Is *post-truth* another word for *political spin* or a radical departure from it? Evidence from behind the scenes in UK government communications: 1997–2015

Ruth Garland, University of Hertfordshire

Abstract

The charge of political spin, as a biased and self-advantaging form of public communication practiced by media and political actors, is thought to have developed alongside 24/7 media during the 1990s. More recently, the critique of the political arts of persuasion has deepened with the more serious charge of post-truth. Here, facts are deemed as malleable and subservient to beliefs, and indeed, can be strategically deployed to serve beliefs. This article draws on data from in-depth interviews with media and political actors and the analysis of key documents to examine the charge of political spin as applied to government communications, taking the United Kingdom since 1997 as a case study. It considers whether post-truth is just another word for the same phenomenon or a radical departure from it. Both charges can be seen as outcomes of the increasing mediatization of politics whereby complex sociopolitical issues are simplified into narratives and slogans, election campaigning becomes an integral part of the everyday process of governing and political imperatives challenge the scope within government for the scrutiny of *verifiable* facts and truths. However, the stance taken by these charges in relation to evidence, and their acknowledgement of the role of accountability in public life and as part of the democratic process, are radically different. The article concludes that, far from being another word for 'political spin', 'post-truth' is a radical departure from it that signals a serious

development: the crisis in public communication characterized by a growing public distrust in government and the democratic process.

Keywords

government communications

spin

public relations

accountability

journalism

mediatization

Introduction

The charge of political spin, as a biased and self-advantaging form of public communication practiced by media and political actors, is thought to have developed alongside 24/7 media during the 1990s.[1] The widespread use of the term was fuelled by the suspicion that governments routinely exploit their dominant position as news providers by deploying instrumentalist notions of truth in the battle to survive and prevail politically (Foster 2005; Hood 2011; Yeung 2006). Such institutional change linked to media change was widely derided by media and political actors in the form of a narrative of political spin that holds that so-called spin doctors took control not only of party political communications but of government communications, thereby compromising its impartiality (Jones 2001; Franklin 2004; McNair 2007). More recently, the critique of the political arts of persuasion has deepened with the more serious charge of 'post-

truth'. Here, facts are deemed as malleable and subservient to beliefs, and indeed, can legitimately be deployed to serve beliefs.

On the face of it, 'post-truth' and 'political spin' have much in common. Both charges can be seen as outcomes of the increasing mediatization of politics whereby complex sociopolitical issues are simplified into narratives and slogans, election campaigning becomes an integral part of the everyday process of governing and political imperatives challenge the scope within government bureaucracies for the scrutiny of *verifiable* facts and truths (Strömbäck 2011; Garland 2017b). Yet on closer analysis, as I hope to demonstrate, the notion of post-truth presents a greater challenge than the idea of spin to the norms of impartial public communication. This article moves the focus from political campaigning in an electoral context, to the much larger everyday process of public communication by governments, to consider the precise role of evidence, or notions of truth, in influencing the insider practices and norms relating to the exchange of information between elite government actors and journalists.

National governments and their associated executive agencies and arms-length bodies are crucial influencers over both the tone and the content of news since they play a dominant role as a prolific source of news and as co-producers of political narratives (Cook 1998; Graber 2003). The most salient and memorable example of UK government news management after 1997 was the persuasive campaign of 2002–03 that, at least in the short term, successfully made the case for Britain's involvement in the 2003 Iraq War. The exposure of the weakness of the evidence base to the campaign resulted in lasting reputational damage not only to the Prime Minister who led the campaign, but also to public confidence in the trustworthiness of what governments say

in general (Chilcot 2016; Whiteley et al. 2016). Many media commentators came to see this campaign as a quintessential example of political spin applied too zealously to complex and nuanced forms of privileged information, but was it also an instance of post-truth politics at play? Like political spin, the more recent discourse of 'post-truth' is a loosely defined term that reflects widespread distrust in the promotional turn in public affairs, but there is an important difference. The Iraq campaign of 2002–03 placed intelligence information at the heart of its argument, even as it mis-used it. 'Post-truth' approaches combine a number of strategies to marginalize information: privileging emotion and opinion, ignoring inconsistency, dismissing factual evidence and conducting personal attacks on bodies and individuals tasked with holding politicians to account. But it is not enough to pose the charge of spin or post-truth; the processes that lie behind the narratives of spin and post-truth need to be understood. The widespread use of both terms, colloquially and in academia, fails to recognize the everyday norms and practices that operate behind the scenes, thereby obscuring rather than revealing the elite power struggles that lie behind much mediated political discourse, and making it harder to expose and challenge them.

