

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Philosophy Faculty Publications and
Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

12-27-2021

The Birth of the Post-Truth Era: A Genealogy of Corporate Public Relations, Propaganda, and Trump

Cory Wimberly

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, cory.wimberly@utrgv.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/phi_fac



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wimberly, Cory. "The Birth of the Post-Truth Era: A Genealogy of Corporate Public Relations, Propaganda, and Trump." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 35, no. 2, Penn State University Press, 2021, pp. 130–46, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.35.2.0130>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

The Birth of the Post-Truth Era: A Genealogy of Corporate Public Relations, Propaganda, and Trump

ABSTRACT: In the early 20th century, the most numerous and well-funded institutions in the United States—corporations—used public relations to make a widespread and fundamental change in the way they constitute and regulate their relations of knowledge with the public. Today, we can see this change reflected in a variety of areas such as journalism, political outreach, social media, and in the ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ administration of Donald J. Trump. This article traces practices of corporate truth-telling and knowledge production across three periods I will call the personal, the legal, and public relations, which are roughly coincident with the antebellum period, the Gilded Age, and the 20th century, respectively. In sum, what can be found in public relations and now broadly across society, is that relations of knowledge have come to be refigured as relations of power, subordinating traditional epistemological concerns like justification and belief in favor of government and control.

KEYWORDS: Governmentality, Produser, Social Media, Michel Foucault, Power

The Birth of the Post-Truth Era: A Genealogy of Corporate Public Relations, Propaganda, and Trump

The truth has seemingly become more elusive of late. The news media and cultural critics fret about the ‘post-truth’ era and public trust in corporations and government leaders “crashed” between 2016 and 2018 according to the Edelman Trust Barometer, a global survey of public attitudes. In the United States, trust in the state has dropped fourteen points and trust in businesses has fallen by ten.¹ Commentators, not necessarily reflecting on this survey but the culture broadly, have cited the growth of partisan rhetoric and the tailored production of news and other information as important contributors to “eroding” trust.² ‘Fake news’ has become a byword with its chief critic also functioning as its main purveyor; *The Washington Post* counts an unprecedented 30,573 false or misleading claims made by Trump over his four-year administration.³

Philosophy probably does not have much to add in terms of the ability to conduct a global attitudes survey or monitor public figures’ media appearances and fact check them; teams of social scientists and journalists are a better pick for those tasks. However, philosophy can make a significant contribution to the analysis of the conceptual moments that turned the present onto its current path and have resulted in the shocking headlines. While there are undoubtedly many contributors to our present epistemological state of the union, this article argues that a break in the corporate production of knowledge at the turn of the 20th century has had an outsized impact on how truth is understood and produced in the present moment.

In the early 20th century, the most numerous and well-funded institutions in the United States—corporations—made a widespread and fundamental change in the way they constitute and regulate their relations of knowledge with the public. Today, we can see this change reflected in a variety of areas such as journalism, political outreach, social media, and in the ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ administration of Donald J. Trump. This article traces practices of corporate truth-telling and knowledge production across three periods I will call the personal, the legal, and public relations, which are roughly coincident with the antebellum period, the Gilded Age, and the 20th century, respectively.

The essay recognizes that the corporation is not a unity but is comprised of a multiplicity of different apparatuses, each with their own unique relationship to the truth. The modern corporation includes so many different relations of knowledge extending within and out of itself that a full accounting is well beyond any single article. This project focuses on offering insight into the present through the genealogy of the relationships of knowledge that are most relevant to the formation of our ‘post-truth’ present. In particular, this essay will argue that the corporate relationships of knowledge that formed through public relations in the early 20th century reflect a ‘post-truth’ orientation well before it became a contemporary buzzword. In the early 20th century, public relations began to mobilize relations of knowledge primarily as tools to govern the conduct of the public, while the classic questions of epistemology about truth, justification, skepticism, and belief increasingly only retained their significance to the degree they impacted those relations of power. For example, when public relations teams craft political messaging, the question focuses around what kind of approach to the public will result in the desired outcomes (for instance, voting for a particular slate of candidates), not on whether the message represents the truth of the issue, leads to a full comprehension, or offers

