

**4**

**Alternative Facts and Fake News:  
Cultural Studies' Illegitimate Brainchildren**

*Silke Järvenpää*



## 4.1 Introduction

Among the oddities of Donald Trump's first weeks in office, the inauguration stands out. The spectator turnout was respectable, but the event attracted less of a crowd than it did in 2009, when Barack Obama was sworn in. Not only media critical of Trump delivered the images; but the photos highlighted the lack of Trump's popularity. The U.S. National Park Service replicated the 2009 perspective when they took a picture of the inauguration literally from a bird's eye's (that is an aerial) view. Newspapers then juxtaposed it with the visual testimony from 2017<sup>1</sup>. Anyone less than supportive of Trump would be able to gloat over the stark contrast<sup>2</sup>. The two photos side by side went viral on the net.

The Trump administration reacted promptly. Trump himself declared that from his point of view, the size of the crowd looked like “a million, million and a half people”, the “biggest audience in the history of inaugural speeches”<sup>3</sup>. Which it may have – and so his impression is, due to his naturally restricted point of view, fair enough. Yet Trump did not let the issue

---

<sup>1</sup> Here are the photos that show Obama's inauguration crowd was bigger than Trump's. Washington Post. 7 March, 2017. Available online: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2017/03/06/here-are-the-photos-that-show-obamas-inauguration-crowd-was-bigger-than-trumps/?utm\\_term=.2e2e5c4a28e7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2017/03/06/here-are-the-photos-that-show-obamas-inauguration-crowd-was-bigger-than-trumps/?utm_term=.2e2e5c4a28e7). Photos: National Park Service; Betsy Klein. Comparing Donald Trump and Barack Obama's inaugural crowd sizes, in: CNN, 21 January, 2017 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/donald-trumpbarack-obama-inaugurationcrowd-size/index.html>) (accessed 26.2.2018).

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the comments sections below articles in the printing press, the inauguration's crowd size became a staple feature of comedians, from Stephen Colbert to the cast of Saturday Night Live in late January, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Trump. President Trump's speech at the CIA Headquarters, 21 January, 2017. Available online: White House Government (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/>), full transcript also available online: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-cia-speech-transcript/> (accessed 26.2.2018).

rest. His press secretary had to issue a statement in which he tries to align the public's with Trump's perception.

*[...] Inaccurate numbers involving crowd size were also tweeted. No one had numbers, because the National Park Service, which controls the National Mall, does not put any out. [...]. This was the largest audience that ever witnessed an inauguration – period – both in person and around the globe. Even the New York Times printed a photograph... er... photograph, showing that a... a misrepresentation showing the crowd in the original tweet in their paper which showed the full extent of support [...]*<sup>4</sup>.

The press was puzzled, because the contradictions within the press statement were so obvious. Consequently, they interviewed Trump's advisor Kellyanne Conway. In NBC's Meet the Press, Chuck Todd demands to know, why the "President asked the White House Secretary to come out in front of the podium for the first time and utter a falsehood". Conway's answer has become legend:

*You are saying it's a falsehood; [...] our Press Secretary Sean Spicer gave alternative facts to that [...]*<sup>5</sup>.

The term "alternative facts" was born (which, incidentally, was awarded un-word of the year 2017 in Germany).

Lying politicians, and lying administrators, as well as lying journalists are not new phenomena. Citizens around the world have also had to put up with a wide range of excuses and prevarications by public officials in the media when the latter are confronted with their own lies. What continues to startle the public with this administration, however, is the shamelessness of Trump and his staff, as well as the self-righteous indignation when challenged by the press, even when challenged with factual evidence.

---

<sup>4</sup> Spicer: Inauguration had largest audience ever, in: CNN, 21 January, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKzHXelQi\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKzHXelQi_A) (accessed 26.2.2018).

<sup>5</sup> Conway: Press Secretary Gave 'Alternative Facts'. Meet the Press with Chuck Todd, in: NBC, 21 January, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643> (accessed 26.2.2018).

I am arguing that alternative facts (as well as fake news) are a new trend for which two developments mostly are responsible: The digital age, of course, but maybe even more so an academia where the most radical postmodernist dogmas, embedded in cultural studies, have made it into the mainstream outside the academy. And this goes particularly for the USA.