In this article, I will argue that, like spin, post-truth is not so much an analytical concept as an exercise in name-calling and a tactic for deflecting blame. However, the two terms are not synonymous, or even variants of the same. The proliferation of the charge of post-truth since 2016 can be seen as a symptom of and arising from the breakdown between much of the media and Trump's presidency but there are continuities. Donald Trump's portrayal of himself as a media victim was foreshadowed by earlier howls of anguish from politicians on both sides of the Atlantic about their treatment at the hands of an all-powerful, adversarial and contemptuous

media (Kurtz 1998; Leveson 2012). Trump's assertion on Twitter that 'if the disgusting and corrupt media covered me honestly and didn't put false meaning into the words I say, I would be beating Hillary by 20 per cent' (Trump, 2016) is a continuation of Bill Clinton's complaint that 'the press was engaged in a "global conspiracy" to ruin his life' (Kurtz 1998: 69). Many studies of the media activities of politicians in a number of European countries show how they overestimate the ability of the mass media, especially national press and broadcast news, to determine their futures (Davis 2007; Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011; Strömbäck 2011; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). Trump's attempts to by-pass the so-called 'liberal media' are a display of confidence from a politician who believes that he can set the agenda directly rather than negotiating it with others. In contrast, the discourse of political spin is more circumspect; it describes the attempt by governing politicians to take control of the media agenda through persuasive means, and to deploy the truth for their own political ends by any means possible *short of lying*. The idea of spin undermines but does not defy the public assumption that 'official sources of information are likely to be more reliable than unofficial sources' (Yeung 2006: 54), or the obligation on governments to 'provide clear, truthful and factual information to citizens' (House of Lords 2008; Lee 2011). Its approach to truth, therefore, is qualitatively different.

I hope to demonstrate here that rather than being another word for 'political spin', 'post-truth' is a radical departure from it that signals a serious development in what has been termed the crisis in public communication characterized by a growing public distrust in what governments say and how they say it (Allen and Birch 2015; Blumler and Coleman 2010). The ideal of the well-informed citizen, facilitated by the watchdog role of the media, is traditionally seen as a prerequisite and safeguard of representative democracy, but since the 1990s political

communications scholars have argued that it is under attack through a toxic combination of politicization and mediatization (Dahlgren 2009; Hallin 2004; Kellner 2005; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Meyer and Hinchman 2002; Zaller 1999). Politicization has been defined as the dynamic process whereby public service becomes more aligned with the partisan policy preferences of elected politicians (Peters and Pierre 2004). As applied to the field of government communication it can be said to refer to the exertion of partisan influence or control over media and government institutions that privileges promotional forms of communication by undermining the public servant's capacity for 'speaking truth to power' (Wildavsky 1979, p401). I argue here that the use of post-truth rhetoric by populist politicians such as Donald Trump is an intensification of the process that delivered political spin during the 1990s, and can therefore be seen as a deeper adaption to the mediatization of politics. Yet this is more than just an adaptation. In the sense that post-truth rhetoric exploits, even celebrates, public distrust in the gatekeeping functions of the media/political establishment, it constitutes a paradigm shift.

Mediatization has been defined as the process by which media logic – that is, what the media consider to be appropriate - intrudes into other fields and institutions, influencing and ultimately replacing existing rules and norms (Esser 2013). Developing the idea further, Strömbäck and Van Aelst outlined four dimensions of mediatization, culminating in a fourth stage, where political actors incorporate news media logic into their decision-making, perceptions and behaviour (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013). Krotz and Lundby argue that society has already exceeded the fourth dimension of mediatization, and that the process continues to intensify, for example, through the further acceleration of the news cycle, and the incorporation of social media into everyday life (Lundby 2009). Rather than an accommodation or surrender to media

logic, mediatization is a wider and more far-reaching historical meta-process in which media proliferate and are institutionalized and normalized, to the extent that they increasingly contribute towards 'the social construction of everyday life, society and culture as a whole' (Krotz 2009: 24).

