perform to show that it is getting closer to the truth’ (Fuller, 2018: 5) become more visible to those outside traditional knowledge communities. STS and studies of journalist epistemologies contribute to the greater transparency of expert processes, while technological and social changes provide greater exposure to the ‘structured flux’ of scientific knowledge (Elias, 1971, cited in Mennell, 1989: 188). The outcome is a relative decline in the autonomy of scientific communities and their ability to influence the knowledge to which lay audiences have access (Rohloff, 2011). Ideas about the relative value of diverse sources of knowledge underpin the popularity of websites like Wikipedia and the ‘frequent and growing practice’ of using vox pops in the news (Beckers, 2018).

A second impact of changing interdependencies relates to the more even power balances between ‘we–they’ groups that arise as the relative autonomy of communities of expert knowledge decline (Rohloff, 2011). The ‘demonopolisation’ of knowledge is a
long-term process, for Elias (2007 [1987]: 73) initially argued in 1956, that the ‘conceptual tools [used by scientists] . . . are spreading again and again, from . . . the specialists to the general public’. Similarly, while Wynne’s (1992) post-Chernobyl study of Cumbrian hill farmers further illustrates that knowledge is generated in a multiplicity of ways (from hypothesis testing to personal experience) and that lay contestation of expert knowledge claims is not solely a contemporary phenomenon, the recent relative democratisation of knowledge (particularly evident, for instance, in debates around climate change; Rohloff, 2011) has been augmented by both studies of expert groups (including STS but also the sociology of professions) and technological developments in communication (Sismondo, 2017; Waisbord, 2018). In contrast to the relative power *imbalance* described in _The Established and the Outsiders_, where a consensus was effectively constructed around the *Established*’s world view, these developments have enabled ‘a plurality of claims to knowledge in a variety of mediums’ (Rohloff, 2011: 646), fuelled by the visibility that mainstream and social media provides to such debates and the potential of social media to shape audience configurations.

Elias and Scotson (2008 [1965]: 132) noted that within established–outsider configurations much of the ‘gossip’ habitually deployed by the more powerful group ‘was vastly exaggerated or untrue’. Even so, the outsiders’ recognition of elements of ‘truth’ within such gossip led to a ‘silent agreement which paralysed their ability to retaliate and to assert themselves’ (Elias and Scotson, 2008 [1965]: 133). However, as the traditional pillars of community identity shift, we/I self-images become more complex. For instance, while the very nature of scientific groups is that beyond their relative consensus upon paradigmatic approach and core knowledge individuals seek to advance knowledge by advocating different positions and interpretations, ironically it is largely through the scientific communities’ response to external challenge, and idealistic portrayals of science, that science becomes falsely portrayed as a community of consensus and purveyor of certainties (Collins and Pinch, 1998). Historically the contradictions and corrections that have characterised knowledge development processes (Fuller, 2018) have been relatively self-contained within expert groups, but communication changes increase the visibility of these knowledge exchanges. Moreover, the weaknesses in the knowledge base that are exposed to heteronomous evaluations, and the characterisations critics present, may resonate with the inadequacies one recognises in the ‘minority of the worst’ within the group with which one identifies; including the beliefs that the premises of colleagues’ experiments are flawed or misguided, that a particular scientific enquiry has fundamental biases (Collins and Pinch, 1998) or that detachment is compromised through the receipt of research funding; for example, from the tobacco industry. In Elias and Scotson’s (2008 [1965]) terms, group charisma and group disgrace have become increasingly contested.

**Habitus**

As noted, the conventional portrayal of post-truth as the ascendancy of emotion over fact is flawed in its nostalgic representation and dichotomic conceptualisation of truth/falseness and subjectivity/objectivity. Alternatively, Elias’s conceptualisation of involvement and detachment depicts emotion and fact as interdependent (Kilminster, 2004), with historically specific blends requiring more-or-less advanced levels of forethought.
In this respect post-truth developments may not represent an a priori challenge to the theory of civilising processes. Elias both argued that a relative levelling of social relations ‘will be mirrored in the internal psychic make-up of people’ (Kilminster, 2004: 28), and illustrated that the relative power balance between established/insider and emergent/outider groups can impact upon the images of self and others held by the respective groups (Elias and Scotson, 2008 [1965]). Thus, in conjunction with new forms of symbol emancipation and shifting interdependency ties, post-truth entails a change in habitus compatible with Elias’s (2012 [1939]) ‘central’ theory, particularly when augmented with Wouters’s (1986) analysis of informalisation.

Specifically, if the key characteristic of post-truth is the propensity to ‘go meta’ (Fuller, 2018) – which in turn correlates with the growth of conspiracy theories – then the greater influence of particular forms of rationality and forethought are becoming more prominent in public debates. The post-truth questioning of the underlying structure of knowledge production and representation (rather than empirical knowledge) demonstrates pronounced forms of thinking about thinking. In particular, post-truth debates exhibit ‘players jockey[ing] for position in the current game, while at the same time they try to change the rules so as to maximise their own overall advantage’ (Fuller, 2018: 182). As post-truth entails both a demonopolisation of knowledge and the social diffusion of knowledge production techniques (Fuller, 2018), we see a societal shift in modes of thought, as new rationalities become more socially widespread.