## 4.2 Discussion

My first claim – that ideas like alternative facts and fake news come into being and thrive in the age of the internet – may be more immediately apparent. With social media, discourse in the Foucauldian sense has become both over-regulated and completely unregulated – overregulated, because, as any member of a special interest Facebook group knows, administrators will ban those who do not subscribe to the cause of the group, even in non-political groups. Pro-eating disorder and pro-suicide communities shall serve as an example here: Made up of members who celebrate their illness and encourage each other to stay that way, the groups do not allow doubts about this self-destructive mission<sup>6</sup>. Members or visitors who break the taboo and write “what is prohibited” (again in the Foucauldian sense)<sup>7</sup> are excluded from the discourse. “What is prohibited” is then very narrowly proscribed.

On the other hand, the fact that such groups legally exist, and we are not even talking about sites on the Dark Net, shows that the traditional order

---

<sup>6</sup> see, for instance, Stephanie Tierney, *The Dangers and Draw of Online Communication: Pro-Anorexia Websites and their Implications for Users, Practitioners, and Researchers*, in: *Eating Disorders* 14/3, 2006, p. 181–190. Available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10640260600638865>; and David D. Luxton, Jennifer D. June, and Jonathan M. Fairall, *Social Media and Suicide: A Public Health Perspective*, in: *American Journal of Public Health* 102/2, 2012, p. 195–200. DOI: 10.2105 (accessed 26.2.2018).

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*, in: Michael J. Shapiro (ed.), *Language and Politics*, Oxford 1984, p. 108–38.

of discourse is no longer in place. Here (mental) illness, traditionally not in a position of discourse hegemony<sup>8</sup>, finds open channels to assert its power of “expertise” and “truth” (i.e. that staying ill or ending one’s life is a sign of strength), and thus to rule over its own definition of normalcy. Group members are able to avoid critical questioning and live in what scholars call an echo-chamber. The algorithms of social media corporations take care of the rest: Based on the browsing history and the *Likes* awarded, the machine will steer the user to click on like-minded sites – this has come to be known as a filter bubble. The erosion of the three exclusions that used to participate in the regulation of the discourse also holds for forums of the political, religious, or sexual fringes. This is one reason why sites like the right-wing extremist *Breitbart News*, the masculinist *Return of the Kings*, and the anti-science *Vaccine Resistance Movement* thrive.

One could argue that neither Trump’s comments, nor Spicer’s statement, nor Conway’s defense were online activities. However, it looks like the unlimited opportunity to publish, find thousands of followers, and make critics invisible so that any narrative stays unchallenged are increasingly being taken for granted. This may also explain the irritation of new-media savvy Trump, as well as his staff when journalists question them. There is indignation at not being to control the discourse. On the web by the way, the echo-chamber still worked as usual. Parts of the internet community were willing to believe that Conway was a victim of manipulative and “fake journalists” and brave enough to tackle this “fake” journalism that is critical of Donald Trump<sup>9</sup>.

One cannot entirely blame them. There is no news story without bias, as countless studies have demonstrated. Journalists have at times been less

---

<sup>8</sup> Foucault (see footnote 7), p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> see, for instance, the FAZ collection of Die Mutter aller alternativen Fakten, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 25 January, 2017. Available online: <http://blogs.faz.net/deus/2017/01/25/die-mutter-aller-alternativen-fakten-4090/> (accessed 26.2.2018).

than ethical<sup>10</sup>. And in the digital age, even amateurs can photoshop images and ‘rip’ interviews.

But what might have surprised the public is that Spicer and Conway did not dismiss the aerial photograph as fake. It was apparent for everyone that the image depicted fewer people at Trump’s inauguration. Moreover, fact checking has become routine. Yet, Conway defends Spicer’s press statement which claimed Trump’s crowd had been bigger, and then coins the term “alternative facts.” She does not seem to be perturbed by the journalists’ reactions. Chuck Todd, on NBC starts reasoning with her, and loses the argument; CNN’s anchor-man Anderson Cooper bursts out laughing with Conway patiently waiting and declaring that she is “bigger than that”<sup>11</sup>.

Here Trump’s staff are not safely inside their echo chamber. But they appear to have the dogmas of critical theory and cultural studies on their side. After all, Jean Francois Lyotard called for “incredulity towards metanarratives”<sup>12</sup>, such as “truth” and “objectivity”. What scholars in the Humanities are starting to realise is that within the past decades

*Cultural anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and gender studies, for example, have succumbed almost entirely not only to moral relativity but epistemic relativity*<sup>13</sup>.

Cultural Studies of course is a discipline known for its liberalism and position on the political left. When John Stuart Hall, the last director of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, New York 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson Cooper Can't Stop Laughing At Kellyanne Conway. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNp7bAKpsvw> (accessed 26.2.2018).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis/USA, 1984, reprint 1997, p. xxiv.