The site of contestation that I draw on here is the so-called *cross-field*, the insider world of national government news-making, where the fields of bureaucracy, politics and media interact to form a particular *culture of mediatization*, and where the terms of trade in the exchange of facts and opinion are negotiated (Hepp 2013; Rawolle and Lingard 2014). The term 'cross-field' was originally deployed to explain the nature of the negotiations between government media intermediaries and journalists to create and convey policy narratives relating to a particular news event (Lingard et al. 2005). In the struggle to define problems and propose solutions, Lingard and Rawolle found that 'journalists and policy agents adopted a range of strategies that produced cross-field effects' (Lingard et al. 2005: 734), such as media frenzies, modes of storytelling and a focus on swiftly circulating 'hot topics'. The intensification of the mediatization of politics and the development of the cross-field can be linked to four historical developments in political communication: the arrival of the multi-channel environment in the 1980s: the simplification of complex sociopolitical issues into narratives and slogans; the integration of electioneering into the routine process of governing (the so-called permanent campaign); and reduced scope and time within public bureaucracies for the scrutiny of verifiable facts and truths (Blumenthal 1982). The spread of digital media, especially after 2000, adds a fifth dynamic to the four discussed above. Post-truth may be seen as a realization of this dynamic, as part of the historic moment whereby political actors break free from the gatekeeping functions of the media and become independent arbiters of news. The question addressed in this article, then, is to what

extent does the challenge posed by 'post-truth' constitute not just an evolutionary change but a radical departure that signals a serious development in the relations between governments and their publics?

Background: Spinning the truth, or bypassing it?

The most visible claim in the UK government's September 2002 dossier *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction* was the highly publicized one stated by Tony Blair in the dossier's foreword, that Saddam's 'military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them' (HM Government 2002: 4). It has been convincingly demonstrated that the dossier, and this claim in particular, was 'the core component of deceptive, organized political persuasion which involved communication officials working closely with politicians and intelligence officials' (Herring and Robinson 2014: 579–80). After a six-year investigation, the 2016 Chilcot Inquiry agreed with the concerns of the Butler report twelve years earlier in concluding that the dossier had presented claims 'with a certainty that was not justified' (Butler 2004; Chilcot 2016). Further, this had led to a 'damaging legacy, including undermining trust and confidence in government statements' and making it less likely that future policy announcements would be believed (Chilcot *Executive Summary* 2016: 113). To win back credibility, concluded the report, a clear distinction had to be drawn between the political drive to argue for certain policy actions and the requirement on the part of officials to present a balance of evidence. This too has echoes of its predecessor, the 2004 Butler Review,[2] which revealed 'an irresistible pressure on ministers', leading to 'presentational biases in favour of simplicity and sensationalism over thoroughness and accuracy' (Yeung 2006: 55–56).

The public row that followed the suicide of the weapons inspector Dr David Kelly, on 17 July 2003, and the failure to discover any WMDs in Iraq, centred on the truth claims of Tony Blair. Blair has insisted that he never deliberately misled parliament or the public but he did not deny the charge of exaggeration. This was twofold: first, in strengthening the claim in his foreword to the dossier, and second, in telling parliament that Saddam 'has existing and active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons which could be activated within 45 minutes, including against his own Shia population' (Great Britain 2002). To what extent, then, was the government responsible for the media misinterpretation of the 45-minute claim, which led to headlines like '45 minutes from attack' in the London Evening Standard (Reiss 2002, p1) and 'Brits 45 mins from doom' in The Sun (Pascoe-Watson 2002, p1)? This question remains pertinent today because, as the controversy over government claims in relation to the EU referendum shows (Public Administration Select Committee, 24 January 2017), the system of internal regulation for government communications that so clearly failed in the case of the dossier of 2002 remains largely unchanged, and if anything, is less robust now than it was in 2002 (Gregory 2012; Garland 2017b).