Consequently, post-truth should be understood as the more routine critical appraisal of established positions (Fuller, 2018). Thus, concomitant with the growing prominence of online ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ (environments where individuals only experience views to which they are already predisposed), is the rise of Twitter spamming and internet trolling – the posting of intentionally inflammatory remarks – both of which seek to question and disrupt knowledge communities (Hannan, 2018; Khalil et al., 2017). Living in the ‘age of advertisement’ entails the routine appraisal of truth claims (Murthy, 2012: 1065). The balance of power (i.e. the relative time, resources and expertise invested) means that corporate and political entities are relatively successful in persuading the public to act in particular ways. Moreover, because the ‘speed of politics is faster than the speed of scientific consensus formation’ (Collins et al., 2010: 188) expertise can relatively easily be challenged, particularly by populist politicians who pre-emptively seek to challenge the traditional checks and balances on power which include science (Collins et al., 2020). But this kind of compliance should not be equated with a loss of critical faculty and the eclipse of truth. Returning to Elias’s model of the sciences many of the most marked post-truth debates concern processual rather than individualistic or systemic questions (e.g. climate change, the consequences of Brexit, the containment of COVID-19) and thus involve relatively high levels of knowledge that does not work, or predictions that prove inaccurate. In the post-truth era we have become more focused on the motivations of communicators and the reliability of the knowledge they seek to disseminate, more aware of the evocation of emotion and more likely to question information received.

The development of concern over the ‘cherry picking’ of data again demonstrates a parallel move towards thinking about how others will think about thinking. First, the manufacture of facts (Lockie, 2017) necessarily involves a recognition of the need to
choose between different narratives. This entails the disaggregation of the potential audience for a particular message (rather than more simplistically assuming a singularity of interpretation), and an evaluation of the relative receptiveness of diverse audiences to blends of ‘emotion’ and ‘fact’. Indicatively, Rohloff (2011) describes the use of predictions about the future risks of climate change as a rational strategy of evoking audience emotions to precipitate desired changes in human action. Elias’s subject–language–object triad is also pertinent here, enabling the recognition of the diversity of ‘objects’ who will mediate the language in the messages of the producer-subjects in multiple ways. Thus, this aspect of post-truth requires both the intensification of the interdependence of emotion and fact and a relatively complex evaluation of what will ‘work’ in the crucible of experience (Elias, 2007 [1987]).

These advances in human thinking about thinking are evidenced in the increasingly widespread use of coded and multivocal communication; techniques which tailor messages for particular constituencies (Albertson, 2015). While coded communication uses ambiguity of meaning to enable the use of refutable propositions, multivocal communication (or ‘dog-whistle’ politics) entails the dissemination of messages that will have particular resonance for one group but will go unnoticed by others (or messages that evoke a hostile response from opposition groups which, in turn, serves to boost popularity within another constituency). Coded and multivocal communication are predicated on considerations of how specific content will be received by different audiences, and both the anticipation of, and appeal to, shared cultural knowledge and ignorance. In some contexts, this form of communication might entail a cost–benefit analysis of the relative value. For instance, Rosenblum et al. (2020) found that the potential risks of perceptions of political incorrectness may be offset by audience judgements of the communicator’s authenticity.

Strategies of coded and multivocal communication capitalise on a range of social psychological concepts exploring the role of relatively emotionally laden knowledge in influencing human behaviour. For instance, the concept of cognitive bias can be seen to be closely linked to the human desire to protect against psychic discomfort (i.e. ego defence). Related ideas include cognitive dissonance (the stress generated by holding two contradictory beliefs); social conformity (when our beliefs are shaped by the beliefs of those around us); confirmation bias (giving more weight to evidence that supports our pre-existing beliefs), motivated reasoning (where hopes shape beliefs) and the backfire effect (where people’s beliefs become increasingly entrenched in the face of contradictory evidence). Social psychological research does not show us whether these concepts are evidence of changes in human behaviour or simply changes in the understanding of human behaviour, but McIntyre, (2018: 62) indicates some temporal specificity in describing these ideas as ‘the perfect precursor to post-truth’. While Elias would agree about the significance of knowledge that is emotionally rewarding and given meaning in a particular time and space, the distinctive position taken here is that the human capacity to think in such ways is linked to social structure and thus changes over time.

The habitus which enables people to grapple with the fluid and complex balances of content, delivery and reception represents a departure from the post-Renaissance scientisation of knowledge production through replication and testing. Moreover, the development of a ‘post-truth habitus’ can be seen as an extension of Wouters’s (1986) concept of
informalisation. Informalisation also helps us to explain why, within post-truth, we appear to be seeing the greater prominence of self-contradiction, and the relative absence of shame at the public exposure of untruths.

