

The Post-Truth Double Helix: Reflexivity and Mistrust in Local Politics

TIMOTHY A. GIBSON
George Mason University, USA

Post-truth politics—the term has achieved buzzword status, arguably with good reason. After all, the Trump presidential campaign was built on a foundation of demonstrably false statements and unproven allegations of conspiracy. However, the concept of post-truth politics currently lacks a firm conceptual foundation. This article, therefore, defines and explicates the concept of post-truth politics, drawing primarily on the work of Jodi Dean, Marc Andrejevic, and Anthony Giddens. With this refined definition, I apply the concept to examine a recent political debate over a proposed streetcar line in Arlington, Virginia. A brief conclusion discusses the political and ethical implications of the Arlington streetcar case and explores prospects for future conceptual development.

Keywords: post-truth politics, political rhetoric, conspiracy theory, reflexivity, misinformation, postmodernism

Nestled across the Potomac River from Washington, DC, Arlington, Virginia, is an affluent suburb with a political culture that tilts strongly liberal-progressive. As part of this political heritage, Arlington's leaders long ago embraced the principles of "smart growth" planning, with generations of leaders supporting the development of dense, mixed-use, transit-oriented corridors as a means of fighting sprawl and promoting sustainable urban living. For years, the Arlington consensus on sustainable and transit-oriented urban planning has run deep.

So it came to many as a shock when, during a town hall meeting on a proposed streetcar line, one Democratic county board member, Jay Fissette, accused his Democratic colleague, Libby Garvey, of behaving like a right-wing climate skeptic. Garvey had just publicly raised doubts about the validity of county government studies that supported the streetcar project. This challenge to the county staff's expertise clearly upset Fissette, who remarked:

And, just to the last comment, I know we hear a lot, there are a lot of ways to say "there are a lot of studies." And there are a lot of people that don't believe in climate change, too . . . because "there are scientists that say any number of things." But we do rely, at some level, on our professional staff. And our professional staff do that research, and I've never seen a group more committed to this project than anything else they do. (Arlington Independent Media, 2013)

Timothy Gibson: tgibson1@gmu.edu
Date submitted: 2017-06-27

Copyright © 2018 (Timothy Gibson). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

This tense exchange highlighted the central role that struggles over legitimate expertise played in this debate over the Arlington streetcar proposal. But it also suggests something more. This article argues that the Arlington streetcar debate reveals the depth to which post-truth politics has penetrated U.S. political culture, all the way down to the nation's most intimate and local debates.

Post-truth politics—the term has achieved buzzword status and, in fact, was named Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year in November 2016. It is not hard to understand why. After all, the path to a Trump presidency was forged out of a series of racist slanders, demonstrably false statements, and unproven conspiracy theories: Barack Obama was born in Kenya. Immigrants are criminals and rapists. Climate change is a hoax. Mexico will pay for the wall. The falsehoods, exaggerations, and demagoguery flow like water from a firehose. They stun and bewilder. Worse, they distract and immobilize—which, of course, is precisely the point.

Clearly, questions of truth, error, trust, and expertise are back on the political agenda—if indeed they ever left (Giddens, 1990). However, as it stands, the concept of post-truth politics confuses as much as it enlightens. Without precise explication, the concept eventually will become decontextualized and appropriated for use as a crude and all-purpose cudgel to pummel one's opponents. In short, the term *post-truth politics* will meet the terrible fate suffered by the related and now worthless term *fake news* (M. Sullivan, 2017).

To prevent this fate, we need better definitions and better conceptual development. However, the definitions of post-truth politics currently circulating among journalists and academics have not yet grappled with fundamental questions about the ontology of post-truth politics (What is it? Is it an "era" or a "discourse"?) and its relation to past histories of political misinformation (Corner, 2017). Moreover, the discussion of post-truth politics has focused almost exclusively on national elections and especially the Trump presidency—a myopic focus that obscures how deeply post-truth politics has penetrated U.S. public life.

This article, therefore, attempts to explicate the concept of post-truth politics, drawing primarily on the work of Andrejevic (2013) and Dean (2010), who in turn have built on the political theories of Slavoj Žižek. The article explores the following questions:

RQ1: What is post-truth politics? What rhetorical strategies count as post-truth politics?

RQ2: What conceptual ambiguities are raised by contemporary uses of this term, and how might these ambiguities be addressed or resolved?

RQ3: What are the implications of post-truth politics for left-progressive social movements?

We will discover that, following Andrejevic (2013), Dean (2010), and Giddens (1990), the specific rhetorical strategies clustered around the term *post-truth politics* derive their efficacy from the intertwining of two discursive threads or strands. The first strand is an endless, untethered reflexivity—that is, an endless loop of claiming, questioning, and critiquing that never quite yields consensus (a condition that predates the rise of digital networking but that, as discussed later, has been noticeably amplified by its arrival). The second strand is a fundamental loss of faith in institutions that anchor and lend weight to some truth claims over others—a phenomenon that Žižek (1999) has termed the "demise of symbolic efficiency." These two strands—endless

reflexivity and a loss of faith in institutions—together form the DNA of post-truth politics, mutually reinforcing each other in a double-helix dynamic as they produce the conditions necessary for the specific rhetorical strategies of post-truth politics to find purchase (Dyer-Witthford, 1999).¹

The next section offers an elaboration of this double-helix model of post-truth politics. The article then applies this model of post-truth politics to analyze the Arlington streetcar debate, with a particular focus on the rhetorical performances of streetcar opponents during a town hall meeting in March 2013. A concluding section explores avenues for future conceptual development as well as the political-ethical implications of post-truth politics, particularly for progressive-left social movements.

The Post-Truth Double Helix: Reflexivity and the Demise of Symbolic Efficiency

The term *post-truth politics* may seem urgent and contemporary, but it actually has been with us for decades. Beginning in 1992, early uses of the term described the emergence of a post-truth culture of permissiveness and narcissism, where individuals either wrap themselves in comforting lies or employ casual forms of deception to achieve their individual goals (Keyes, 2004; Tesich, 1992). A few years later, other writers began using the term to refer to the ongoing deterioration of professional journalism, with a particular focus on the inability of journalists to hold political actors accountable for their deceptions (Alterman, 2004; Krugman, 2011). Post-truth politics, for these writers, was what happened when professional journalism failed.