At the heart of this discussion are the rise of promotional culture throughout society from the late 1980s onwards (Davis 2013; Miller and Dinan 2008; Wernick 1991) and the development of a form of 'aggressive political public relations' (Moloney 2001, p128) *within government*, especially after 1997. Persuasion, and the use of creative means to encourage behaviour change, had been an important tool of government communications since its origins in wartime (Grant 1999; L'Etang 2009), but 'Chinese walls' had been erected via a system of increasingly codified self-regulation after 1945, which ensured that there were checks and balances in how, when and

to whom government information was exchanged. By 1997, these were no match for the incoming Labour government's more strategic, innovative approach to news management that applied creativity to uphold the political objectives of the party in power. Rather than directly serving their *ultimate*, if distant clients, the public, the permanent officials charged with media relations were increasingly required to serve their *proximate* clients, the political leadership (Fredriksson et al. 2015; Garland et al. 2018).

This brings us to the question of creativity and its relation to truth. Public relations theorists argue that a creative approach to truth is essential to the 'added value' that is its raison d'être (Green 2010: 8). In considering the dark side of creativity, Cropley goes further to claim that promotional arts such as advertising and public relations are driven by the 'application of creativity with the conscious and deliberate intention of doing harm to others' (2010: 4), where harm is a form of misrepresentation. Such promotional discourses contrast with the more deliberative and rule-based systems that draw on ideas of accuracy, fairness and transparency to serve a notional public good. This is the source of the clash between the bureaucratic value of impartiality, or the balance of evidence, and the political drive to persuade, that was identified by Chilcot.

The case of the 45-minute claim illustrates the triumph of a creative and persuasive approach to the facts over a more sober analysis of the balance of evidence. The presentation of the claim as a form of persuasive discourse in the foreword to the dossier, in parliament and in briefing the media, can be described as a form of 'truthful spin'; that is, the intentional placing of a selective fact in the public domain that will almost certainly be misinterpreted (willfully or not).

According to Manson, such an action may serve the advantage of the client (in this case, Tony Blair, and his promise to stand by George W. Bush after 9/11), but as a consequence undermines public trust in a way that is unethical and deceitful (Manson 2010). Yet however unethical and deceitful, the routine PR practice of offering selective information to the media in the knowledge that it is incomplete and hence inaccurate, and the journalistic practice of giving visibility to such claims, while knowing them to be weak or fallible, both fall short of lying. In that sense, these practices uphold the possibility, even the desirability, of truth. This is the point at which the idea of post-truth diverges from the idea of spin, suggesting that facts are not worth striving for and there is no virtue in logic or consistency.

The idea of post-truth within politics is doubly flawed because it combines *cynicism* with *moral panic*, rather than a specific engagement with arguments that favour truth, evidence and fact-based deliberation (Lilleker 2017; Calcutt 2016). It is cynical because it assumes, first, that we have left behind a previous regime of truth, and second, that for many people truth no longer matters. Furthermore, the use of the term as a noun, as in 'post-truth politics' or 'post-truth journalism', universalizes the concept by depicting it as *the defining feature* of both modern politics and journalism. Thus, a rhetorical device that aimed to de-legitimize a populist political election campaign – that is, Donald Trump's race for the White House – is extended to apply to the entire body politic, and indeed, the public sphere that upholds it.

In the next section I consider the extent to which ideas of truth influenced the struggle for control over what was deemed fit to appear in the political domain as official UK government policy and, ultimately, as government news between 1997 and 2015.

Evidence from behind the scenes: 1997–2015

> Your main task, day in, day out, is to defend the indefensible – cuts to policing, terrible immigration decisions – while simultaneously trying to avoid the ire of the 'SpAds', the special advisors (aka spin doctors) who run the show at big government departments. Marianne Taylor, former government press officer. (Taylor 2017)

The empirical basis for the arguments presented here is a combination of elite interviews and archival and contemporary documentary analysis relating to the public communication function of UK governments between 1997 and 2015. The study on which this article is based examined the capacity of the civil service to scrutinize and verify facts and truths and to communicate with the public ethically to build and maintain trust. In-depth interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2015 with 34 key actors in government communications – sixteen former and nine serving government officials concerned with media relations, six long-serving policy journalists and three political special advisers – who had served between the 1960s and 2015. The selection process combined purposive and snowball techniques with some quota sampling to ensure access to key witnesses who had served within government departments at all levels from press officer to Director of Communication during the Thatcher to Cameron period (1979–2015). The interviews focused on changes over time in the everyday practice of government–media relations, asking how interviewees saw their role, how politicians, special advisers and press officers worked together and how all parties managed the interface between government bureaucracy, party politics and the media. This was augmented by a systematic analysis of contemporary documents and archived papers dating back to the 1980s relating to government

communications including reform plans, propriety guidance, staffing lists and reports; government and parliamentary enquiries and evidence sessions; and archived documents dating back to the 1980s that have recently become available through the 20–30-year rule.[3]