Wouters (1986) originally developed the theory of informalisation to help understand the ‘permissive revolution’ of the 1960s and 1970s and the apparent evidence of the greater deregulation of emotional control. In an extension of Elias’s theories, Wouters argued that the reality was more complex, with emotional de-regulation accompanied by the growing social compulsion to make emotional expressiveness appear natural, and the suppression/concealment of feelings/expressions of inferiority and superiority. Thus, the weakening of such social constraints on behaviour, Wouters argued, is accompanied by a greater degree of self-regulation: ‘Accumulating evidence suggests that emotionally people today are increasingly able to bring to the surface, and control, strange feelings and other previously more severely suppressed emotions’ (Kilminster, 2004: 37).

Similarly, through informalisation humans are increasingly enabled to commingle elements of fact and emotion in their intellectual debates. Emotion-based arguments may be instrumentally evoked to support more evidence-based arguments because the crucible of experience teaches us that this combination ‘works’ (as evidenced in the electoral success of Donald Trump in 2016 and the Brexit campaign). Concomitantly, the informalisation process enables the feelings of shame associated with the experience of being contradicted to be more routinely managed by internal consciousness rather than external social controls. Such a relaxation of feelings of shame is enabled by the ‘excess’ of truth to which we are now witness (Biesecker, 2018) – that is, ease of access means contradictory evidence is more frequently presented, which in turn is enabled by the internet and social media’s impact on the social fund of knowledge. The democratisation of knowledge, the growing apparent criticality which leads to the greater frequency and visibility of the manufacture of fact, the more routine exposure of the infringement of the social norms of speaking ‘truth’ and the broader recognition of the multiple and diverse audiences that will respond in potentially diverse ways, further contribute to reducing both the expression and expectation of shame previously associated with being empirically or factually challenged.

Conclusion

Following Fuller (2018) this article conceives of post-truth as a change in the socially prevalent styles of debate fuelled by the democratising trends of communication technology developments and changing public perceptions of (scientific) expertise. However, this article goes beyond Fuller to argue that post-truth entails an intensification in the blend of emotion and fact, of involved and detached modes of thinking. Moreover, it positions these technological developments as more fundamentally changing the use of ‘language’ (or what Elias called symbol emancipation), which, in turn, has shaped and been shaped by the changing nature of human interdependencies. In combination these have served to create a shift in human habitus characterised by the foresight to anticipate multiple audience receptions, and negotiate feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with being challenged over the validity of one’s position. Such an explanation is aligned with Elias’s desire ‘to explore, not just the social contingency of knowledge but
also the different ways in which knowledge is tied dynamically to different and differently emergent human psyches and figurations’ (Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 131, emphasis in original). Seen in this light, post-truth does not so much represent an a priori challenge to Elias’s theory of civilising processes but helps us to extend the usefulness of this paradigm by evidencing the more complex rationalities within the development of the social constraint towards greater self-restraint.

As noted in the introduction, the primary way post-truth developments have been viewed is through a prism of potential social disaster. Through a re-conceptualisation of post-truth, and analysis of the incipient social processes, an alternative depiction of contemporary developments emerges. The widespread focus on emotion relative to ‘fact’ is both an exaggeration and over-simplification, and while a focus on post-truth as the democratisation of long-standing rhetorical strategies is evident (Fuller, 2018), deeper and more significant shifts in the structure of communication, changing human interdependencies and social habitus are occurring. Specifically, we are not simply seeing a relativisation of ‘truth’ but a new blend of truth and emotion characterised by a deeper and more complex consideration of political and scientific claims than has hitherto been evident. The threats to democracy posed by right-wing populists’ dismissal of expertise undoubtedly remain (Collins et al., 2020), but post-truth is perhaps the symptom of these threats rather than the cause.

Elias’s sociology of knowledge not only provides the basis for this more adequate understanding of the post-truth phenomenon, but also helps explain why post-truth developments have met with such social concern. Certainly, one of the primary reasons is the ongoing power game (Fuller, 2018) and shifts in the relations between knowledge elites and publics. In post-truth societies knowledge producing subjects have been turned into the objects of study – the news creators have been turned into news and the work of scientists has become subject to empirical questioning. Second, Elias and Scotson (2008 [1965]) noted that while outsiders find relatively little appeal in exercising self-restraint in accordance with dominant social norms (and thus can readily embrace post-truth), the exercise of self-restraint is central to the emotional bonds and unity of established groups. Third, in The Society of Individuals Elias (2010 [1991]) noted that people often resort to nostalgic representations of past social order in time of pronounced social change (Crow and Laidlaw, 2019). Elias (2007 [1987]: 25) also suggested that ‘from the relative pacification of non-human nature stands out all the more starkly the untamed ferocity of the struggles between human groups themselves’. It is in such a context that ideological (rather than physical) tribal war is predicted, and that the ‘death of democracy’ might be feared (Biesecker, 2018). (While climate change has been the focus of much post-truth debate in recent years, the central issues are not non-human nature as such, but the impact of human behaviour on non-human nature.) For these reasons dominant social groups have responded to political and status challenge with emotional appeals highlighting the fundamentally problematic basis of emotively driven debates.

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