'Post-truth': a myth created by journalists?
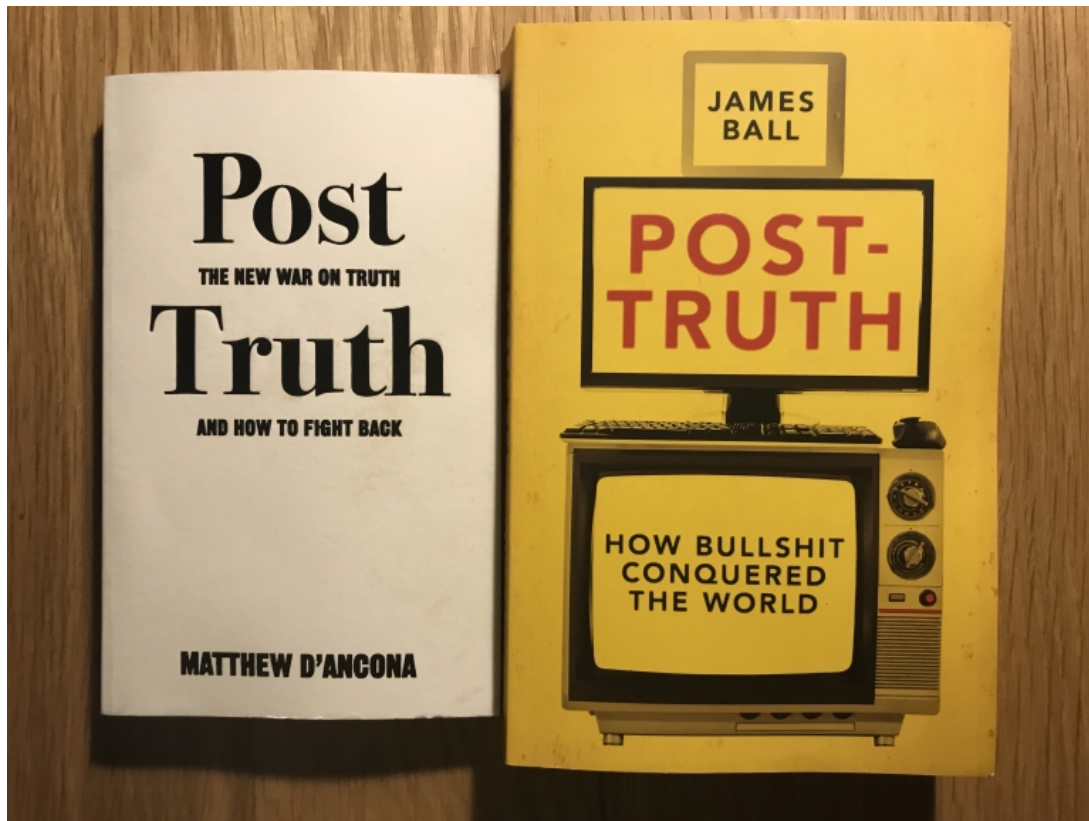
blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2017/06/06/post-truth-does-the-solution-lie-outside-the-newsroom/

Post-truth: how bullshit conquered the world by James Ball

Post-truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back by Matthew d'Ancona

John Lloyd has already reviewed these two books better than I could have done. I share his view that the existential threat of 'fake news' is sometimes exaggerated and that we've been in informational crises before. If Hillary Clinton had won the electoral college and if one in twenty Leave voters had stayed at home, then I wonder if these books would have been published. This is essentially a liberal moral panic. But as Rahm Emanuel said, 'never let a serious crisis go to waste".

d'Ancona and Ball both provide a useful recent history and they identify many of the problems that 'fake news' presents. Technology combined with real economic, social and political factors has created a new scale and reach for mis-information. The rise of subjectivity, relativism and partisan polarisation has various causes but recent developments in media seem to be amplifying some disturbing trends.

You only have to look at the public confusion, irritation, fragmentation and alienation from the social and mainstream media discourse around the current UK General Election to see that there is something amiss with our highly developed but cantankerous public sphere.

These books both suggest there is a complexity to the risks and negative effects of mis-information that deserves much more rigorous analysis. At LSE we're about to embark on a major inquiry into these issues, so stay tuned (sign up for our newsletter by emailing polis@lse.ac.uk. or follow me on Twitter @CharlieBeckett)

Both these books are the start of the solution but as both authors stress, this is a long-haul structural challenge. As

I've argued at length elsewhere 'fake news' is a great opportunity for journalism to lead the charge to improve public information, but it's best seen a symptom of a wider, ongoing problem.

The term 'post-truth' has all sorts of problems itself. It can feel Golden Age-ish and nostalgic for certainty in a world where perhaps we should not be so frightened of diversity, difference and disruption.

It's Difficult

In both books the sections on solutions rapidly turn into quite vague exhortations. Concrete rules or technical fixes are difficult. In fact it might be even tougher than they realise. I am no stranger to making rhetorical claims myself, such as 'Transparency is the new objectivity".

Unfortunately, recent research suggests that fact-checking and openness can actually have nugatory or even counter-productive effects.

It may be that journalists are still not taking enough responsibility. We demand too much of our audiences. We are too rational in our approach. People have limited time, they don't want to read journalism 'properly'.

Think Again

Academics are also perhaps testing this wrong. We often look at discrete articles or specific issues when it's more of a connected, interrelated process. You read and trust content because of the experience not because of the news organisations' codes or the terms and conditions of the social network. When we think about trust and truth, are we even looking in the right place?

Journalism ethics is a practice and a theory based largely on news media professional perceptions. I don't reject those values, but the limits of these two excellent books is that they don't really escape the newsroom in their search for a solution.

In a crowded field, including interesting books by Evan Davies and Marcus Gilroy-Ware these are a good place to start to investigate the truth of post-truth. It matters.

This article by Charlie Beckett, director of Polis, LSE @CharlieBeckett