Following the Brexit and Trump campaigns in the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively, the term has quickly become central to contemporary political discourse, appearing regularly in both popular commentary and scholarly research. Contemporary uses of the *post-truth* adjective seem curiously split in two. Some writers, for instance, take a narrow approach and use *post-truth* as a modifier to describe specific rhetorical strategies that trade heavily in deception, misinformation, and emotion (Griffin, 2017; Levinson, 2017). Fish (2016) offers perhaps the most concise definition among these writers, defining post-truth politics as:

a willingness to issue warnings regardless of whether there is any real sense of the events being likely to come about, or make promises that there is no real commitment to keeping, or make claims that there is no real reason to believe are true, all for the purpose of gaining an electoral advantage. (p. 211)

For this first group of writers, then, the problem of post-truth politics stems mainly from unethical actors who pollute the public sphere with misinformation and emotional appeals. Framed in this way, *post-truth politics* becomes a close cousin to a much older and arguably much less fashionable term, *propaganda*. Not surprisingly, the solutions these scholars offer to the problem of post-truth politics would be familiar to most early 20th-century propaganda scholars: public education campaigns designed to inoculate citizens against the virus of misinformation (Griffin, 2017; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014; Levinson, 2017).

¹ The metaphor of a double helix is inspired directly by Dyer-Witthford (1999) and his discussion of autonomous Marxism, especially the work of Mario Tronti.

Other writers use the term much more expansively to signal a broader shift toward a new political-epistemological landscape—an environment where it becomes increasingly difficult for all citizens to separate truth from error, thus enabling the most predatory and deceptive forms of political persuasion. For these writers, post-truth politics refers to the emergence of a new “era” (D’Ancona, 2017) or “world” or “informational landscape” (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017)—one that, as Corner (2017) wryly notes, is presumed to be distinct from a previous “era of Truth’ we apparently once enjoyed” (p. 1100). Different scholars emphasize different causes for the emergence of this new post-truth era, but typical suspects include digital media platforms (chiefly Twitter and Facebook) that debase rational discourse and circulate fraudulent stories (Ball, 2017; Ott, 2017); the related development of segmented information markets, which both intensify political tribalism and shield citizens from disconfirming evidence (Harsin, 2015); and a more general decay in the status of scientific expertise in the face of an emergent and pervasive epistemological relativism (D’Ancona, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

To be sure, this broad-stroke division of recent scholarship into two groups is somewhat simplified. But even this schematic review suggests that three important questions need sorting out. The first is definitional and focused on concept explication: What is post-truth politics anyway? Is it a set of strategies or an epoch or era? The second is historical: To what extent, if at all, is post-truth politics new? Are there clear continuities with past histories of political misinformation and propaganda, or are we, perhaps due to the development of a digital media ecology, now operating in a substantially new political and epistemological terrain? And a final question focuses on scale: How pervasive is post-truth politics? Given that much of the literature focuses on national and international politics, to what extent can post-truth politics be found in other domains of political life, at other institutional scales?

A full treatment of these questions is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, this article represents a modest attempt to explore some of these questions and to advance, however incrementally, a process of theoretical explication and clarification. As Corner (2017) recommends, a useful first step toward this goal would be to offer a model of post-truth politics that neither treats the current conjuncture as a discontinuous “break” from the past nor fails to recognize that there is indeed something troubling about the wide circulation and seeming efficacy of falsehoods and conspiracy theories in the current moment. To this end, I begin with the following definition: *Post-truth politics refers to the specific political and rhetorical strategies that emerge from, and take advantage of, the circular relationship between the endless reflexivity of late modernity and a loss of faith in institutions that anchor truth claims, a dynamic amplified (but not created) by an emergent and participatory digital media ecology.* As explained later, this definition grounds post-truth politics in two strands of modern public discourse (reflexivity and loss of faith) that predate the current digital media ecology (see also Aupers, 2012), even as the definition also recognizes that the affordances of digital media technologies reinforce and amplify both of these discursive strands.

An understanding of post-truth politics thus begins with the concept of reflexivity. For Giddens (1990), reflexivity refers to a fundamental feature of modernity, in which “social practices are constantly examined and reformed in light of incoming information about those very practices” (p. 38). During the Enlightenment, reflexivity—the constant reevaluation of beliefs and practices through the application of reason—seemed to offer more solid ground for truth claims than tradition or superstition. But as Giddens notes, it later became clear that wholesale reflexivity inevitably undermines certainties almost as soon as

they are produced. With modern reflexivity, in short, everything is always already up for discussion, and we can never be completely certain that any given element of current knowledge will not later be revised (Giddens, 1990). The best we can hope for is the ability to judge probabilities—that X is more probable than Y, under our current state of knowledge (to be revised later). This realization can be profoundly unsettling.

In response to this condition of generalized uncertainty, social authorities have developed strategies for building public trust in institutions and in the application of expert knowledge. Giddens (1990) refers to this as “re-embedding”—a term that points to how faith in institutional knowledge is shored up at key access points between laypersons and disembedded institutions and systems of expertise. The professional demeanor of the doctor, the calm cheerfulness of the flight crew, the authoritative voice of the TV news anchor—these forms of institutional facework attempt to project a sense of certainty and authority under conditions of reflexivity and rapid social change (Giddens, 1990). Yet, at best, these attempts at re-embedding and building trust in institutions are always incomplete, and the uncertainties produced by the endless reflexivity of modernity can never be fully sutured. For these reasons, Giddens (1990) writes, trust is always partial, with respect for experts, technical knowledge, and institutions inevitably mixed with varying amounts of skepticism or fear.

