

2 Media and the Restyling of Politics 20 Years On

A Note (March 2023)

John Corner and Dick Pels

What are the changing relationships between aesthetics and political expression and feeling? How do we assess the growing resemblance of performance, stylisation and self-branding in politics to the practices of commercial popular culture and the rise of celebrity? In what ways has the relationship of publics to politicians and political claims-making shifted, and how has it altered the nature of political representation? Across all these points, how have the modes and flows of political deception, a classic factor in the history of politics internationally, and of political trust and mistrust, become both revised and expanded?

It was with questions like these in our minds that, over 20 years ago, we began to plan a collection of articles which appeared in 2003 as *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (Corner & Pels, 2003), a collection which received positive reviews and has had extensive citation across the intervening years. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this volume in a note which re-assesses our ideas in the context of contemporary settings, ones in which issues of ‘post-truth’ have become both increasingly present and complex. There are some continuities with our concerns of 2003 and our assessment of an emerging media-political order but also important differences, given what has happened since in both the structures and practices of politics and media systems, in the modes of formation of public opinion and also in the frameworks of theory and analysis now required.

In 2003, we could hardly have foreseen the dramatic changes which would be wrought by the emergence of new social media alongside established ones such as the press, radio and TV (Facebook, from 2004; YouTube, from 2005; Twitter, from 2006) and of technologies such as the smartphone and fast internet connections which facilitated their unprecedentedly swift global spread. Neither could we envisage that this new spurt of mediatisation would not only help to accelerate and democratise some of the flows of public information but also, by circumnavigating traditional gatekeepers and filtering institutions, simultaneously promote the creation of closed internet bubbles. These would feast on alternative facts,

wild conspiracy theories and extremist posturing, and as a result descend to new depths of verbal aggression and political polarisation.

The intervening two decades have also witnessed the consolidation of right-wing political populism in many EU countries and in the United States, culminating in the Brexit vote in 2016 and the election of Donald Trump as US president in the same year. In both events, new media such as Facebook and Twitter were able to add their algorithm-based sensationalist power to that of more traditional *provocateurs* such as the British ‘yellow’ press and right-radical TV channels such as Fox News, merging politainment and personality display into a highly effective, populist-nationalist ‘reality show’.

We would like to begin with a brief retrospective review and then move on to identify issues which will require more focused attention in a world where not only national political structures but also, as noted, the broader geopolitical frame are currently undergoing significant and disturbing shifts. Central to these shifts are changes in the character of public information and the criteria used in its assessment. We think it is best to offer our review under three headings, each opening out on to further questions which are currently receiving attention by writers using diverse approaches, including by the other contributors to this book.

Re-assessing the 2003 Perspective

We can start by noting how we now judge our evaluations of 2003 to be overly optimistic about the possibilities for progressive change. This is despite the caution we introduced into our wish to give emphasis to those positive indications which the steady reconfiguring of political performance and of politics-public relations seemed to offer as they interconnected more closely with the dynamics, cognitive and affective, of popular culture and the ‘everyday’. This was an emphasis set against dominant, allegedly ‘rational’ ideas of how politics should be conducted, spoken about and related to, ideas which were receiving defensive support in some sections of academia in response to the current shifts. In these assessments, reference was often made to precedents such as the fascist dictatorships from the Interbellum, which had harnessed the mass media of their time to shore up an aggressive nationalism. In our estimation, however, mediated and personalised politics could not be simply *dismissed* as an unmitigated threat to democracy but should rather be seen as a structural trend which, though clearly pioneered by the populist right, could hopefully also benefit the progressive-democratic left.

In outlining our ideas, we identified what we called the ‘three Cs’—consumerism, celebrity and cynicism—as points around which many of the then current changes could be discussed. Since then, the economics, stylings

and modes of public connection with the 'performative' have both expanded and deepened rather than modified their unprogressive tendencies, so that in the past two decades, the profits of mediated politics have mostly accrued to the populist right. 'Populism' has rightly been a vigorously debated term in contemporary political analysis (for instance, the debate on definitions and consequences around the account of Muller, 2016). However, its broad indication of a move away from traditional forms, alliances and terms of engagement towards a narrative about the need for strong leadership to reverse a national 'failure' that is largely the result of elite betrayal has become familiar. It is a shift in which real inequalities and failures of political management have been exploited by powerful rhetorics of fear and blame. In this context, 'cynicism' has appeared in a variety of very different patterns, being strongly at work as deep distrust in relation to many flows of information from established sources, professional as well as political, and yet often exchanged for high levels of uncritical credibility in relation to emerging 'popular' commentators and groups. The national and international circulation of conspiracy theories in the context of settings already characterised by post-truth practices and flows has been an important factor here (COVID-19, the 2020 US election and its aftermath, the Russian invasion of Ukraine are three very different examples).