sound reasoning. Being caught lying is a problem, but not because of any perceived responsibility to epistemological criteria. It is a problem because getting caught lying could backfire and result in the public turning against the campaign; even when epistemological criteria are raised, they are subordinated to the ends of public control. The consequences of this conversion of epistemological relations into relations of power and governance are echoed today in the way that truth has begun to lose its force as a central normative category in public discourse in favor of measurements of the successful government of the public (e.g. bills passed or rejected in the legislature, rises or falls in polling, and sales figures).

The Personal

The first of the three historical periods through which this essay traces the relationships extending between the corporation, truth, and the public differs substantially from the present. In the 18th century, before the American Civil War and before industrialization had yet to fully take hold, the relations of knowledge produced by businesses were deeply impacted by the size of the businesses. Antebellum, the average American workshop only employed 5–10 workers.⁴

Without the tremendous scale of the post-Civil War industrialized business, the owner of the small workshop was readily accessible to the workers and labor issues could be taken care of face-to-face between the ultimate decision maker and the ones affected. Likewise, manufacturers were small enough and distribution local enough that the consumers or at least retailers would have access to the business owner directly. Notably, businesses did not generally need a separate apparatus to manage the knowledge relationships between the owner and their workers, retailers, consumers, and other concerned individuals—the owners could handle it personally as part of regular business. Consequently, relations of truth-telling in these

businesses were most commonly individual-to-individual relations, personal, and not yet bureaucratized.

The relations of knowledge in the early 19th century would be memorialized and praised in later times for different reasons. As we will see in the next section on the Gilded Age, 1870–1900, many owners fought public investigation and media interest in corporate conduct by insisting that, as in the antebellum period, no one outside of a particular contract negotiation had any right to knowledge of it or input on it; in other words, knowledge was still a personal relationship and no business of the general public. The 20th century public also praised this early period and mourned its passing for different reasons than did the Gilded Age capitalists seeking to keep their dealings private. Roland Marchand wrote a book documenting the public lament that the corporation had lost its soul once the ability to personally interact with and hold the owner accountable was lost due to scale.⁵ John Cuthbert Long also eulogized this change in the opening lines of perhaps the first book to be entitled *Public Relations* (1924) as a means of heralding the rise of a new era: “What has happened to the Village Square—where one rubbed elbows with one’s neighbors and acquired a reputation among them for better or for worse? They have been swept away by the complications of the present age.”⁶

En route to marking the break that constitutes our own era of corporate epistemological practice, it is important to note two things about the antebellum period. First, businesses in this era generally had no public. While the state had a public in that a whole class of people was interested, impacted, and had a right to know what was going on in the state, businesses at this point in time did not generally have publics. Most businesses outside of a small handful were too small and too local to have regional or national impact; furthermore, those that were impacted were most often dealt with on a private and individual basis. Businesses did not have

publics but individual relations with its suppliers, retailers, and customers. Second, as a consequence of lacking a public audience, workshops generally had no independent professional apparatus for the production of knowledge for their (nonexistent) publics: most businesses were so small in scale that the owner handled matters personally. For the vast majority of businesses in this era before department stores, the assembly line, or even interchangeable parts, the relation between business and customer or worker occurred on the level of the individual. Truth-telling occurred in these relationships between people who were proximate to each other and probably known to one another outside of their business relationship.