All material was subjected to thematic analysis via Nvivo. Codes were not pre-assigned but emerged inductively, resulting in a coding frame with 76 separate codes under 16 main headings. The analysis presented here is taken from interview and documentary texts that referred to the themes of *truth* and *lies*, and considers some structural obstacles to truth telling in government in three sections. The first examines obstacles to truth-telling in government communication, considering the points at which objective information and good practice may be compromised through (a) the role of partial understandings during the process of translation from one domain to another and (b) the influence of political narratives in the selection of evidence, taking the use of statistics as a case study. In the second section I consider the impact of politicians' existential fear of the media, and finally, I look at how truth values matter to journalists and their sources. It is important to note that while the stimulus for this study was the threat to public trust as a result of ongoing claims of *political spin* in government communications, the narrative of *post-truth* emerged after the data had been collected. Post-truth is therefore considered here in the light of the preceding historical change that has come to be known as mediatization.

Obstacles to truth telling in government communication

In complex policy areas the translation of policy facts into readily understandable information that can be digested by the public involves a process of simplification. This is compounded by a further reinterpretation in the light of the overall policy narrative of the government of the day.

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The officials responsible for reinterpreting government policy in the form of government announcements, or news, that is, government press officers, face two conflicting professional imperatives: their commitment as public servants to evidence-based information and their loyalty to their proximate client, the minister.

Partial understandings and losses in translation

The 2004 Butler Review into the intelligence behind the decision to go to war in Iraq reached the damning conclusions that 'more weight was placed on the intelligence than it could bear'(p114, para.466) and that available intelligence was stretched 'to (although not beyond) the outer limits' (Butler 2004, p82, para.331). The report acknowledged that hard facts were difficult to come by in the field of military intelligence, and could be misinterpreted, and that 'strenuous efforts' had been made during the production of the dossier to ensure that 'no individual statements' went beyond the judgements of the government's intelligence experts. The first error, according to the report, came in the *translation* of material from intelligence assessments into the dossier, leading to the removal of warnings about the limited evidence base of these assessments. The second error was to *translate* the material a second time, from the dossier into a media-friendly narrative, with a further loss of the appropriate caveats.

An important government witness to the production of the dossier was John Williams, a former colleague of Alastair Campbell's at *The Daily Mirror*, who became Director of Communications at the Foreign Office in 1999, and was responsible for one of the dossier's early drafts. In his evidence to Chilcot, Williams admitted that his journalistic ethos, whereby 'facts need checking and challenging vigorously, at times to the point of cussedness', did not translate into his

government communication role because he had neither the institutional nor the cultural capital to resist the will of the Prime Minister and his aides. He was aware that his employer, the Foreign Office, felt that 'the material was weak on Iraq', and was also 'instinctively against the idea of a dossier' because it 'seemed to me to rest on uncertainties'. Yet he did not resist the request to produce a document based on the intelligence that was fit for publication. He told Chilcot that 'I followed the policy laid down by the elected Prime Minister, and had no objection to it other than my own instincts, which I felt were outweighed by his' (Williams 2010, pp.3-4). He concludes that his own journalistic instincts and practices were no match for Tony Blair's political imperative and that they therefore 'failed the Iraq test'. In other words, the practice of fact checking and the verification of shared truths did not *translate* from the domain of journalism or public service into the domain of *real politick* as practiced within the governing executive.

A tendency on the part of government communicators to empathize with ministers as their proximate clients was observed among a number of interviewees. From the point of view of PR professionalism this makes sense; identification with the primary client is essential, but so are internal challenge and the responsibility on the part of PR practitioners to 'have the guts to say no to their bosses' (Cutlip 1994: 774). Many respondents understood that one of the important roles of the civil servant was to serve a wider public and considered the failure to do this as a source of frustration. Yet tribal loyalty to the department, in the person of the Secretary of State (chief departmental minister), could, in practice, act as an obstacle to a more rounded and public-focused explication of the policy arena.