For Dean (2010), the arrival of wholesale, endless reflexivity—and the challenge it poses to authorities attempting to cultivate trust in experts and institutions—is closely connected to what philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls the “demise of symbolic efficiency.” For Žižek, symbolic efficiency refers to the ability of institutional authority (what he calls, vividly, the Big Other) to pronounce what is true and false, and to have this assertion “stick” in the public sphere (Myers, 2003). The demise of symbolic efficiency therefore describes a crisis of faith in institutional authority and a resulting diminishment in the ability of authorities to halt the endless stream of reflexive questioning and thus win recognition for institutional truth claims.

According to Žižek (1999), the demise of symbolic efficiency has many causes, including especially the post-Enlightenment realization that human life is wholly in human hands, that “there is no ‘Other of the Other’ pulling the strings” (as cited in Dean, 2010, p. 10). The public’s tenuous faith in institutions is thus “grounded in the very fact that today’s society is thoroughly ‘reflexive,’ that there is no Nature or Tradition providing a firm foundation on which one can rely” (as cited in Myers, 2003, p. 49). This loss of foundation then sets the discursive conditions necessary for the proliferation of popular mistrust. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we have peered behind the curtain and discovered that the Big Other is just a bunch of fallible humans, no different, really, than the rest of us.

Building on Žižek, Dean (2010) and Andrejevic (2013) further suggest that several features of the digital media environment have accelerated the ongoing demise of symbolic efficiency. First, Andrejevic (2013), following Turkle (1997), notes how participatory media tools cultivate “savvy” users whose newfound experience as message producers raises their awareness about the constructed nature of representation, thus rendering them more skeptical of the messages of others. In addition, Dean (2010) argues that the sheer volume of online discourse undermines not just the efficacy of any single claim “but the possibility of knowledge and credibility as such” (p. 103). The briefest foray online (e.g., a search for “health effects of aspartame”) quickly reveals that there is always another study, always another argument, always another fact (or “alternative fact”) to be found. As Andrejevic (2013) concludes, “it is the broad

sweep of this information landscape that helps make any particular point isolated from it appear purely partial or perspectival, arbitrarily closed off from an ever-more complex combination of myriad alternative narratives and perspectives" (p. 14). And if at first blush this democratization of skepticism and critique seems empowering, Dean argues that it comes at a high cost. As the ability to falsify becomes unlimited, we face an incapacity to know anything at all (Dean, 2010, p. 111).

This, then, is the fertile ground upon which post-truth politics can grow. The endless and destabilizing reflexivity of modernity, accelerated (but certainly not created) by digital networking, has become locked in a tight, mutually reinforcing embrace with the demise of symbolic efficiency and a loss of faith in institutional authorities, a crisis of faith that, again, predates the digital media ecology but that nonetheless is amplified by it. Together, this double helix (reflexivity and loss of faith) generates the cultural and discursive conditions where the truth claims of authorities ("aspartame is safe") are viewed as immediately suspect and subject to being overwhelmed by a flurry of counterclaims circulating rapidly in a complex, participatory communication ecology (Dean, 2010).

The specific strategies of post-truth politics thus emerge from, and take advantage of, this double helix of reflexivity and the demise of symbolic efficiency. These strategies include, as discussed below, (1) the proliferation of narratives, (2) the politicization of expertise, and (3) the cultivation of conspiracy. To demonstrate not only how these strategies leverage reflexivity and mistrust for persuasive ends but also the depths to which post-truth politics has been absorbed into the body politic, the next sections explore each of these post-truth strategies in the context of the Arlington streetcar debate.

The heart of this exploration is a qualitative textual analysis of the streetcar town hall forum held by the Arlington County Board on March 27, 2013. Coming at a key moment in the debate, just months into a county board election campaign widely viewed as a referendum on the project, this forum featured presentations from county board members and staff, followed immediately by a contentious audience question period. Using a theory-driven coding process, and with the working definition of post-truth politics in mind, I scanned the transcript for moments when discrete arguments were voiced. I labeled these moments with codes, including especially analytic codes derived from Andrejevic (2013) and Dean (2010). The codes were then sorted and combined into themes via a process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014). The themes that emerged from this coding process were then placed into the larger political, economic, and discursive context of the streetcar debate, drawing on a large data archive I collected over two years, including press reports, news blog comments, and interviews with key debate participants. The results of this analysis are presented below.

The Arlington Streetcar Debate

The Arlington streetcar proposal was presented in 2002 as a wholly unremarkable extension of the county board's long-term commitment to transit-oriented development. In a nutshell, transit-oriented planning attempts to funnel new commercial and residential development into corridors served by robust mass transit infrastructure, with the larger goal of getting residents out of their cars and into more walkable and eco-friendly urban environments. Previous generations of county planners had applied this philosophy to good effect in the upscale neighborhoods of North Arlington, which are now served by a subway line. The

Arlington streetcar was an attempt to do the same in the more working- and middle-class neighborhoods of South Arlington, along the Columbia Pike corridor. Although this corridor was already served by a popular bus route, Arlington planners argued that a streetcar line would be not only better equipped to handle anticipated growth in transit demand but also more likely than bus service to attract future commercial and residential investment (Arlington County Government, 2012).

With these advantages of the proposed streetcar system, county officials were confident that residents would largely unite behind the project. After all, this was solidly Democratic Arlington. Voters had not rejected a transportation bond measure in over 30 years. And for a decade, it seemed that the streetcar would arrive virtually unopposed. Between 2002 and 2012, the streetcar proposal worked its way through Arlington's approval process—clearing multiple hurdles at public meetings and design charrettes, and winning no fewer than two unanimous votes of support from the county board.

But this appearance of consensus was illusory. Although not registered by media coverage from *The Washington Post* or local television news until late 2012, interviews with debate participants revealed that opposition to the streetcar had been percolating online for at least the previous year in spaces such as Twitter (#ArlingtonStreetcar), electronic mailing lists such as "22204" (the zip code for South Arlington), and in the comment fields of local news blogs such as ARLnow.com. A key turning point in the visibility of opponents came in November 2012, with the election of Garvey, a streetcar opponent, to the county board. It was this event that raised the media standing of opponents, inaugurating a new, more contested phase of news coverage. Then, just two months after Garvey's election, opponents formally organized under the banner of Arlingtonians for Sensible Transit (AST), an anti-streetcar citizens' group (Pyzyk, 2013).