Although related developments occurred in other countries, sometimes much earlier, the presidency of Donald Trump saw a significant development both in mode of political styling and in the relationship between politics and the popular, increasingly dominant, criteria for assessing 'truth' in respect of both events and social circumstances. The widely noted strategy of dismissing most if not all mainstream media accounts as 'fake news', thereby turning a category which had been used to describe specific types of online flow into a term for the description of the full range of established press and broadcasting reporting, was central to Trump's project. Alongside it went what we can see as a kind of opportunistic postmodernism in which 'alternative facts' were appealed to in the face of conventional forms of evidence. The calculated relativism of this move was combined with a contradictory commitment to an emotionally reinforced absolutism regarding key aspects of the socio-political landscape and the 'rightness' of the policies being adopted in relation to them. This was a feature of Trump's response to the COVID-19 crisis right from the start, initially dismissive of the seriousness of the pandemic and then vigorously promoting alternative views of its development and the appropriate public health initiatives. Only the credibility of public health officials at federal and state levels served to counter the impact of this presidential account. More broadly, of course, COVID-19 put public information flows under stress internationally, with 'trust' levels in government responses variously being the focus both of strategic attempts at support and of critical questioning.

This situation often led to very different statistical projections being put into circulation and the subsequent growth of a spectrum of opinion ranging from a healthy scepticism about the relationship between statistics and ‘truth’ to full-blown conspiracy theories about the entire pandemic.

A more recent example of a ‘deep’ fracture in public truth and trust relations is the continuing project of regarding the 2020 US election as ‘a steal’ achieved by electoral fraud, a project which will be a powerful and continually reinforced narrative during the 2024 election campaign. Meanwhile, the strenuous efforts in the UK to assert the essential rightness and economic advantages of the Brexit decision as a triumph for ‘global Britain’ in the face of continuing problems with the flow of imports and exports across borders is another instance. However, across a range of diverse national settings, a tendency towards a right-oriented politics dismissive of established institutions and embracing a ‘popular’ alternative to ‘liberalism’ and the existing forms of social democracy has shown itself.

Political Styling and Truth in the Ukraine Conflict

Inevitably, the conflict in Ukraine cannot but bear strongly on our thinking. When we chose in 2003 to give emphasis to matters of the ‘performative’ within the ever more densely interconnecting spaces of politics and media, we could not have envisaged the sheer intensity and the careful scripting of President Zelenskyy’s presence as a charismatic personification of the struggling Ukrainian nation and effective projector of his country’s plight on an international plane. An improbable Churchillian ‘man of the hour’, Zelenskyy has been turned by the war into the most visible media politician in Europe and beyond, so far successfully framing the war as an epic struggle between Western democratic freedom and the powers of darkness let loose by Putin’s militaristic autocracy. As such, the Ukrainian president perhaps offers a more hopeful counterexample of the impact of mediated political style and of the power of personality when assessed against the authoritarian-populist Trump years. As many commentators have observed, the components of the performance are at least partly grounded in Zelenskyy’s professional theatrical past and in the media production skills, including those in drama, of many of his team. There is a sustained visibility in which appearance and demeanour have strong continuity while speech is generally calm and firm in delivery and strategically adjusted to primary addressees in content. The framing mode of projection is that of a major international celebrity but the personification is weighted towards ‘ordinariness’ and the sense of someone placed within emergency working contexts, a factor reinforced by the basic military clothing worn, often simply a green T shirt. The engagement is not only with diverse political audiences nationally but one connecting across to major international political bodies (e.g. the EU,

the G7 summit, the institutions of government of the UK and the USA), to economic gatherings (e.g. the Davos forum) and to spheres of culture (e.g. Eurovision Song Contest, Cannes film festival, Glastonbury festival). The tone varies but always contains strong elements of the reasonable and the sincere, mostly preferring modes of ‘plain speaking’ to the more obviously crafted forms of rhetoric but able to employ elements of these, too, where thought to be effective with particular audiences.