Legal

If relations of truth in business in the period preceding the Gilded Age were mostly considered individual relations in which truth was told face-to-face and governed by personal accountability, many businesses soon became too large, too geographically distributed, and too stratified for business owners to be able to engage in personal relationships with the vast majority of those with whom they had economic relationships. The scale of business 1870–1900 was growing, both in the sense that individual businesses were becoming larger, and that businesses were occupying an ever-larger slice of the economy. In 1880, the manufacturing sector for the first time edged out farm production as the single largest sector of the economy, and wage-laborers came to outnumber the self-employed. The consolidation of industry can be glimpsed in the difference between the neighborhood butcher shop and Armour and Company, which in 1880 employed 4,000 people at its plant in Chicago alone.⁷ By 1900, the United States

accounted for one-half of the world's manufacturing capacity as large-scale businesses took on a new scale and importance.

Many businesses grew so much in scale and in geographical distribution that the owner could no longer conduct most routine business on an individual basis, and for the first time, a significant number of firms had to develop apparatuses to negotiate these multiplying knowledge relations. The most common response for large businesses to deal with vendors, customers, labor, and distributors in this period was through using the existing legal arrangements of agency.⁸ In essence, the relationships of agency were modeled on the earlier period of individual relationships in that the executive (or at least the executive's authority) was effectively multiplied, allowing legal agents in proxy to act as the owner and carry out business individual-to-individual.

The legal axis of agency did not disrupt the individualistic and contractual quality of the previous 'personal' relationships of knowledge, but they did disturb its ethical basis. Whereas an individual in charge of a small local business might be called to standards of conduct based on familiarity, neighborliness, and the ethical bonds built in other areas of life, agency had a different and legally binding set of guidelines for conduct called 'fiduciary responsibility.' Fiduciary responsibility, as it evolved in English common law and then in American law, makes it the agent's legal duty to carry out the client's wishes and to seek to maximally advance the interests of the client without other conflicts or considerations, e.g. what Delaware enshrined as the duties of care, loyalty, and good faith.⁹ Importantly, fiduciary duties oblige the agent to seek their client's financial good to the maximum extent possible, regardless of its effects on the other parties. In regards specifically to practices of corporate truth-telling, fiduciary responsibility dictates that the agent only has to share information with others insofar as it

benefits his or her client. As the agent was duty bound only to carry out those actions commanded by the principal and otherwise to seek his best interest, there was no other basis besides self-benefit for deciding whether to share information and what kind of information to share.

Harkening back to natural law, legal agency was premised on the understanding that every party was equal and protected from meaningful coercion by the state. This assumption of equality theoretically released agents from worries that their position as representing an owner of a massive business might lead to intimidation, grossly imbalanced relations of power, and exploitation; theoretically, each agent could pursue her own best interests to the maximum extent without ethical concern for the supposedly equal and autonomous other.

Silence, or the refusal to comment, became a common refrain that opened the agent and his principal to the least legal jeopardy and was reflective of this classically liberal understanding of business contracts. Liberalism, political economy, and natural law all point towards the private nature of business, in which only those whose property are at stake are party to a contract and are obliged to divulge what is in their best interests only to those contractual parties. This is the era in which Cornelius Vanderbilt notoriously replied to a reporter seeking comment for the concerned public that “the public be damned,” J.P. Morgan claimed that “I owe the public nothing,” and John D. Rockefeller replied to a question about his business by stating that “silence is golden.”¹⁰ This juridical framework for communication dealt with dissent by denying the public standing on which it could claim any obligation from the business. The Gilded Age’s corporate legal apparatus often even refused to recognize the existence of what would later become commonly referred to as the corporations’ publics: many agents neither recognized unions’ power to speak for those laboring individuals with whom the

corporation had individually contracted nor those other massifications that struggled for citizens' and consumers' interests as a class against the corporation. For instance, the Great Upheaval—the nationwide strikes of 1877—was ignited when the vice president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railway, John King Jr., refused to recognize and meet with the laborers sent to negotiate on behalf of the railroad's employees.¹¹ This characterization of the responsibility of businesses solely to those individuals as individuals with whom it had contracted was tantamount to a refusal of the idea that there was a public for businesses.