The streetcar town hall in March 2013 thus came at the moment when streetcar opponents, who had been steadily finding one another in multiple spaces (both online and off-line) over the previous year, had just coalesced into a more focused and organized social movement, fronted by Garvey and AST. In this way, the life history of the streetcar debate reveals the wisdom of scholars who argue that analytic distinctions between the off-line world and the online world increasingly make little sense, particularly in politics, as arguments, images, and narratives circulate rapidly throughout deeply intertwined interpersonal, digital, and legacy media networks (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Indeed, the arguments voiced by opponents during the March 2013 town hall had circulated previously on electronic mailing lists and blog comment fields, just as the events of the in-person town hall were quickly used as fodder for subsequent online debates and discussions.

With this background established, I turn to the streetcar town hall meeting and the political rhetoric of streetcar opponents, applying the double-helix model of post-truth politics as an interpretive lens. What emerges is that opponents—many of whom were longtime Democratic activists with impeccable progressive credentials—adopted three distinct post-truth strategies in their effort to derail the streetcar proposal: (1) the proliferation of narratives, (2) the politicization of expertise, and (3) the cultivation of conspiracy.

The Borrowed Kettle Comes to Arlington

The first post-truth strategy to appear in the streetcar debate—and one that took direct advantage of late modern reflexivity—was what Andrejevic (2013) terms “the proliferation of narratives.” Andrejevic situates this proliferation in the context of an important shift in how social power is established and maintained in contemporary politics. As Andrejevic writes, in the past, when media channels were fewer in number, social power was largely exercised through the *control* of information, and social authorities used that control to produce and circulate dominant narratives that legitimated the interests of the powerful. But in recent years, with an exponential multiplication of information sources, this ability to defend the integrity of dominant narratives against competing alternatives has declined significantly. Instead, in the current environment, social power is exercised as much through the *proliferation* of claims as through the defense of singular, dominant mythologies (Andrejevic, 2013). Social control, in short, is maintained by creating a “fog of narratives” that impedes sense making and immobilizes the will to act.

Zizek (2004), drawing on Freud, refers to this tactic of narrative multiplication as the “borrowed kettle.” As Andrejevic (2013) describes:

The term refers to the multiplication of contradictory narratives reputing apparent facts: confronted with the fact that a borrowed kettle was returned with a hole in it, the person accused of breaking it responds with several mutually contradictory excuses: “there was already a hole when I borrowed it; the hole wasn’t there when I returned it; I didn’t even borrow the kettle.” (p. 6)

Zizek (2004) applies this borrowed kettle concept to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the revelation that weapons of mass destruction (the professed reason for the invasion) were nowhere to be found. The multiplication of arguments and claims was indeed stunning: there were weapons of mass destruction; they were destroyed during the invasion; they were smuggled out of the country; the Russians stole them, and so on. Ultimately, Bush administration officials threw up their hands, pointing to the discursive fog that they themselves had created: “given the uncertainty, we’ll never know for sure” (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 7). In such an environment, critique is quickly overwhelmed—a lone white blood cell vainly trying to latch on to a rapidly mutating and endlessly reproducing virus.

A key feature of this strategy of narrative multiplication lies in its ability to undermine certainty. We see this with particular clarity in the right’s response to climate science (Dunlap & McCright, 2011). The discourse of climate denial offers not a single narrative but rather an endless proliferation of shifting positions: climate change is not happening; it’s happening but is not caused by humans; it’s happening but will be good for us; if it is happening, it is too costly to do anything about it; the scientists are cooking the books, anyway; ad nauseam (Andrejevic, 2013). All evidence-based claims are thus drowned in a sea of proliferating counterclaims and accusations of conspiracy.

Ultimately, the goal is not to present a coherent critique or an alternate view of reality but to simply generate doubt (Oreskes & Conway, 2011). It is a brilliant strategy. After all, to preserve the status quo, all one needs to do is to confuse and immobilize the will to act. By undermining the very basis for political

mobilization around a shared and evidence-based view of reality, “strategies of debunkery and information proliferation can work to reinforce, rather than threaten, relations of power and control” (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 11).

In the streetcar town hall, a key feature of opponents’ political rhetoric from the beginning was the proliferation of narratives. Garvey, at that time the lone streetcar opponent on the county board, made the following claims in just over one hour:

- The county’s community involvement process suppressed dissenting voices.
- The county never produced a cost-benefit analysis comparing the streetcar with other transit alternatives.
- The expense of the streetcar will divert funding from affordable housing.
- Money is fungible, so spending dedicated transit funds on the streetcar will still hurt public schools.
- Bus rapid transit (BRT) is a better alternative and will save money.
- The disruption of streetcar construction will harm small businesses.
- The streetcar will get stuck behind broken-down cars.
- The county staff’s Federal Transit Administration (FTA) study may not be rigorous.
- County staff are concealing hard data from the public.
- BRT vehicles are attractive, just like streetcars.
- Streetcars will make you stand up. Buses allow you to sit down.
- The streetcar system in Portland is losing ridership and blowing up the city budget.
- County staff constructed a biased survey of residents in order to inflate public support.
- The facts are hard to determine. Some studies support BRT; others support the streetcar.
- The staff producing pro-streetcar studies are just following orders.
- Other jurisdictions agree that BRT is better than the streetcar.

To be sure, Garvey had a difficult task to accomplish at this event. With the other four board members in support, and with county planners answering questions as well, Garvey was forced to present her arguments in rapid bursts, often after others had spoken. Even with these constraints, she was able to cover a remarkable range of critiques. Many focused on the cost of the proposal, a cost she argued threatened other priorities such as affordable housing and schools. But other claims proliferated as well: streetcars will get stuck; streetcars will require people to stand instead of sit; construction will harm small businesses; county studies are untrustworthy; and so on. This rapid-fire proliferation of claims clearly stymied streetcar supporters throughout the event. Although pro-streetcar board members attempted to respond to some of these claims, they let many other claims slide by uncontested.