This senior economist, for example, recalled a clash of storytelling that took place during his

time at the Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS):

> As a Treasury macro economist you to an extent have to parrot the government's line on the macro economy, which is not necessarily a balanced view. Treasury puts out various press releases on the macro economy (that are) […] economically illiterate. (BIS) wanted (a narrative) that was more firmly rooted in the economics and that was less weighted by a political view. There was a punch up about that which we won but the Prime Minister brushed it away and put his own narrative in (IV1).[4]

This official's approach was to consult 'externals' to find a point of challenge to what he considered to be 'economically illiterate' ministerial narratives. Since no single individual had 'the truth', he argued, 'open-ness to how other people look at things is absolutely vital'. He defined 'externals' or 'other people' as largely journalists specializing in economics, and it was not just their intelligence that mattered, but their clout as sticks with which to challenge the arguments of over-zealous ministers. Here, truth exists, and is acknowledged as important, but is multi-faceted and becomes a weapon in a battle for public opinion, or as part of the struggle to resist untruthful representations of economic realities. Public opinion remains distant and unfathomable.

The complexity and quantity of information in government was a revelation to this respondent, a former senior journalist of twenty years' standing, who moved into a position in government as a departmental communications adviser in 2008:

What you realize is the amount that journalists see is only a tiny tiny part of the work that's going on in the department […]. As a journalist you see a tiny bit of what happens. When you're in the department you see it all and at a very senior level […] so your knowledge expands enormously. (IV2).

Yet within the government department, even this broader knowledge was seen as partial by policy officials who 'were all worried about the media not understanding the policy; they would be worried about the press office maybe taking a couple of lines and not explaining the whole policy'.

From this account, and that of John Williams, it is clear that information is an entirely different proposition within the two domains of government and journalism. It is almost inevitable, even with goodwill and a regard for the facts on both sides, that misinterpretation and simplification will take place when the two domains exchange information. Yet however flawed, this system rests on a common truth value: that facts exist, whether misinterpreted or not, and that persuasion must ultimately be backed up by facts.

Political narratives in the selection of evidence: Statistics as a political weapon

Institutional moves to prevent the selective use of facts to achieve (usually short term) political gain rest on the understanding that credibility depends on objectivity. This has been most obvious in the more regulated domain of government statistics. The UK Statistics Authority was set up in 2008 under statute as an independent body reporting directly to Parliament to promote and safeguard 'the production and publication of official statistics that "serve the public good"' (Treasury Select Committee, 2005; UK Statistics Authority 2017). This was recognition on the part of the incoming Brown administration that, in part due to the controversy Blair faced over

the 2002 Iraq dossier, the public would only accept statistics if they were removed from the direct influence of government departments. In 2004, for example, a survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that only 14% of the public believed that the government used official statistics honestly (Briscoe 2005). More recently, a report conducted by NatCen on behalf of the UK Statistics Authority found that although 90% of people trusted the ONS to produce accurate statistics, only 26% said that the Government would present these accurately (Simpson et al., 2015, p1).

Howell James, the first Permanent Secretary for Government Communications (2004–08), told MPs in 2006 that in his experience ministers' sensitivity to the media led post-1997 governments to overreact.

> For me it constituted at the time a tendency to announce and re-announce initiatives. It was a tendency to rebut too vigorously and too quickly without recourse to the full facts, and it was an attitude that encouraged an inflation of language around policies and around what Government were doing. (Public Administration Select Committee 2006)

Similarly, in its examination of government communications in 2008, the House of Lords noted evidence from Lord Phillis criticizing the use of government statistics as 'a political weapon' that was too frequently used to 'reinforce a political point'. This practice had 'contributed to the atmosphere of mutual suspicion between the government and the national media' (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications 2008, para.22, n.pag).