This legal apparatus contributed to the tremendous instability at the turn of the 20th century. The first national wildcat strike occurred in the United States in 1870 and tens of thousands followed it in the next decade. As the 19th century entered its last decade, the legal apparatus' failure to meaningfully address the strikes, the urban protests, the consumer protests, and the broader criticism of corporate power that would soon turn the Gilded Age into the Progressive Era opened a space for different approaches to constructing corporate relationships. A decisive shift away from using the legal apparatus to deal with individuals on a contractual basis happened nationwide with the Anthracite Coal strike of 1902. George Baer, a prominent lawyer and head of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, was put in charge negotiating the owners' position with the United Mine Workers. Baer, feeling public sentiment heating up in support of the union workers, famously lectured reporters that the "rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for—not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country."¹² These kinds of statements reflect the Gilded Age assertion that unions and the broader public had no standing to intervene in the private affairs of individuals, but Baer went beyond even Vanderbilt and Rockefeller to assert a divine right of capitalists to

exercise dominion through the terms of the employment contract. Baer's position inflamed public sentiment against the owners, which pushed President Roosevelt into action, and resulted in a worse deal than might have been had otherwise for the coal interests. The scope of the agent as representative of the corporation definitively began to attenuate after 1902.¹³ Out of this break, public relations would grow to govern corporations' relationships with what it would term the corporations' 'publics.'

Public Relations

Public relations received its name in the 1920s, largely from Bernays' use in his 1923 work *Crystallizing Public Opinion*; before that time the field was referred to as publicity or propaganda—names which continue to be tied to public relations today.¹⁴ Publicity was ultimately rejected as a name because it suggested that the field was characterized by the narrow concern to publicize events, and propaganda was rejected as a name because the term already had negative connotations, which only worsened with the German use during World War I (*kriegspropaganda*).¹⁵ Though the name 'propaganda' was phased out, propaganda duties were not: during every war from World War I to present, public relations counsels have performed the propaganda tasks during U.S. military conflicts.

Public relations was a solid break with the corporate relations of knowledge that had been built in the personal and legal periods; almost everything changed, from who the participants were, to how their relationships should be constructed. Public relations counsels saw the corporation outside of the juridical-contractual framework, which stemmed in large part from their different regard of the subjects with whom they were interacting. Whereas the liberal-juridical view of the subject was individualistic and tended to portray subjects as

autonomous contracting agents, public relations began from the idea that corporations had misrecognized the nature of the subjects that were their workers, laborers, and interested voters. For public relations counsels, these subjects were best regarded not as individuals but as massifications—individuals united into a larger mass subjectivities. Ivy L. Lee, hired to speak to a group of railroad executives to educate them about this new reality in 1914, told them in plain terms how the situation had changed, “The people now rule. We have substituted for the divine right of kings, the divine right of the multitude. The crowd is enthroned.”¹⁶ The old tools for governing relationships with individuals and the relations of knowledge that they entailed were ignorant of the power of the crowd, how democracy dangerously empowered it, and how it might best be governed.

Ivy Lee argued that the corporation, in order to survive, needed to develop itself as an apparatus of psychological government adequate to these new circumstances and highlighted the basic principles of this government. Borrowing heavily from crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon and social critic Walter Lippmann, he made four numbered points that were to serve as the poles around which government could be constructed: “1. In the first place, crowds do not reason; 2. Again, crowds are led by symbols and phrases; 3. Success in dealing with crowds, that success we have got to attain if we are to solve the railway question, rests upon the art of getting believed in; 4. The problem of influencing the people en masse is that of providing leaders who can fertilize the imagination.”¹⁷ The sense of his four points is that the public is driven by deep-seated psychological forces that do not operate according to the laws of reason. The irrationality of this subjectivity is explained by its agglomeration of individuals; a mass subjectivity falls to the level of the lowest common shared features in order to compose a unity. Any features peculiar to one subject or another has to be discarded in order for each individual