I discuss the significance of Garvey’s comments on the pro-streetcar bias of county planners below, but here I highlight how one of her arguments—the superior benefits of a bus rapid transit system on Columbia Pike—also served to multiply narratives in this debate, much to the dismay of streetcar supporters.

According to the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (2017), a bus rapid transit system is a “high-quality bus-based transit system that delivers fast, comfortable, and cost-effective services at metro-level capacities. It does this through the provision of dedicated lanes . . . off-board fare collection, and fast and frequent operations” (para. 1). For the ITDP, a dedicated lane is a “vital” part of any full BRT system. Without a dedicated lane, the best that planners can hope for is “BRT-lite” status, and even this depends on all the other elements (off-board fare collection, signal prioritization, etc.) being present (Cain, Flynn, McCourt, & Reyes, 2009). In short, without dedicated lanes, the *R* in BRT becomes very tenuous. Establishing two dedicated lanes on Columbia Pike was impossible, so essentially the two options on the pike have always been either a streetcar system (mixed with auto traffic) or an enhanced bus system (larger buses, also mixed with auto traffic). At best, using the most generous definition possible, such an upgraded bus system could be referred to as BRT-lite. For county planners, however, it was simply the “enhanced bus alternative.”

As a county board member, Garvey undoubtedly knew that a full BRT system was not feasible. In fact, county staff underlined exactly this point at the beginning of the forum. And indeed, according to interviews with opponents, the decision to use “bus rapid transit” as the opponents’ go-to label for the enhanced bus alternative was controversial even among opponents, with at least one founding AST member arguing it was inaccurate and misleading (personal communication, June 23, 2016).² Nevertheless, for Garvey and most other opponents, BRT became the loyal opposition to the streetcar, most likely because it connoted an improved and more rapid transit system without the cost of a streetcar—this despite the fact that a full BRT system could never be built.

Ultimately, the use of the BRT symbol—as opposed to the terms *enhanced bus* or even *BRT-lite*—functioned again to proliferate narratives at yet another level of discourse.³ It suggested that Arlington residents were not simply facing a choice between the status quo (with larger buses) and a more ambitious alternative (the streetcar); rather, they were facing a wide range of choices. Residents could choose the status quo bus system, or perhaps “modern buses” (an ill-defined term Garvey used repeatedly), or even perhaps a new BRT system that would, as Garvey promised, “do it for a whole lot less.” In this proliferation of alternatives, the ground shifts and a once-stable distinction (bus/streetcar) suddenly seems much less clear.

The Postmodern Right and the Politicization of Expertise

In addition to the proliferation of narratives, Andrejevic (2013) discusses the politicization of expertise—a second rhetorical strategy that draws on the other strand of the post-truth double helix: a loss

² Name withheld to preserve confidentiality.

³ In interviews, some streetcar opponents argued that using the term *BRT* was not misleading, since AST’s proposal for enhancing bus service included some of the elements found in full-service BRT systems. But for county staff, streetcar supporters, and indeed at least one member of AST, these elements were insufficient to qualify such a system for full BRT status.

of faith in institutions and the demise of symbolic efficiency. For Andrejevic, there is a great irony at work in the current moment, in which all forms of expertise are easily politicized. If, during the high period of postmodern philosophy (Lyotard, 1984), the main challenge to notions of objectivity and neutrality in science emerged from a left-infllected criticism of corporate and state power, Andrejevic (2013) argues that postmodern deconstruction has now been wholly claimed by the right. And at the heart of this appropriation is the reduction of "all evidence-based claims to a matter of politics" and the dethroning of capital-S Science as merely one mode of discourse among many (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 9). For the postmodern right, then, science is, in a clever retooling of Foucault, merely a form of power-knowledge without a privileged claim to truth (Andrejevic, 2013).

Again, the attack on climate science provided an early test of right-wing postmodernism. Climate change deniers from the beginning have attacked scientists as committed leftists hiding their "big government" agendas behind the cloak of disinterested science. Denialists' slogans such as "green is the new red" and invented scandals such as Climate-gate together promote the impression of climate science as inherently politicized and thus inherently suspect. As Oreskes and Conway (2011) write, in this discourse of the postmodern right, "science, even mainstream science, was just politics by other means. Therefore if you disagreed with it politically, you could dismiss it as political" (quoted in Andrejevic, 2013, p. 9).

Ultimately, as Dean (2010) argues, the incessant politicization of scientific claims and the constant undermining of expertise undercuts the possibility of sustained critique leading to social reform. If we come to view all experts as inherently bought and sold, we also lose faith in shared knowledge and the possibility of common understandings of reality. Again, as the ability to falsify becomes unlimited, knowledge itself recedes into the distance (Dean, 2010, p. 111). We are then left with uncertainty, doubt, and an inevitable default back to either inaction or endless, soul-destroying debate.

In the town hall, we see this politicization of expertise most directly in Garvey's comments about county staff. Throughout the planning process, staff were asked to produce multiple studies to assess the performance of current bus service, to project future transit demand, and to compare the costs and benefits of the proposed streetcar line to the enhanced bus alternative. And throughout the town hall, Garvey sought to undermine these studies and, by extension, the expertise of county staff. For example, when an audience member asked county staff whether any research supported the streetcar proposal, staff leader Stephen Del Giudice cited "the FTA study," a study submitted to the Federal Transit Administration that featured a side-by-side comparison with enhanced bus service. He described the study as "a rigorous comparison" that "met [the] FTA's requirements, and it was approved by them." In reply, Garvey said, "and the FTA study, I would just like to say, I invite people to look at it. I don't know about it being rigorous. I think we could question that."

