The Future of Institutions in a 'Post-Truth' Era

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When Oxford Dictionaries named "post-truth" the 2016 word of the year, it set off alarm bells. Some in society rushed to assure us that in actuality we "cannot be post-truth"[1]; while others sought to explain "how we arrived in a post-truth era, when 'alternative facts' replace actual facts, and feelings have more weight than evidence."[2]

The idea of a post-truth era is especially disconcerting as it affects the foundation of our institutions. Historian Niall Ferguson, has suggested that a

"great degeneration" is occurring in four specific institutions: capitalism, a civil society, democracy, and the rule of law.[3]Especially exposed are institutions that erode through their friction with other institutions.[4]

For us to think effectively, then, about the threat to institutions posed by the 'post-truth' phenomenon, we need to consider three things: (1) a specification of what we are talking about when we use the word 'institution'; (2) an articulation of the mechanisms through which institutions arise, persist, and erode; and (3) some specific suggestions to consider, to address the threats of a 'post-truth' era.

Institutions

When we use the word "institution" we mean the generally-accepted "patterns of activity through which humans conduct their material life in time and space, and symbolic systems through which they categorize that activity and infuse it with meaning."[5] Thus, democracy, for example, is understood to include the patterns of voting, majority decision-making, and regular elections that enable a democratically-elected government to be accepted as legitimate. The nature of each institution is supported by an explanation for how and why that institution works the way it does (i.e., the *institutional logic* for that institutional order). Thus, as explained nearly 30 years ago by two noted social scientists, Roger Friedland and Robert Alford:

… each of the most important institutional orders of contemporary Western societies has a central logic—a set of material practices and symbolic constructions—which constitutes its organizing principles and which is available to organizations and individuals to elaborate. The institutional logic of capitalism is accumulation and the commodification of human activity. That of the state is rationalization and the regulation of human activity by legal and bureaucratic hierarchies. That of democracy is participation and the extension of popular control over human activity. That of the family is community and the motivation of human activity by unconditional loyalty to its members and their reproductive needs. [emphasis added][6]

Which brings me to this question: What if the logic of one institution becomes so pervasive that it begins to erode some of the other institutions with which it interacts? In particular, it is beginning to appear that the institutional logic for capitalism—accumulation, and the commodification of human activity—which requires in essence that "commodity producers attempt to convert all actions

into the buying and selling of commodities that have a monetary price,"[7]has created conditions ripe for a 'post-truth' era.

We get into truth-trouble due to the commodification of material goods and services, because exchange is based on demand for these goods and services. As a market-system society we have accepted the practice of creating or augmenting *meaning* to create demand, for example, when advertising is used to attach status to a particular brand of car. In short, meaning *must be manufactured*, so that great volumes of goods and services move, and so that exchange occurs within an economy.[8] In our capitalism-based economy, this means marketing. And in this sense, marketing requires the *manufacture of meaning* in ways that now have come perilously close, if not actually become, the mechanism (which all of us now take for granted as an institution) that propels the acceptance of 'post-truth' thinking.[9] Our willingness to take marketing for granted, then, enables 'meaning-manufacture' to persist as an accepted institutional logic within the institution of capitalism. This persistence is magnified with the rise of social media. The manufacture of mass meaning—previously restricted to mass media (e.g., newspapers, radio and television)—is now open to anyone who seeks to "market" an idea (fact or not) as truth. Hence in this sense, the 'post-truth' phenomenon can be seen as an outgrowth of the marketing mechanisms of capitalism.

Thus, it appears to me that the institutional logic for capitalism that provides incentives for 'meaning-manufacture' (and therefore sustains and supports the existence of such post-truth phenomena as alternative facts), erodes other core institutions (in addition to capitalism) such as civil society, democracy, and rule of law (each of which depend upon facts to function well). In our present situation, the (now) inevitable clash between the institutional logic of capitalism and that of truth can have profound implications for the efforts of those who seek to preserve and strengthen the institutions of society because *without* these efforts lies degeneration, while *with them* lies preservation. This, however, brings up the second element needed for us to think effectively about preserving and strengthening the core institutions of society: What are the mechanisms through which institutions arise, persist, and erode?

Institutional Mechanisms at Work

The actions that members of society take to influence institutions have been termed "institutional work."[10] Institutional work has three main functions: institutional creation (arise), maintenance (persist), and disruption (erode).[11] It seems reasonable to assume that the way to counter a post-truth-driven degeneration of key institutions is to cancel out the mechanisms of disruption using the mechanisms of creation or maintenance. Let's look at two examples to illustrate what I mean. In each case, those doing the institutional work have sought to maintain the 'function' of the institution by changing its 'form' to diminish institutional erosion.