to join into the shared consciousness of the whole and become one. For Lee, once all of the individual differences were discarded, what remained in common uniting the public as a whole were only the most basal drives of the human being. Consequently, the way to influence and modify the conduct of such crowds was by directing those basal drives. Directing the basal drives of human beings towards new conduct would not happen through argument but by mobilizing symbols and images of great affective power. A leader with great prestige and the respect of the crowd could manipulate the symbols and images that drives conduct affectively and unconsciously, becoming an effective governor. Lee relates that everything essentially boils down to the “art of getting believed in” but that art does not trace traditional liberal deliberative epistemological categories of belief. Nowhere is reason, evidence, or argumentation mentioned as a key step to producing belief, nor is knowledge primarily an individual property, but is instead a constitutive and dispositive relationship for an agglomerative mass subjectivity.

Public relations counsels side-stepped most of the epistemological categories through which relations of knowledge are frequently understood because they believed that they held no purchase in achieving their aim— altering the conduct of the public. Bernays wrote, “Men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their actions.”¹⁸ In an environment in which the public does not even know what motivates their actions, let alone is able to judge the truth or falsity of those motivations, why would the propagandist focus on epistemological questions? Instead of argument and persuasion, the propagandists focused on producing conduct through stimulating the unconscious via symbols and images delivered by psychologically puissant leaders. Truth becomes a secondary issue in the relations of the corporation with its publics just at the same moment the corporation is opening torrents of communication and beginning to speak unrelentingly.

Those people that structure corporate relations with the public are paid to crystallize conduct. Even corporate speech is seen through this lens, as a governmental tool rather than an epistemological one. This is why studies of public relations and propaganda by liberals and social epistemologists who insist on viewing it through the lens of epistemology ring hollow; they miss the governmental level on which the work is being carried out and instead only catch its distant echoes in questions of truth, justification, and belief.¹⁹ Studying public relations through the register of epistemology is a bit like studying a Picasso in the infrared spectrum—all you get is secondary radiation from the incredible density of relations occurring on another level.

Today

A major worry at present is that we have entered a ‘post-truth’ era in which the epistemological status of statements has little impact in the way they are trafficked. If we are filtering our history for the precipitants of our current situation in order to understand how we got here, certainly the corporate relationship to the truth has to figure importantly. Public relations has woven itself deeply into contemporary American society, and it has consciously and systematically subordinated truth to power for more than a century on the premise that the public is incapable of reason and deliberation. Before we look to the so-called “cultural relativists” like gay rights activists, feminists, and Black Lives Matter protestors—all of whom are deeply concerned with the truth—as the cause of our post-truth situation, we might look first at the corporations who spent well over \$2 trillion dollars during the last decade in the United States alone, creating relations of knowledge that actively undermine the normative value of truth in favor of merely maintaining public control.²⁰

Certainly, we can see the intersection of this corporate genealogy and the trigger of many of these 'post-truth' worries in the figure of Donald J. Trump. He is a person who won his first business deals, yes, through his father's money but also through his public relations ability; "[Trump] is almost a throwback to the nineteenth century as a promoter."²¹ Trump comes from this tradition of corporate public relations. As businesses claim themselves to be the 'best ever' and 'winners,' so too does Trump. As businesses claim to be 'unprecedented' and 'record breaking,' so too does Trump. As businesses spin their losses as 'victories' and flaws as 'features,' so too does Trump. It needs to be remembered that the tremendous but also utterly quotidian disconnect between reality and what is communicated to the public about past events, products, and responsibility is not new with Trump.²² The great droning clouds of falsehoods that first began to be mass produced by American corporations alongside faucets, automobiles, and moving pictures in the early 20th century have followed Trump into the White House. While the degree to which this public relations strategy has been embraced by his presidency is greater than in past presidencies, it is otherwise common in the culture of the United States.