Later in the event, Del Giudice cited a survey of residents around Columbia Pike that found that transit ridership would likely increase by 20% if the mode switched from buses to streetcars. In short, the survey found that there were significant numbers of people on the pike who did not currently take the bus, but would indeed consider using a streetcar. Again, in response, Garvey sought to undermine the expertise of county staff:

Surveys are very tricky things . . . think about it, if somebody asks you, do you want to ride a beautiful, spiffy streetcar—it's a neat thing—or do you want to ride a bus? . . . [Y]ou need to put out, as I say, the modern buses. This was not presented. If you look at the pictures, I can't believe somebody wouldn't ride something like that. . . . *And for the statistics that are cited, it's really whose facts are which* [emphasis added]. There are studies that show that growth has happened better with BRT, or just as well with BRT [as] with streetcar. There are studies that have shown that streetcars have done better. There are good BRT systems, bad BRT systems, good streetcar [*sic*]. The question is, we really need to do a good analysis, a fair comparison. And is it worth . . . the extra expense? (Arlington Independent Media, 2013)

There are many claims in the above statement, but the key rhetorical move here boils down to, first, the assertion of an inability to access the truth (despite the final claim about the need for a "good analysis"). Surveys are "tricky things," after all, and some studies show X and others show Y. Second, there is an argument that asserts official truth claims are partial and politically motivated, where the "answer" is cooked into the research from the beginning (e.g., "this was not presented"). Ultimately, then, citizens can only throw up their hands in the swirl of competing claims from politicized experts and go with their gut—*is it worth the extra expense?*

When Fisetta, a pro-streetcar board member, challenged Garvey's statements about county staff (in the quote at the top of this article), Garvey moved to repair the damage at the end of the town hall. But she did so in a way that further politicized staff expertise.

I thank all of you for coming. I know there are supporters on both sides, and I really appreciate, I hope I've planted seeds of doubt in the minds of some of you, because there are facts on both sides, and actually I think more facts for BRT. *But we haven't been able to see them. And I don't blame staff at all. They're following direction* [emphasis added]. But this is the time to make a decision. (Arlington Independent Media, 2013)

The charge of "following direction" is never specified, but it is enough to imply that the staff were directed to produce pro-streetcar data by a county board that was hell-bent on building a streetcar. And simply leveling the charge is enough. Even if countered, the purpose—stated explicitly—is accomplished: planting enough "seeds of doubt" to immobilize support.

Conspiracy Theory on Columbia Pike

The last post-truth rhetorical strategy—the cultivation of conspiracy theory—also emerges in response to the demise of symbolic efficiency, defined as the atrophied ability of authorities to make their truth claims stick. As Žižek argues, the death of the Big Other (that is, faith in institutional authority) can lead in multiple directions. Some put their faith in "little others," the gurus and self-help celebrities who promise their followers small islands of certainty and peace (Myers, 2003). Others, however, turn instead to conspiracy, positing that behind the seeming chaos and uncertainty of everyday life lies a Really Big Other

(or what Žizek calls, following Lacan, the Other of the Other in the Real)—that is, an all-controlling figure or shadowy cabal pulling all the strings in pursuit of nefarious goals, hidden from view (Myers, 2003).

It is for this reason, as Žizek argues, that contemporary politics is rife with claims of conspiracy, such as anti-Obama “birthers,” 9/11 “truthers,” and anti-pharma “anti-vaxxers.” For Žizek, these toxic assertions of conspiracy are at heart a desperate response to the terror of being adrift and unmoored. Building conspiracies is a way, at least at the level of affect, to reconstruct order, to find the “true purpose” behind the distressing clutter of claims and counterclaims (Andrejevic, 2013; Aupers, 2012; Myers, 2003).

This politics of conspiracy, typically discussed at the national level, has come to inform even the most quotidian local politics as well. Throughout the Arlington streetcar debate, for example, opponents claimed that the county board was doing the bidding of property developers along the pike, who were accused of working behind the scenes to manipulate the process (P. Sullivan, 2013). As it happens, supporters had their own conspiracy theories focused on the whispered links between streetcar opponents and bus companies that supposedly wanted to kill the streetcar (personal communication, February 6, 2016).

But perhaps the most significant conspiracy claim during the debate focused on county board member Chris Zimmerman, the board’s most vocal streetcar supporter. A longtime board member, Zimmerman devoted himself to learning the minutiae of transportation policy, becoming in the process a fierce advocate for smart growth planning. As a smart growth expert, Zimmerman was hired by AECOM, an engineering firm specializing in transportation research and planning, to fly to Ottawa, Canada, for one day in 2012 to consult on one of its (non-Arlington) projects. He was paid \$510 (“Zimmerman,” 2013).

Although not required to do so by law, Zimmerman disclosed this trip and his \$510 fee to the county upon his return (P. Sullivan, 2012). In the months after, in both county board meetings and in the comment fields of local news blogs, opponents of the streetcar seized on this disclosure as evidence of Zimmerman’s coziness with AECOM and the overall corruption of the project.

The following facts were true: AECOM had previously been hired by the county to produce the “alternatives analysis,” which compared the streetcar proposal to the enhanced bus alternative. AECOM’s analysis had recommended the streetcar. The county then awarded AECOM another \$1 million contract for additional streetcar planning work (Vincent, 2013). And Zimmerman was paid \$510 from a different division of AECOM to offer his advice for one day in Ottawa.

The implication, of course, is obvious: AECOM and the county board are in bed together, and all of them are cooking the books to build the streetcar. In exchange for producing a biased alternatives analysis, AECOM gets the Arlington contract, and Zimmerman gets to build his beloved streetcar along with a cool \$510 for his trouble (Vincent, 2013). And of course none of it needs to be proved. The links do not need to be established. By alleging this conspiracy, opponents offer certainty at one level (“So *that’s* why they want a streetcar”) while undermining it at another (“Wait, who is in bed with whom?”). The conspiracy claim thus accomplishes its work—muddying the waters, providing reason for pause, casting doubt and suspicion—simply by being voiced. It does not need to do anything else.