First, in a recent study of the world's most-influential business school accreditation body, the AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business – International), two noted organizational scholars have explained "how an institution maintains its impact … in the face of change."[12] To maintain its influence, the AACSB had to expand its membership beyond elite schools to include business schools that otherwise wouldn't meet their standards. They did it by changing their criteria for accreditation from a focus on curricular and administrative standards, to a mission-based system, under "which schools are accredited, based on their work toward accomplishing their particular missions … [and] by making this change, the number of schools that could potentially qualify for accreditation increased considerably."[13]

In the second case, in a different setting, two other noteworthy organization scholars have explained how in the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, the deputy finance minister who became Prime Minister and later President, and other 'institutional workers', shepherded the post-communist economy transition—from a centrally-planned economy to a market-based economy—by preserving specific rules and norms during a tumultuous period.[14] They did this by decoupling form (what people saw) from function (what actually was occurring):

To accomplish these goals required institutional entrepreneurship to: (a) create new structures, while simultaneously (b) deinstitutionalizing managerial and administrative frameworks already in place, and (c) deciding which elements from the existing institutional structures to preserve. [15]

In both cases, key institutional logics (i.e., the actual functions of the institution) were preserved, while the form was changed to resist erosion. The

AACSB preserved their legitimacy, by changing from content to mission-driven criteria for accreditation. The new CDP (Civic Democratic party) preserved a functioning economy (e.g. to protect it, unlike Russia, from global raiders) through form-changing institutional work, in particular, "(1) decoupling structure from activity, and (2) the establishment of the logic of confidence and good faith."[16]

So then, using these examples as a template, what institutional work should people who seek to preserve truth in a so-called 'post-truth' era undertake? How can we preserve the function despite or through changes in form?

Preserving Truth in a 'Post-truth' Era

We know that the institutions of capitalism, civil society, democracy, and rule of law, all depend upon truth to work effectively. We also know that in a capitalism-based marketing culture now exposed to accelerated meaning manufacture via social media, "when 'alternative facts' replace actual facts, and feelings have more weight than evidence,"[17] truth can be manipulated as never before. What function must be preserved from the 'truth' era in function, and what must be its form?

The answer—but in newer form—is the one that's tried and true: "One must always fight back against lies…A lie is told because the person telling it thinks there is a chance that someone will believe it."[18] Verification thus is the core function of the logic of truth. It's form, however, is in flux.

I envision improvements in the form of verification, for example, through the use of artificial intelligence and big data to produce readily available and generally-accepted factuality indices that measure and can report the veracity level of virtually any assertion. These would be similar to the way that a thermometer measures and reports temperature virtually anywhere. For this to occur, however, the specifications for assertions to qualify as 'facts' must be tightened in the information space. Noted psychologist and philosopher, William James, gave us a place to start. He said that "true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify,"[19] despite the reality that, as suggested by philosopher, Simon Blackburn:

these questions may belong to many kinds of subject matter—empirical, theoretical, mathematical, moral, aesthetic, legal, religious—and in each domain there should be procedures for rectifying doubt or ignorance.[20]

It therefore is important that as we go about deciding the do's and don'ts of protecting the information space from post-truth institutional logic, we try as much as possible to prevent or counter the "pollution" of the informational environment. Thereby we can rebuff the most damaging institutional disruptions from post-truth, to preserve and strengthen the institutions that are core to a good society.[21]

Endnotes:

[1] Illing, S. 2018. A philosopher explains America's "post-truth" problem. From an interview with philosopher Simon Blackburn, https://www.vox.com/2018/8/14/17661430/trump-post-truth-politic-philosophy-simon-blackburn

[2] McIntyre, L. 2018. *Post-truth*. Cambridge MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

[3] Ferguson, N. 2012. *The great degeneration. How institutions decay and economies die*. New York: Penguin.

[4] Lawrence, T. Suddaby, R., & Leca, B. 2009. *Institutional work: Actors and Agency in institutional studies of organizations*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

[5] Friedland, R., & Alford, R.R. 1991. Bringing society back in: Symbols, practices, and institutional contradictions. In *The New institutionalism in organizational analysis*, Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, Eds., p. 232. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

[6] Ibid., p. 248.

[7] Ibid., p. 249.

[8] McCracken, G. 1988. Meaning manufacture and movement in the world of goods. In *Culture and Consumption*, pp., 71-92. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.

[9] Others think that post-modernist thinking also has contributed. See e.g. Blackburn, S. 2018. *On truth*, p. 71. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

[10] Lawrence, T. Suddaby, R., & Leca, B. 2009.

[11] Lawrence, T, B., & Suddaby, R. 2006.

[12] Quinn-Trank, C., & Washington, M. 2009. Maintaining an institution in a contested organizational field: the work of the AACSB and its constituents. In Lawrence, T. Suddaby, R., & Leca, B. Eds. *Institutional work: Actors and Agency in institutional studies of organizations*, pp. 236-261. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

[13] Ibid., p. 241.

[14] Hirsch, P. M. & Bermiss, S. 2009. Institutional "dirty" work: Preserving institutions through strategic decoupling. In Lawrence, T. Suddaby, R., & Leca, B. Eds. *Institutional work: Actors and Agency in institutional studies of organizations*, pp. 262-283. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

[15] Ibid., p 275.

[16] Ibid., p. 273.

[17] McIntyre, 2018.

[18] Ibid., p. 155.

[19] James, W. 1907. *Pragmatism*, p. 197. New York: Longmans, Green & Co.

[20] Blackburn, S. 2018. *On truth*, p. 71. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

[21] Ferguson, 2012, pp. 11, 18-19.