The occlusion of this public relations strategy from the eye of the wider public is only aided by the myopic focus by many philosophers on the epistemological axis of the analysis of propaganda. This is a mistake, as the shift public relations is making in how its clients relate to and impact their publics is about much more than falsehood; it is about post-truth. Post-truth is what happens after the epistemological is displaced, and is about what is doing the displacing. We should see our current 'post-truth' situation as the byproduct of a larger strategic situation in which a private, largely corporate form of government has emerged to ballast the growing social and political power of the public. This new governmental apparatus, which has been

alternately called propaganda, publicity, and public relations, exerts its government over a public that it assumes is incapable of taking up its duties as a democratic body and consequently needs to be dominated by the supposedly rational interests of the elite.

What is not new in our situation is Trump. His contribution is only to hasten the migration of an apparatus commonly employed in business for over a century to the presidency. If anything has seriously changed, it is on the side of the public. Many of the worries about ‘post-truth’ society are not just aimed at Trump but the degree to which his base also consumes discourse without serious regard for its truth or falsity. One way of reading this relationship between Trump and his base supports the propagandists’ underlying argument rather than critically opposing it, namely, the argument that Trump’s publics are dupes and ignoramuses, unfit for democratic responsibility, unwilling or unable to distinguish the true from the false. I do not think that this is an accurate reading of the situation, however. The publics’ role goes beyond just passive consumption, and it should be strongly acknowledged just how much of the ‘post-truth’ discourse and even of what Trump says comes from the public itself. In fact, the majority of the conspiracy theories that Trump spreads are not of his own creation but are just popularized by him.²³ Looking at Trump reveals that many American publics are not just passive consumers of ‘post-truth’ discourse, they are also its creators and participate in its formation. Americans participate at all levels in fabricating ‘post-truth’ discourse, spanning everything from creating the discourse, as with QAnon, to liking or forwarding it as people commonly do on social media. Rather than looking at the political milieu Trump has created as a strictly top-down relationship, we need to acknowledge the degree to which the production of a ‘post-truth’ reality has become a community effort. Trump has already made clear that winning is his priority—“My whole life is about winning. I don’t lose often. I almost never lose.

²⁴—and so would it be hard to believe that his base too, has also adopted this public relations credo, and that they are willing both to produce and consume the body of statements necessary to achieve their victory? Are Trump’s publics merely dupes or are they too, like Trump and public relations more generally, focused on winning to the degree that they are willing to say and believe whatever is necessary to get there? We should not forget the lies that public relations counsels had to tell themselves in order to launch their field and ‘win’—lies about the moral superiority and fine rationality of their clients and the incapability of the public to be entrusted with democratic responsibility.²⁵ Are the lies the publics produce and circulate through the institutional channels of politics, business, or the mass media any different—might not they too be willing to sacrifice the epistemological and come to believe whatever is necessary for governmental success? This is especially easy in the current time when the truth seems so unimportant anyway (the mercenary editorials and talking heads on 24-hour news offer a good example); the truth is only a little, maybe even unnoticed, sacrifice to make for winning.

Certainly, the anti-democratic work by corporate propagandists and its almost inevitable bleed into politics is something to mourn. But it is also clear that there is no panacea in the past either: the relations of agency in the Gilded Age were not the critical basis of a robust and informed civil society, and the personal relationships of communication in the antebellum period could not function today in a global economy. What does stand out in our present situation as an opening to build on is that the production of information has increasingly come to be located in the hands of everyday citizens, and, as those relations of knowledge come to be keystones in contemporary government, the public has great potential for change. Even professional sources for the production of knowledge—ranging from news broadcasts, to