<sup>13</sup> Helen Pluckrose, How French intellectuals have ruined the West, in: *areo*, 27 March, 2017. Available online: <https://areomagazine.com/2017/03/27/how-french-intellectuals-ruined-the-west-postmodernism-and-its-impact-explained/> (accessed 26.2.2018).

Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham stated that meaning “does not inhere in things. It is constructed, produced”<sup>14</sup>, he meant that scholars should look at discourse and power relations in culture. Hall demanded that the signifying practices of, for instance, minorities be no longer ignored; that the marginalised be taken seriously in the assertion of their identities etc. Therefore, their narratives should be declared as equally valid as those dominating the discourse. In the USA, culture was likewise seen as containing “a number of perpetually competing stories, whose effectiveness depends not so much on an appeal to an independent standard of judgement, as upon their appeal to the communities in which they circulate”<sup>15</sup>.

I am not saying that Conway and Spicer are on intimate footing with the theories of cultural studies, although Steve Bannon (who also was in Trump’s team) probably is. But nowhere else but in the US do the media – from the commentators of the *New York Times* to Hollywood to comedians on National TV – juggle so competently with terms like ‘narrative’, ‘myth’, ‘framing’, ‘to negotiate meaning’, and the ideas behind them. It also appears to have become commonplace to start debate from constructivism, often radical constructivism. Cultural Studies has long left the academy and settled comfortably in popular culture, a point to which I will return shortly. In order to understand why facts can have alternatives, one needs to look to the academic scene again.

There, critical theory became even more radical. In 1991, the renowned journal *Critical Inquiry* dedicated an entire volume to the topic of constructivism in letters and science and began to question the absoluteness and universality of such ideas as “fact”, “evidence”, and “proof”<sup>16</sup>. Ian McEw-

---

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Work of Representation*, in: Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London 1997, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Pluckrose (see footnote 13).

<sup>16</sup> *Critical Inquiry* 1991, 18/1, available online: [https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/past\\_issues/issue/autumn\\_1991\\_v18\\_n1/](https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/past_issues/issue/autumn_1991_v18_n1/) (accessed 26.2.2018).



an satirized the deplorable development in his novel *Solar*. In one chapter a feminist professor of Science Studies argues that genes are “no objective entities” but “entirely manufactured by (the scientists’) hypotheses, their creativity, and by their instrumentation... Outside those networks [the gene] did not exist”. Genetics itself is dismissed as “crude objectivism by which [men] seek to maintain and advance the social dominance of the white male elite”<sup>17</sup>. Of course, *Solar* is fiction, and the parts read like satire on the excesses in academia. What is somewhat disconcerting, however, is that McEwan did not exaggerate. From Shay Akil McLean, blogger and PhD candidates in postcolonial studies to postmodern philosophers like Laurie Calhoun, research is trying to deconstruct exact science and expose it as oppressive ideology. McLean is sure that:

*“[T]o think there are universal truths,” [...], “perpetuates a particular kind of able bodied white cisgender male logic, a world where everything is measured in comparison to them as the ideal type of human that everyone else aberrates from”*<sup>18</sup>.

Calhoun goes a step further. She redefines the building blocks of scientific methodology as a contemporary form of magical thinking. A colleague recalls a discussion:

*When I had occasion to ask her whether or not it was a fact that giraffes are taller than ants, she replied that it was not a fact, but rather an article of religious faith in our culture*<sup>19</sup>.

Politically, the two scholars quoted above are firmly located on the liberal left. Laurie Calhoun, for instance, is known for her research in Peace Studies where she challenges the idea of a “just war”<sup>20</sup>. It is not hard to see,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ian McEwan, *Solar*, London 2011, p. 183–4.

<sup>18</sup> Shay Akil McLean, *Decolonize all the science*, 2 March, 2017. Available online: <https://decolonizeallthescience.com/2017/03/02/> (accessed 26.2.2018).

<sup>19</sup> cited from Pluckrose (see footnote 13).

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Friberg, *Metapolitics from the Right*, in: *The Real Right returns*, n.p., 2015, p. 17–25. His understanding of *Metapolitics from the Right* is also available on various right-wing websites, such as <http://sigurfreyr.is/innrasin-evropu-daniel-friberg/> – in other words Friberg has become a household name for the New Right and Identitarian movements.

however, why authoritarians and right wing populists are usurping the toolkit of such postmodernist thought. Constructivism becomes a weapon, served on a silver platter by the liberal left. The New Right, or alt-Right in the US – large parts of which are backing Trump – is discovering Cultural Studies and calling it ‘Metapolitics from the Right’. Quoting Marx, Gramsci and Foucault, they are finding that the war for domination is “about affecting and shaping people’s thoughts, worldviews, and the very concepts which they use to make sense of and define the world around them”<sup>21</sup>. What comes in especially handy is the erosion of rational discourse. If reality becomes **so** arbitrary that facts, evidence and logic should be discarded because they are merely political and ideological, then it follows that there are “alternative facts”. Sensory perception has lost any value in argument. It, too, has become an article of ideology. Seeing a larger crowd at Trump’s inauguration and negating one’s cognitive dissonance, when faced with visual evidence, turns into a sign of loyalty to Trump. Arguing on the basis of alternative facts and following the (right) fake news will naturally lead to very different “concepts which people use to make sense of the world around them” (to quote Friberg again), inside and outside the digital echo-chambers.