In hindsight, with the full flowering of these three post-truth strategies, the beginning of the end for the streetcar came at this town hall forum. In fact, a single moment stands out as suggesting that the streetcar was in serious trouble. This was when an Arlington resident—and not an AST activist, as far as I could gather—stood up and asked, “I’m sorry but I have to ask, how is it not an ethics violation for a member of this board to be employed by a company that has financially benefited from this project?” The discourse of conspiracy and the accompanying seeds of doubt had found their purchase.

Even so, it took about one more year for the Arlington streetcar proposal to die. Zimmerman stepped down not long after the town hall forum to take a position at Smart Growth America, a national advocacy group. He was replaced in a special election by John Vihstadt, a former leader of AST and committed streetcar opponent. Once Vihstadt won his seat again in the general election in November 2014, the remaining board members saw the writing on the wall and scrapped the project for good (P. Sullivan & Olivo, 2014). The Arlington streetcar was officially dead.

Conclusion

What does the death of the Arlington streetcar suggest about the future development of the post-truth politics concept? This article began by noting that current discussions of post-truth politics suffer from important ambiguities that can be summarized in three basic questions: What is post-truth politics (concept explication)? To what extent is post-truth politics new or connected to the emergence of a digital media ecology (historical context)? And how pervasive is post-truth politics (scale/register)?

This article explores these questions to open new and more productive avenues of inquiry into post-truth political strategies. With regard to the first question (concept explication), the article provides a firmer conceptual foundation for discussions of post-truth politics. In particular, drawing on Giddens (1990), Andrejevic (2013), and Dean (2010), I argue that post-truth politics refers to the specific political and rhetorical strategies that emerge from, and take advantage of, the circular relationship between the endless reflexivity of late modernity and a loss of faith in institutions that anchor truth claims—a dynamic that is amplified (but not created) by an emergent and participatory digital media ecology. In Arlington, three of these post-truth rhetorical strategies were in action: the proliferation of narratives, the politicization of expertise, and the cultivation of conspiracy theories. Each of these strategies emerges from, and exacerbates, the conditions of uncertainty generated by the post-truth double helix—in other words, by the mutually reinforcing relationship between late modern reflexivity and the demise of symbolic efficiency. And streetcar opponents used each of these strategies to sow seeds of doubt and undermine the will to act.

Given this article’s focus on Garvey’s performance at the streetcar town hall, the examination of the second question on the historical context of post-truth politics and the role of digital networking in circulating post-truth political rhetoric has remained more exploratory in nature. Yet the case does suggest that future research might focus on how post-truth rhetorical strategies (e.g., the borrowed kettle) circulate fluidly through intertwined interpersonal, digital, and legacy media networks, as they clearly did during the streetcar debate. More broadly, however, the double-helix model also suggests a particular way of conceptualizing the relationship between post-truth political strategies and digital media networks—one that

is historically grounded and that refuses to make decontextualized claims about our arrival in a so-called new epoch of post-truth.

In particular, as noted above, the double-helix model begins with the premise that reflexivity and uncertainties around expert knowledge not only predate the Internet but, following Giddens (1990), are in fact constitutive features of modern life (see also Aupers, 2012). Therefore, rather than positing an epistemic break between a previous era of truth and a new era of post-truth, the double-helix model suggests focusing instead on the specific social, technological, and discursive conditions that either amplify and accelerate the double helix of reflexivity and mistrust or slow it down and disrupt it. In short, depending on the historically contingent configuration of social, technological, and discursive conditions, authorities will have a greater or lesser capacity to anchor truth claims against the entropic forces of untethered reflexivity and popular mistrust.

So if scholars like Andrejevic (2013) and Dean (2010) have focused attention on the role of digital networking technologies in amplifying late modern reflexivity and undermining the symbolic capital of experts and authorities, others have pointed to nontechnological conditions. For example, MacLean (2017) closely examines emergent relationships between the conservative/libertarian donor class (e.g., Charles Koch Foundation) and American public universities—a relationship that threatens the independence of university research and surely does little to dispel the narrative that all experts, including university professors, are on the take.

In addition, the model presented here offers a way to conceptualize ongoing research in science communication and cognitive psychology that explores how best to interrupt the post-truth double helix (reflexivity and loss of faith) by either bolstering the public prestige and persuasive skill of experts or increasing the informational literacy of the public (Kotcher, Myers, Vraga, Stenhouse, & Maibach, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Overall, then, it is my hope that the more precise conceptualization of post-truth politics offered here can inform future research not only on the social, technological, and discursive factors that amplify the double helix of reflexivity and mistrust but also on the specific conditions and interventions that might interrupt this dynamic and provide more secure footing for authoritative truth claims.

Finally, what of the pervasiveness of post-truth rhetoric? The Arlington streetcar case suggests that post-truth rhetorical strategies have seeped deeply into the U.S. political sphere. It is instructive to note that the chief antagonists in this town hall—Fisette, Zimmerman, and Garvey—are all Democrats who would consider themselves progressive liberals. Yet to block what she viewed as a flawed, wrongheaded, and prohibitively expensive proposal, Garvey drew deeply from the rhetorical well of post-truth politics. These strategies should therefore not be viewed as tied to a particular political party (i.e., the GOP), but rather as a particular genre of political rhetoric that takes advantage of the uncertainties engendered by late modern reflexivity and the demise of symbolic efficiency.

At the same time, it is nonetheless clear that post-truth political strategies have a particular resonance with conservative politics. As Andrejevic (2013) notes, post-truth strategies proliferate reflexive questioning, disrupt the authority of experts, and resist efforts at fact-checking and falsification. As such,

these strategies excel at muddying the political waters, sowing confusion, and immobilizing political will. They thus serve as powerful arrows in the quiver of anyone attempting to block collective action aimed at significant social change.