As we write, gratefulness for the international response in terms of sanctions and weapons, sometimes generalised and sometimes tailored with elements of calculated flattery for specific national addressees, is mixed with the urgency of requests to do more. This produces what is often a calculated play-off of rhetorical objectives, linking gratitude with further demand for support in military equipment in ways which have so far avoided slipping too far into direct complaint but, as the war has extended into its second year, have sometimes got very close to that and almost certainly will do again. The primary performances themselves then generate secondary texts both in mainstream media and on the web, providing some of the main framing within which other news from Ukraine is reported. Moreover, Zelenskiy’s intensive and sustained performance of a ‘leader’ role has been something to which other national leaders have largely had to relate in their own chosen stylings, positioning them performatively in varying relations of deference rather than of dominance whatever the underlying variables of power at work. It seems inevitable that Zelenskiy’s international projection and the terms of its reception will come under new stresses as the conflict continues and new factors, across economic, political and military contexts, come into play. It is perhaps worth noting too, however much lower in significance, the ways in which his wife has ‘styled’ herself, appearing, for instance, on the front cover of *The Guardian* magazine and of *Vogue* as a wartime ‘First Lady’—in the case of *The Guardian* image, with an armed soldier in combat uniform seated off right (*Guardian* 18 June, 2022; *Vogue* 26 July 2022, digital edition).

As well as raising issues of political style, the conflict has generated disputes around ‘what is really happening’. These disputes have connected with international information flows from a number of sources but a steady stream of disinformation and denialism from Moscow has featured strongly in the mix. Among the academic commentaries so far, Stanescu (2022) notes the different modes of the informational war at work in Ukraine, Kreft et al. (2023) look at shifting alignments with ‘fake news’ and Woolley (2022) examines the new importance of digital technology and ‘influence culture’ within the overall pattern. An increased stream of disinformation began early with denials that any incursion into Ukraine was planned, denials that were continued right up to the day the invasion began and the existence of a ‘special military operation’ was admitted.

Notwithstanding the complex political history of Ukraine over the last decade, including the existence of a right-wing militia and pro-Russian segments of the population, especially in Eastern areas, the dominant narrative justifying the offensive—the ‘liberation’ and ‘de-nazification’ of the country—seemed contradicted by the full range of historical and contemporary evidence. These broad frames of contested accounting were joined by much more localised and specific evidential conflicts, often centring on images and their interpretation. Most notably to date these have occurred in the reporting of what happened in Bucha, on the outskirts of Kyiv, where filmed evidence of dead bodies lying in the street were dismissed by Russian sources as ‘faked’ footage (Stanescu, 2022, gives a brief analysis), a dismissal also applied to many other images of death and destruction. A steady stream of such accusations and dismissals against the record of carefully analysed data, a record largely supported by the flow of journalists’ accounts of military activity and its impact upon civilians, has positioned official Russian statements in the starkest contrast with Western evaluations since the days of the USSR. Quite who believes what has become an issue both for Ukrainian and Russian publics and, importantly, for broader international populations. The credibility of the Kremlin’s accounts with large sections of the Russian population would seem, as we write, still to be holding up, if often strained and requiring adjustments in response to changing events. This situation is at least partly a result of the very tight restrictions on Russian information flow, particularly where the conduct of the ‘war’ (or ‘special military operation’) is concerned.