What distinguishes today’s and yesterday’s use of lies and fake news, however, is less apparent. We know dictatorships that have successfully brainwashed their populations. Hitler’s and Stalin’s propaganda ministries stand out. History was rewritten, un-persons retouched out of photographs.

Orwell satirized even the idea of reality as a construction of the Party in his novel *1984*; so that idea must have been around in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century:

*“Reality is inside the skull. [...] There is nothing that we could not do. Invisibility, levitation — anything. I could float off this floor like a soap bubble if I wish to. I do not wish to, because the Party does not wish it. You must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of Nature. We make the laws of Nature”*<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>21</sup> Friberg (cf. footnote 20), p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, London 2013, p. 153.

Oceania's 1984 and the world of 2017 with its "alternative facts" both share epistemological idealism in the broadest sense. However, America in 2017 is actually more absurd than Orwell's world, or the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian regimes. With the internet available to all, and users themselves playing Big Brother, the dissemination of information is not controlled by any Inner Party. Users turn into pseudo-experts in all areas, doubting real expertise – ultimately this serves to delegitimize authorities and the realities they have created. As recent studies have found, people with strong opinions tend not to be swayed by facts and evidence, but instead cling to their misconceptions (the anti-vaccination movement is a case in point here) and embrace alternative facts all the more willingly<sup>23</sup>. Critical theory which has seeped into popular culture in a vulgarized version again serves as ammunition.

Excesses in the cultural studies have indeed undermined the power of rational argument as such. If there is nothing but conflicting narratives that battle for discourse hegemony, if the irrational is as valid as the rational, if there is nothing more important than identity and the politics of identity, then each group can make use of this moral as well as epistemological relativity. In that respect, alternative news and fake news are brainchildren of cultural studies.

But ultimately, I will still call alternative facts and fake news illegitimate brainchildren. It would be naïve to go back to universalism, mono-perspectives and closed systems of thought in the Humanities. Cultural Studies has brought about valuable findings: the realisation that Enlightenment values have a dark side to them; that seemingly objective discourses are biased and disenfranchising communities, and that downplaying difference will hinder progress. Postcolonial cultures and women have profited immensely – with very material consequences. Feminist critique, for in-

---

<sup>23</sup> Sandra Gorman, Jack Gorman, *Denying to the Grave. Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us*, Oxford 2016.

stance, gave rise to a new way of looking at medicine, both from a doctor's and from a researcher's perspectives, with more appropriate drugs and treatment for female patients. Postcolonial thought effected a positive change in development cooperation. And as Cultural Studies is part and parcel of neighbouring disciplines, such as Media Studies, its postulates, rhetorics, and theories have successfully spread to the general public through pop-culture again. There is a certain cross-fertilisation between cultural studies and popular culture.

### 4.3 Conclusion

I do not doubt that cultural studies will continue to yield valuable results. But it is at a crossroads. Its benefit lies in its eclecticism – the fact that it was rooted firmly in the Humanities where it refused to submit to any one ideology. The danger with the more radical protagonists of Cultural Studies is their tendency to leave the Humanities and to create ideology with orthodoxies governing. Often, the idea of radical constructivism was distorted in the first place. Whereas constructivists concede that constructs of reality cannot be arbitrary, because they are rooted in experience of the physical world and therefore based on viability<sup>24</sup>, scholars on the fringe of critical theory made a mockery of themselves by composing or passing papers for publication that questioned the laws of nature<sup>25</sup>. The meaningful study of cultures also accepted certain tried and tested methods of hermeneutics. When logic or the act of reasoning are questioned, Cultural Studies has subverted itself, because it will become faith-based. It will cater to esoterics (political or religious) and provide them with the justification for alternative facts and fake news.

---

<sup>24</sup> Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Kognitive Autonomie und soziale Orientierung*, Frankfurt 1996, p. 12–13.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Sokal, *Beyond the Hoax. Science, Philosophy, and Culture*, Oxford 2009.