

Post-truth politics as online abuse: How gender, race, and sexuality shape perceptions of the expert

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Executive Summary

The post-truth era has emerged alongside an intensifying context of online abuse of women, LGBTQ+ and racialized people, yet these issues are usually discussed separately. Unless we analyse online abuse as a form of post-truth politics, we overlook potentially significant impacts on public knowledge and scientific debate. Using the case study of Brexit, we show that post-truth can be considered as a violent process of excluding not just certain types of knowledge or expertise, but also particular gendered, sexualised or racialized bodies from the public sphere. Measures to address post-truth politics and disinformation should take into account this issue of online abuse.

How is post-truth politics linked to online abuse?

The so-called post-truth era has coincided with one that has seen intensifying online abuse of women, LGBTQ+ and racialized people. Women politicians and scientists, for example during Covid-19, have reported receiving threatening and abusive messages, sometimes forcing them to deactivate their social media accounts¹. Online abuse is also intersectional – racialized, trans or queer women receive abuse that is also racist, homophobic or transphobic². Amnesty International has described the abuse of women and non-binary people as a serious problem affecting the right to freedom of expression³. While the Council of Europe has characterised harassment and hate speech as ‘mal-information’⁴, discussions about the post-truth climate have generally been kept separate from those about online abuse. Unless we analyse online abuse as a form of post-truth politics, we overlook potentially significant impacts on public knowledge.

Using the case study of Brexit, we show that post-truth can be considered as a violent process of excluding not just certain types of knowledge or expertise, but also particular gendered, sexualised or racialized *bodies* from the public sphere. Our findings have relevance for the implementation of the EU’s Digital Services Act and the Code of Practice on Disinformation, as well as national legislation regulating social media platforms. Firstly, the concepts of disinformation or post-truth need incorporate the issue of online abuse. Secondly, the role of the legacy media needs to be considered in measures to tackle the spread of disinformation.

What is ‘post-truth’?

Post-truth politics is not just about factual inaccuracy, but about what is or is not considered to be acceptable knowledge, and who is considered to be a legitimate producer of knowledge. Post-truth politics therefore involves a process of bordering of what and whose knowledge ‘belongs’ in the public sphere, which is shaped by ideas about gender, race and sexuality. Firstly,

post-truth involves discrediting certain *kinds* of knowledge in ways that are feminised, such as accusations that it is based on ‘emotions’ rather than ‘objective science’. Feminist research here is particularly vulnerable to such accusations.

Secondly, post-truth involves denying particular people, certain *bodies* the figure of the ‘expert’. White men are typically perceived as more knowledgeable or trustworthy, even when engaging in ‘post-truth’ discourse⁵. Post-truth as online abuse involves silencing particular people from making claims to knowledge by drawing attention to bodies, such as through references to physical appearance or sexually explicit or violent comments. Post-truth here may also draw borders around the national community, by denying particular – often racialized people – from the right to produce knowledge on account of perceived ‘foreignness’.

What did the study involve?

We selected news articles about Brexit and academics or experts in three right-wing UK newspapers between 2016 and 2019 that involved critical commentary or inflammatory attacks on individual academics, universities or ‘experts’ that had received high engagement on public Facebook pages. Using qualitative discourse analysis, we coded themes relating to the ‘figure of the expert’ in the Facebook discussion threads. We applied queer and intersectional theory here to analyse how certain academics or experts who hold multiply marginalised identities are seen as ‘impossible subjects’, that is, as incompatible with the figure of the ‘expert’.

What did we find?

Comments about men and academics in general tended to be about what they were *doing* or *saying* as academics rather than *who* they are. For example, the male academic in our sample was described as a ‘left-wing loonie’, a ‘typical academic’, or lacking common sense. Reflecting populist discourse, academics were imagined as corrupt, and funded by the EU, and therefore untrustworthy. There were some comments that used tropes of

sexual perversion, for example, academics were described as 'grooming' young people. Yet the idea of academics as white men remains: such comments are critical of academics, who are even imagined to be engaging in problematic behaviour, but their status as academics is not brought into question.