Post-truth Contexts and the Future for Political Truth

The apparent ‘death’ of truth in the Ukrainian war—and the Big Lie stubbornly sustained by Trumpian Republicans in the United States—have uncovered depths of cynical manipulation at work in conditions of sharp enmity, extreme polarisation, and the near-total breakdown of social trust. It is quite remarkable how something like the myth of a ‘stolen’ presidential election has held up against an avalanche of facts and figures, judicial verdicts, administrative controls and careful recalculations—items and practices which would ‘normally’ be accepted as providing overwhelming evidence to the contrary (climate change denials, denials of COVID-19 figures, ‘birtherism’ and other conspiracy theories provide comparable cases). As we noted earlier, it would seem that traditional truth-saying and fact-producing institutions, such as independent journalism, scientific research, an independent judiciary, professional expertise and the checks and balances of pluralistic democracy and public debate, have lost much of their power to convince, yielding the terrain to more ‘popular’ truth-sayers who have no need for doubt or evidential control but simply command belief in

their absolutist assertions. Many chapters in this book variously illustrate the ways in which new technologies, rhetorics and tactics of knowledge circulation and management, of political claims-making, are changing the nature of ‘truth’ as a public marker. They are further loosening the popular criteria by which it might be judged, including those concerning notions of factuality and those involving appropriate modes of public engagement and institutional roles of oversight and action. In this situation, what kind of frameworks and perspectives might guide political action and political expression in ways which both recognise the changed contexts and their impact and yet seek to reinforce forms of deliberative democratic exchange in which levels of trust can continue to operate?

As Jayson Harsin (2018) argues, ‘post-truth’ society and politics are first and foremost a product of the breakdown of social trust. Truth and trust are indeed closely aligned: our sense of reality, of sharing a common world, constitutionally depends on investing trust in others. In his own commentary on the new conditions Stephen Coleman notes that ‘the work of distinguishing between political truth, lies and various shades of grey can be arduous and dispiriting’ (Coleman, 2018, p. 117). Restoring a culture of truth-saying and political commonality therefore requires the restoration of a critically framed trust in democratic truth-saying institutions and their spokespersons. It demands an active defence of institutions which value and enable the filtering, moderation and de-escalation of emotions, beliefs and opinions, and are able to reorder them into forms of democratic compromise.

In this sense, the battle for truth cannot but be deeply political. This is not to assume histories of democratic structure and practice in which civic principles have been routinely followed, but to note the way in which such principles were generally recognised even in the deceptions and evasions surrounding them. This recognition is disappearing. In conditions of generalised distrust, where the building blocks of a common world have crumbled, it does not now appear useful to rely on traditional rationalist or enlightenment conceptions of truth and factuality (in this—but only this—sense, we have all arrived in ‘post-truth’ conditions). Schindler (2022) points to the difficulties of finding clear, orienting terms of critique and response in a situation where older contrasts around orders of knowledge, such as those between perspectives of relativism and naturalism, have become complicated and have sometimes collapsed. Using a broader frame, Harjuniemi (2022) places the current situation against the long-standing problem with liberalism’s regimes of truth, ‘oscillating’ between regulatory and free-market approaches to the circulation of knowledge.

It is no longer feasible to expect truth or facts to fend for themselves—a naiveté which is still encountered in some fact-checking philosophies. They do not command an innate power to compel assent or to spread of their own accord. Without political empowerment, they are too weak to stand

up to their enemies: ‘alternative’ truths and facts which are usually clothed in a ferocious absolutism. The current geopolitical turmoil has opened up a new round in a seemingly eternal battle: that between democracy and authoritarianism. Here we encounter an old enemy: the imperious frame of mind, which is constitutionally prone to intimidation, provocation and violence. Putin’s Russia offers the most acute example, but a similarly toxic certitude is seen to have gained ascendancy in the United States and in the minds of most populist-nationalist political leaders in Europe. Schlesinger (2020) examines some of the factors—political, economic and cultural—involved in the related slide towards ‘post-public’ conditions, whilst giving attention to the possibilities of at least checking this process through new regulatory frameworks.

Against such threats, a society’s public structures of thought and feeling will need, against strong counter-currents, to refresh and mobilise their strongest sense of the ‘civil’, together with continuing the attempt to cleanse human relations and institutions as much as possible from forms of violence: physical, economic, political, cultural and verbal. Our future, and the future of political truth, crucially depend on the question of whether our democracies—their institutions, their practices and the forms of relationship they encourage between people—will be strong enough to withstand the vigorously undemocratic forces of division, cynicism and distrust. At the moment, attempted answers to this question would have to struggle for any optimism. Although issues of ‘style’ will be one part of a response to the challenges, it will take a lot more than a further, corrective, phase of ‘re-styling’ to even begin to secure the conditions in which a politics grounded in deliberative engagement, transparency and accountability might emerge.

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