Since its foundation, the UK Statistics Authority has regularly published critiques of government uses of statistics, especially in government news statements. In 2013, for example, the authority concluded that a statement by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that 8000 people affected by the 'benefits cap' had moved into jobs, and that the cap was therefore having the desired impact, was unsupported by official statistics published by the same department earlier in the year (Dilnot 2014). More recent adjudications have included judgements against 'misleading communication' in a government tweet about the benefits of grammar schools; 'overstated' Treasury claims of the household costs of leaving the EU (both 2016); and lack of clarity over claims that the government was meeting its targets for the building of new homes (2017). All these claims were politically expedient and specifically intended to defend controversial government policy against public and media criticism. However, it is important to acknowledge that the UK Statistics Authority was set up by democratically elected politicians who universally accepted its judgements, however uncomfortable. Under a 'post-truth' paradigm, any specialist body that draws conclusions from a review of evidence, such as the UK Statistics Authority, or indeed, a parliamentary select committee, would be unnecessary. According to such a paradigm, evidence or specialist expertise is irrelevant if there is no objective truth in politics, and judgements as to the veracity of political claims should be left to personal opinion or gut feeling.

Truth, journalism and storytelling

Even the most popular of elected politicians express a deep-rooted fear of the power of the media to overturn their reputations with the public. In his portrait of Clinton's White House, Howard Kurtz recalled the President's paranoia about the press (1998). Similarly, as he prepared to leave government in 2007, Tony Blair described the media as being 'like a feral beast, just tearing

people and reputations to bits' (Blair, 2007). Even more vividly, in his evidence to the Leveson Inquiry (2012), in common with statements to Leveson from many other leading British politicians, Blair depicted the behaviour of the media as 'an abuse of power'. He told Leveson that journalists were 'all out against you' and would engage in 'long and sustained […] full on, full frontal, day in day out […] relentless and unremitting […] attack' that can 'literally wash a government away' (Blair, 2012, pp.31, 33). Yet, however infused with fear and loathing, such statements do not deny the media their editorial freedom or the right to ask questions. In the post-truth paradigm, as practiced by Donald Trump, the power of the Presidency is explicitly pitched against the rights of the media to challenge, question and criticize.

Government officials interviewed for this study acknowledged that the ministers they worked with were overwhelmingly preoccupied, even terrified, of career-ending media exposure. As this former Strategy Director (1998–2010) explains: 'I don't know any minister, certainly not any minister that wanted to be around for any length of time that would not want to be all over the way that their messages would be handled in the press' (IV3). A former Director of Communication (1991–2011) recalled the particular intensity of the relationship between ministers and their media handlers (IV4). Senior members of the media team 'see ministers every single day, all day. They spend weekends with them. They are the last person they speak to; they are the first person they speak to in the morning'. It was not just the constant contact but the priority accorded to the media on the part of ministers. The senior economist quoted earlier observed that, 'ministers are in fear of public exposure all the time. That's why they take media very seriously' (IV1). The point here is not just that media advisers are influential within government, and within politics, but that mediatized narratives are so internalized within the governing process that they form a constitutive part of policy decision-making by ministers

(Garland et al. 2018; Dean 2012; Silverman 2012). Given such preoccupations on the part of governing politicians, it should not come as a surprise that once direct forms of communication became available through social media channels, the most determined would seek to exploit such methods as a way of developing an unmediated public voice. This, again, can be seen as evolutionary. What is radical, however, is the post-truth stance that holds that there is no need for checks and balances or due process, and that news can be what you want or choose it to be.

The truth according to journalists

Government press officers frequently recalled the pressures of media scrutiny, which although often deeply uncomfortable, are an accepted part of the democratic process. Margaret Thatcher's Chief Press Secretary, Bernard Ingham, for example, conducted more than 3000 Number 10 press briefings during his eleven years in post, but although these included many bruising encounters, he concluded that:

> I find it very difficult to suggest that the media make things up. I think they stretch things; they reach heroic conclusions on the basis of the flimsiest evidence which would have Sherlock Holmes lost in admiration until he saw the results; but, in the end, they do not make it up. (Public Administration Select Committee 2003, Q3)

Bill Bush, special adviser to the Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowell (2001–05), agreed that outright invention by journalists was rare but felt that this was almost beside the point. He often dealt with stories that were 'so overwrought and de-contextualized that it's as good as a lie'. What mattered to journalists was a story, albeit based on truth that could entertain. In the competitive

world of networked media: 'what they care about is impact, they care about bums on seats, eyeballs attracted' (IV5). However, he acknowledged that, however overwrought, it was essential to journalists that these stories contained 'a kernel of truth'.