There were key differences in comments about women academics. They also involved anti-intellectual tropes of being 'out of touch' or corrupt. However, many comments were misogynistic, using infantilising or sexualising language or employing the common trope of women being irrational. For example, they were described as 'stupid women', 'spoiled brats', or as mentally ill. Some commenters suggested they should never have been given a platform to speak. In the case of one woman academic who had engaged in a feminist protest appearing naked with the words 'Brexit leaves Britain naked' written on her body, comments were particularly extreme. These involved violent and graphic, sexualised and dehumanising language such as 'what a stupid self centered excuse for a Women if she cant explain her views with out degrading her sex she should not be in work. What a Tartish Exhibitionist she is' or 'I hope she at least had a paper bag over her head'. Such comments contest the existence of women's bodies in academic life and public spaces. We also analysed comments on articles about Gina Miller, a Black British woman who took the UK government to court over the right of Parliament to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. Here, sexist and misogynistic comments intersected with violently racist and xenophobic commentary. Comments that she was being supported by 'hidden elite interests' or questions about support from 'shadowy establishment figures' have strong anti-Semitic undertones, while comments that she is a 'nobody and a foreigner' with no right to speak about British politics symbolically remove her from the national community. Some comments were profoundly dehumanising, such as calling her as a 'parasite', or even verge on death threats such as 'why is this fascist Cow still alive'? We interpret these comments as violent acts of bordering, whether this be from the public space, the national space or from humanity altogether.

These findings also support Giulia Evolvi's study on post-truth politics and religion as part of this project⁶. She finds that Islamophobic and anti-Semitic hate speech was integral to disinformation spread by far-right parties on Twitter. Generalisations, hyperbole and misleading connections in relation to Muslims and Jewish people were found to be key strategies in the spread of disinformation about migration and refugees.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/aug/03/microbiologist-elisabeth-bik-queried-covid-research-thats-when-the-abuse-and-trolling-began>
- ² Galpin, C. (2022) 'At the Digital Margins? A Theoretical Examination of Social Media Engagement Using Intersectional Feminism', *Politics and Governance*, 10, pp. 161-171.
- ³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1-1/>
- ⁴ <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html#>
- ⁵ O'Dwyer, M. (2018). The intersectional politics of bullshit. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1(3), 405-420
- ⁶ Evolvi, G. (2022). "Europe is Christian, or It Is Not Europe": Post-Truth Politics and Religion in Matteo Salvini's Tweets. In M. Conrad, G. Hálfdanarson, A. Michailidou, C. Galpin, & N. Pyrhönen (Eds.), *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere* (pp. 129-148). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that online abuse is central to post-truth politics. We have explored the ways in which individuals are depicted as being compatible and/or incompatible with academic expertise through online abuse. Through the violent (re)assertion of gender and racial stereotypes, the abuse of women, LGBTQ+ and racialised people works to preserve the public sphere as the domain of White men, at the same time as discrediting feminist, queer or postcolonial research. Social media comments directed at women do not just criticise what they are saying or doing, but relate to who they are, and challenge their participation in public life or, even, their very humanity.

Implications

Firstly, our findings show that online abuse particularly of women, LGBTQ+ and racialized people is central to post-truth politics. Post-truth politics is not just about false or misleading information, but also how particular forms of expertise, and particular bodies are discredited through racist and misogynistic online abuse. Secondly, we show the central role played by the legacy media in the post-truth context. Measures to tackle disinformation typically focus only on social media. 'Quality' news media tend to be described as an important counterbalance to online disinformation. Our findings show that legacy media also play a role in generating online abuse. Newspapers are increasingly reliant on generating anger that provokes the kinds of comments we have analysed here. Newspapers – both tabloid and 'quality' outlets – post articles online that then host discriminatory and abusive comments targeted particularly at minoritized academics, experts and professionals.

Key recommendations:

- Expand commonly used definitions of post-truth politics and/or disinformation in, for example, the Code of Practice on Disinformation, and in the implementation of the Digital Services Act, to incorporate the issue of gendered and racialized online abuse.
- Hold legacy news media accountable for their role in facilitating abuse, and with it for their role in shaping the post-truth context. Engage legacy media in discussions and regulations around content moderation when harmful online content is linked to their journalistic output.
- Better understand the role of legacy media and its journalists in facilitating online abuse and post-truth politics, for example, in annual assessments of disinformation under the Digital Services Act.