political spin, to corporate public relations—draw deeply from the memes, issues, and interests produced by the public. Media theorists Bruns and Schmidt call these contemporary public subjectivities “producers” as they are no longer just consumers but also act as producers and transformative “users” of commodities. “Producers processes...are now evident across a wide range of activities (mainly online, but increasingly also extending to the offline world)—from citizen journalism and communal knowledge management through to collaborative artistic activities, from learner-led education models to citizen engagement in political processes.”²⁶ As marketers have known now for decades, corporations have come to be beholden to their publics for the ideas, energy, and inspiration to make corporations function and so the distinction between consumer and producer is failing. “We need to base our inquiries on a multiplicity of moments in an ongoing cycle of production and consumption, rather than on a bi-polar opposition between the two concepts that is clearly a modernist tendency. The consumer should now be viewed as a producer, as well as a consumer, of symbols and meanings that are incorporated into the symbolic system, which all human activity has become.”²⁷ The publics’ activity has increasingly become integral to contemporary governance, and that lends the public heavy influence on mass conduct. Critically however, the publics’ contemporary influence is too often exercised within the context set by corporate actors such that their influence remains bound to be exerted only over a relatively narrow range (paradigmatically consumer goods) and in narrowly prescribed formats (Facebook or Google reviews, for instance). Even given these bounds, it nevertheless remains that the reliance on the publics gives them the potential to subvert these bounds and affect change; we have seen examples everywhere from Kaepernick taking a knee to the #MeToo movement. Fuat and Dholakia, in their exploration of “producer culture” and “construer” (versus consumer) subjectivity,

acknowledge these worries but also find reason to be hopeful; “The construer, initially, will be a conflicted and stressed figure—attempting to write the script of participatory innovation, collaborative design, and democratic production and distribution on the (hopefully fading) palimpsest of powerful financescapes and brandscapes...[this] is inescapable, yet it does not portend paralysis as long as it is playfully and critically engaged.”²⁸ Perhaps there are seeds in the ‘post-truth’ era for more democratic relations of power, more egalitarian production of knowledge, and more active and puissant subjectivities, if only the constraints can be moved beyond those formulated by corporate propagandists a century and more ago.

¹ Edelman Foundation, *2018 Executive Summary*. .

² John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, *American Views: Trust, Media, and Democracy*, January 15, 2018, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-trust-media-and-democracy>.

³ Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, “Trump’s False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 Over 4 Years,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

⁴ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 8.

⁵ Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁶ John C. Long, *Public Relations: A Handbook of Publicity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1924), 1.

⁷ Mark R. Wilson, “Armour & Co.” In *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago*. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2554.html>.

⁸ Hayes Robbins, *Human Relations and Railroading* (New York: General Publishing Company 1927), vii–xi.

⁹ David Rosenberg, “Making Sense of Good Faith in Delaware Corporate Fiduciary Law: A Contractarian Approach,” *Delaware Journal of Corporate Law* 29 (2005): 491–516.

¹⁰ As quoted in Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 9.

¹¹ J.A. Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States* (Chicago: L.T. Palmer & Co., 1877), 28.

¹² Walter F. LaFeber, Richard Polenberg, and Nancy Woloch, *The American Century: A History of the United States Since the 1890s*, 6th ed. (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2013), 19.

¹³ Robbins, *Human Relations and Railroading*, x.

¹⁴ Historians have found that the term ‘public relations’ was used by Ivy Lee before Edward Bernays but it did not gain widespread usage until Bernays published *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, which used public relations to name the field. See Scott Cutlip, *The Unseen Power* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), 176–177.

¹⁵ Edward Bernays, interview, in *Century of the Self*, directed by Adam Curtis (2002; London: BBC, 2002), DVD. See also Cory Wimberly, *How Propaganda Became Public Relations: Foucault and the Corporate Government of the Public* (Routledge: New York, 2020), 1–4.