The journalists interviewed claimed that it was vital that government spokespeople could be trusted to tell the truth. In his 31 years as a policy journalist for the *Times, Independent* and the *FT*, Nick Timmins stated that he had never been lied to by a government press officer. He understood that he might be presented with half-truths, delaying tactics or selective interpretations of the facts, but if any of his other government sources had been found to be cavalier with the facts, or to lie, he would have suspended communication with them (IV6). Within the 'dynamic process of contestation' (Schlesinger 1990: 69) that characterizes the relationship between journalists and government sources lies a shared assumption that truth exists and should be aspired to as an ideal. Perhaps as an indication of their more adversarial relationships with journalists, special advisers were more likely than press officers to describe journalists negatively, for example as 'a pack of wolves' (IV7) that 'don't care about the truth very much' (IV5). One journalist went off the record to claim that he had experienced one special adviser who he knew had lied to him, and had, as a result, refused to talk to him again. It is clear among all three parties – journalists, press officers and special advisers – that truth is part of the currency of credibility, and is seen as essential to good public communication.

Discussion and conclusion

The common practice in public relations and journalism of offering selective information to the media in the knowledge that it is incomplete, in the expectation that the media will give visibility

to such claims, while knowing them to be weak or fallible, both fall short of lying. In this sense, such practices, which are collectively referred to as 'spin', uphold the possibility, even the desirability, of truth. Ethical and professional norms and codes among PR practitioners, journalists, politicians and civil servants all agree on the need to scrutinize and verify facts and truths before statements are placed in the public domain. Despite widespread concerns that journalists and government sources 'collude' in providing a selective and biased form of news that advantages both parties but offers a disservice to the public, this study found no evidence that either journalists or sources are guilty of lying.

Like 'spin', 'post-truth' is a form of discourse that refers to widespread perceptions of a decline in standards in public communication. Neither is an analytical or a descriptive term, but rather a form of name-calling in which blame is ascribed to 'the other': journalists blame political spin-doctors, politicians blame the media and the public despair of both (Ipsos MORI 2016). The main obstacles to truth-telling in government that are explored in this article, and the structural biases in the understanding of truth according to journalists, can be seen as 'symptom(s) of broader structural problems' (Moore 2017: 9) engendered by the response of liberal democracies to the challenges of 24/7 media. To use the conceptual framework deployed here, spin and post-truth are both symptoms of the 'culture of mediatization' that has developed over recent decades in the cross-field between media, politics and the central governing bureaucracy. What is not new is the fact that different standards of truth operate across different domains and that political systems require different forms of communication within and between these domains. To regulate this, systems of propriety and mutually understood 'good practice' were put in place in 1945 both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Garland 2017a; Moore 2006).

In recent decades, such systems of self-regulation have become subject to new pressures and may no longer work effectively under current conditions. The ethical response is not to ignore such systems but to strengthen them by opening them up to democratic scrutiny and accountability. The idea, or trope, of 'post-truth' makes no attempt to accommodate evidence-based truth or verifiable truth-claims to the new, more demanding media environment, but seeks to bypass them entirely. In the sense that a post-truth interpretation of politics does not accept the ideals, principles or even the possibility of good and trustworthy public communication, it should therefore be seen as a radical departure from the idea of political spin.

[Insert Appendix 1 about here]

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Contributor details

Ruth Garland is a lecturer in media in the School of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire, UK.

Contact:

School of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, Hertfordshire AL10 9AB, UK.

E-mail: r.garland@herts.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8184-9289.

Appendix 1: Interviewees cited

Interviewee	Date of interview	Length of service (Years)
IV1: Senior Economist	13/2/2015	14
IV2: Strategic communications adviser	10/9/2014	2
IV3: Strategy Director	3/12/2013	12

IV4: Director of Communication	6/8/2014	20
IV5: Bill Bush, Special Adviser	26/6/2015	6
IV6: Nick Timmins, Journalist	14/4/2014	31
IV7: Katie Wareing, Special Adviser	15/07/2015	3

Notes

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[1] It is not clear when the use of the term 'political spin' began but according to one account, the first use of the term 'spin doctor' has been traced to the *New York Times* in 1984, in an article about the aftermath of the televised debate between the US presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. See www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries'query/0.5753,-1124.00.htm.

[2] The panel included Chilcot, then a senior civil servant.

[3] For a full list of documentary and archival sources see (Garland 2017a: 82–83).

[4] See Appendix 1 for a list of interviewees cited in this chapter.