The strong homology between post-truth rhetoric and conservative politics thus raises a series of uncomfortable questions for progressive-left political activism. After all, politicizing credentialed experts and questioning their true motives have long been cornerstones of progressive-left activism—consider, for instance, the urbanist Jane Jacobs’s legendary battle to prevent Robert Moses from building a highway through Greenwich Village (Gratz, 2011). Asserting that distant experts should listen to the wisdom of local residents and not be allowed to run roughshod over their interests is central not only to progressive urban planning but to progressive-left politics more broadly. And to be sure, the left should never abandon its commitment to wide-ranging, participatory democracy. Yet the Arlington case (not to mention the experience of the 2016 presidential election) makes clear that post-truth politics is especially suited to those who wish to block collective action and prevent significant social change. But what if citizens want to build a better future through collective action? What if citizens want to build more equitable communities or a carbon-free future? In this case, the post-truth politics of uncertainty and mistrust has nothing whatsoever to offer. Indeed, if politics descends into a fog of endless reflexivity, mistrust, and conspiracy theory, what, then, are the hopes for progress of any kind? In such an environment, all that is left is the status quo. An immobilized public. Stuck in place.

References

- Alterman, E. (2004). *When presidents lie: A history of official deception and its consequences*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Andrejevic, M. (2013). *Infoglut*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Arlington County Government. (2012). *Columbia Pike Transit Initiative: Locally preferred alternative report*. Retrieved from <http://projects.arlingtonva.us/plansstudies/transportation/columbia-pike-transit-initiative/>
- Arlington Independent Media. (2013, April 4). *Arlington community: Streetcar town hall meeting* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbPoE1Ucp5Q>
- Aupers, S. (2012). "Trust no one": Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture. *European Journal of Communication*, 27, 22–34. doi:10.1177/0267323111433566
- Ball, J. (2017). *Post-truth: How bullshit conquered the world*. London, UK: Biteback.
- Cain, A., Flynn, J., McCourt, M., & Reyes, T. (2009). *Quantifying the importance of image and perception to bus rapid transit*. Tampa, FL: National Bus Rapid Transit Institute, Center for Urban Transportation Research.

- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Corner, J. (2017). Fake news, post-truth, and media-political change. *Media, Culture and Society, 39*, 1100–1107. doi:10.1177/0163443717726743
- D’Ancona, M. (2017). *Post truth: The new war on truth and how to fight back*. London, UK: Ebury.
- Dean, J. (2010). *Blog theory*. London, UK: Polity Press.
- Dunlap, R. E., & McCright, A. M. (2011). Organized climate change denial. In J. Dryzek, R. Norgaard, & D. Schlosberg (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of climate change and society* (pp. 144–160). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Dyer-Witheford, N. (1999). *Cyber-Marx*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Fish, W. (2016). “Post-truth” politics and illusory democracy. *Psychotherapy and Politics International, 14*(3), 211–213. doi:10.1002/ppi.1387
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gratz, R. B. (2011). *The battle for Gotham: New York in the shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs*. New York, NY: Nation Books.
- Griffin, R.A. (2017). The “morning/mourning” after: When becoming president trumps being a sexual predator. *Women’s Studies in Communication, 40*(2), 140–144. doi:10.1080/07491409.2017.1302259
- Harsin, J. (2015). Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies. *Communication, Culture, and Critique, 8*, 327–333. doi:10.1111/cccr.12097
- Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. (2017). *What is BRT?* Retrieved from <https://www.itdp.org/library/standards-and-guides/the-bus-rapid-transit-standard/what-is-brt/>
- Jowett, G., & O’Donnell, V. (2014). *Propaganda and persuasion* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Keyes, R. (2004). *The post-truth era: Dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press.
- Kotcher, J., Myers, T., Vraga, E., Stenhouse, N., & Maibach, E. (2017). Does engagement in advocacy hurt the credibility of scientists? Results from a randomized national survey experiment. *Environmental Communication, 11*, 415–429. doi:10.1080/17524032.2016.1275736

- Krugman, P. (2011, December 22). The post-truth campaign. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/23/opinion/krugman-the-post-truth-campaign.html>
- Levinson, P. (2017). *Fake news in real context*. New York, NY: Connected Editions.
- Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U., & Cook, J. (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 6, 353–369. doi:10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008
- Lyotard, J. (1984). *The postmodern condition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- MacLean, N. (2017). *Democracy in chains*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Myers, T. (2003). *Slavoj Zizek*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. M. (2011). *Merchants of doubt*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Ott, B. (2017). The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34, 59–68. doi:10.1080/15295036.2016.1266686
- Pyzyk, K. (2013, January 17). Group forms to question streetcar plan. *ARLnow.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.arlnow.com/2013/01/17/group-forms-to-question-streetcar-plan/>
- Rainie, L., & Wellman, B. (2012). *Networked*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sullivan, M. (2017, January 8). It's time to retire the tainted term "fake news." *The Washington Post*, p. C1.
- Sullivan, P. (2012, December 8). Arlington board publicly rejects conflict-of-interest charge by fellow member. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/arlington-board-publicly-rejects-conflict-of-interest-charge-by-fellow-member/2012/12/08/15c8ea16-4165-11e2-bca3-aadc9b7e29c5_story.html?utm_term=.a5de2889a6cf
- Sullivan, P. (2013, March 29). Arlington streetcar forum lures loud, angry crowd. *The Washington Post*, p. B2.
- Sullivan, P., & Olivo, A. (2014, November 19). Arlington pulls the plug on two streetcar projects. *The Washington Post*, p. C2.
- Tesich, S. (1992, January 6). A government of lies. *The Nation*, 254(1), 12–14.
- Turkle, S. (1997). *Life on the screen*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Vincent, W. (2013, December 8). Arlington's runaway streetcar. *The Washington Post*, p. C4.

Zimmerman: I only made \$510 from AECOM. (2013, March 28). *ARLnow.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.arlnow.com/2013/03/28/zimmerman-i-only-made-510-from-aecom/>

Zizek, S. (1999). *The ticklish subject*. London, UK: Verso.

Zizek, S. (2004). *Iraq: The borrowed kettle*. London, UK: Verso.