-
- ¹⁶ Ivy L. Lee, *Human Nature and the Railroads* (Philadelphia: E.S. Nash & Co., 1914), 8.
- ¹⁷ Lee, *Human Nature and the Railroads*, 14–16.
- ¹⁸ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: H. Liveright, 1928), 51.
- ¹⁹ Megan Hyska, “Propaganda, Irrationality, and Group Agency” in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2021), *forthcoming*.
- ²⁰ A Google search of the Fox News website alone on 2/26/2021 produced over 300 results for stories on the threat of relativism. For a financial accounting of total marketing spending in the United States’ economy see, A. Guttman, *Marketing Services Spending in the United States 2017–2021*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/987009/marketing-spending-us-category/>.
- ²¹ Donald Trump and Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 106.
- ²² Ivy L. Lee, *Publicity: Some of the Things It Is and Is Not* (New York: Industries Publishing Company, 1925), 44–45.
- ²³ Angelo Fichera and Saranac Hale Spencer, *Trump’s Long History With Conspiracy Theories*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/10/trumps-long-history-with-conspiracy-theories/>.
- ²⁴ Chris Cillizza, “This is the most Donald Trump interview Donald Trump has ever given,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/09/this-is-the-most-donald-trump-interview-donald-trump-has-ever-given/?postshare=3631449681203914>.
- ²⁵ Cutlip, *The Unseen Power*, 120, 772–773.
- ²⁶ A. Bruns and J.H. Schmidt, “Produsage: A closer look at continuing developments,” *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 17, no. 1 (2011): 3–7, as quoted in Fuat Firat and Nikhilesh Dholakia, “From consumer to construer: Travels in human subjectivity,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17, no. 3 (2016): 515.
- ²⁷ Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh, “Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, no. 3 (1995): 258.
- ²⁸ Firat and Dholakia, *From consumer to construer: Travels in human subjectivity*, 518.

WORKS CITED:

- Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. New York: H. Liveright, 1928.
- Bruns, A. and J.H. Schmidt. “Produsage: A closer look at continuing developments.” *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 17, no. 1 (2011): 3–7.
- Curtis, Adam, dir. *Century of the Self*. London: BBC, 2002; DVD.
- Cutlip, Scott. *The Unseen Power*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994.
- Dacus, J.A. *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States*. Chicago: L.T. Palmer & Co., 1877.
- Edelman Foundation. *2018 Executive Summary*. Edelman.
https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018_Edelman_TrustBarometer_Executive_Summary_Jan.pdf
- Fichera, Angelo and Saranac Hale Spencer. *Trump’s Long History With Conspiracy Theories*. Factcheck. October 20, 2020, <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/10/trumps-long-history-with-conspiracy-theories/>.
- Firat, Fuat and Alladi Venkatesh. “Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, no. 3 (1995): 239–267.
- Firat, Fuat and Nikhilesh Dholakia. “From consumer to construer: Travels in human subjectivity.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17, no. 3 (2016): 504–522.

-
- Guttmann, A. *Marketing Services Spending in the United States 2017–2021*. Statista. March 2, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/987009/marketing-spending-us-category/>.
- Hyska, Megan. "Propaganda, Irrationality, and Group Agency." In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. New York: Routledge, *forthcoming*.
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. *American Views: Trust, Media, and Democracy*. Knight Foundation. January 15, 2018, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-trust-media-and-democracy>.
- Kessler Glenn, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly. "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 Over 4 Years." *Washington Post*. January 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.
- LaFeber, Walter F., Richard Polenberg, and Nancy Woloch. *The American Century: A History of the United States Since the 1890s*, 6th edition. London: M.E. Sharpe, 2013.
- Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Lee, Ivy L. *Human Nature and the Railroads*. Philadelphia: E.S. Nash & Co., 1914.
- Lee, Ivy L. *Publicity: Some of the Things It Is and Is Not*. New York: Industries Publishing Company, 1925.
- Long, John C. *Public Relations: A Handbook of Publicity*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1924.
- Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Robbins, Hayes. *Human Relations and Railroad*. New York: General Publishing Company 1927.
- Rosenberg, David. "Making Sense of Good Faith in Delaware Corporate Fiduciary Law: A Contractarian Approach." *Delaware Journal of Corporate Law* 29 (2005): 491-516.
- Trump, Donald and Tony Schwartz. *Trump: The Art of the Deal*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1987.
- Wilson, Mark R. "Armour & Co." *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago*. March 1, 2019, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2554.html>.
- Wimberly, Cory. *How Propaganda Became Public Relations: Foucault and the Corporate Government of the Public*. Routledge: New York, 2020.