

Part One. Facts, dissimulation and fake news: from truth as correspondence to truth as strategy

1. In June 2018, at a series of seminars given in Bonn on the topic of the event, I spoke about the relation between process signs and events. One of the recurring debates in the seminars turned around the question of truth. The context for the requests for a definition of truth was varied. It was topical, given the importance of truth claims in current political and scientific worlds (around fake news and denialism, for instance). It was also philosophical, given the expectation that the process philosophy of signs and events I was proposing should have something to say about truth in a world undergoing a supposed crisis of veracity.

2. I say supposed crisis because it is not obvious the world has ever been awash with truthfulness. It seems more likely that the ways in which truth is lost or concealed vary according to changes in political power, to shifts between the parts of society entrusted with truth and to technical innovations controlling our access to it. It is not clear that the transfer from established sources of news, such as national state-funded television channels, to user-fed social networks constitutes a loss of truth rather than a change in its constitution and transmission, where early and late media have different ways of revealing and concealing truth.

3. Emily Bell makes the point that the barriers between information ‘have and have-nots’ are lower with new technologies rather than traditional publishing; investigating truth for oneself has become easier. Bell was writing in 2006 and it is harder – in 2019 – to accept her optimistic claim about ‘entering a new age of enlightenment for mass communication’ given recent scandals about Facebook and elections. Her wider technical point about barriers to investigation and dissemination remains a good one, even if the lowering of those barriers also means higher risks around false information. Though how much longer it will be a good point is moot. The monetisation of access to the internet and to sources of information is moving very fast and in highly unstable ways. For instance, the move to improve general access to academic research has been accompanied by rising costs and more research behind paywalls, or in prohibitively costly yet more numerous books – that’s partly why you are reading this on my personal website. More seriously, in an age where the internet has become essential for aid and information, populations are denied access to the internet through poverty, repression and punishment.²

4. So what is truth? How should truth be defined for signs taken as processes? The second question involves presuppositions about the problem of truth:

¹ This is the paper behind my freeform talk at The Politics of (Post) Truth conference at Cumberland Lodge, October 7-8, 2018. Somewhat tangentially, the paper seeks to address the question ‘How can we better understand (post) truth?’ posed by the conference organisers: Laura Garcia, Tom Watts, Hannah Richter, Chris Henry and Guillermo Reyes Pascual. I am grateful to them for their organisation and running of a stimulating and thought-provoking event.

² Emily Bell, ‘Fact-Mongering Online’ in Julia Hobsbawm (ed.) *Where the Truth Lies: Trust and Morality in the Business of PR, Journalism and Communications*, London: Atlantic Books, 2006, pp 10-17, esp. p 17

- a. Truth is not simply something that is 'out there' as fact. Truth is constructed rather than merely discovered and we should therefore ask what it should be like, rather than what it is;
- b. The construction of truth is not free, but rather subject to pragmatic constraints, as well as positive and negative consequences. We should therefore think how truth ought to be constructed in relation to those constraints and towards a maximisation of positive effects;
- c. There is no truth independent of signs. Truth is constructed through them. As such, truth is always a political and ethical interpretation and fabrication of signs;
- d. The signs truth operates on should be understood as processes, rather than fixed entities counting as solid facts or as invariant carriers of meaning. Truth is an interaction with fluctuating signs rather than stable entities.

Taken together these assumptions lead to another version of the question of truth. How should truth be made and criticised, as an attitude and responsibility towards the handling and transformation of signs? That is the main question for the remainder of this essay – working towards the answer that truth should be defined as the fullest.

5. The process version of truth is antithetical to ideas of truth as mere correspondence to matters of fact, as possible independent of manipulation, and as a straightforward moral good. It is therefore antithetical to the idea that truth leads to the good through a neutral or objective representation of the world. This idea is replaced by with the view that truth can be pursued well or badly, that the construction of truth varies in degrees of truthfulness, and that it should be subject to pragmatic ethical and political principles.

6. The position I defend in Part B of the essay therefore calls for something more than the idea of truth captured in the contemporary movement towards fact-checking. This is not to deny the importance of facts and checking them, but rather to say that fact-checking is an incomplete approach to facts and to truth in two ways. First, it is incomplete in the facts it produces. Second, it is incomplete as production of truth. Put more starkly, fact-checking provides limited evidence but not truth. When reduced to checked facts, truth is distorted.

7. To take a simple and prevalent example, fact-checking frequently involves verifying whether something was said and then checking that statement against some evidence. Here is *Libération's* exemplary fact-checking service cross-checking a statement by Laurent Wauquiez of the *Les Républicains* party in France: "France is the country that takes the most refugees" dixit Wauquiez. True or false? False. France is ninth in the list of EU countries according protection to refugees relative to population.³ Independent of the motivations for Wauquiez to distort the facts, the checking of his statement counters the dissemination of information liable to create false impressions about refugees and France. So why isn't this a sufficient approach to truth? Why might it even be detrimental to truth?

³ https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/2018/09/28/la-france-est-le-pays-qui-accueille-le-plus-de-refugies-dixit-wauquiez-vrai-ou-faux_1681801

8. To answer these questions, I'll reverse the positions and investigate the claims to truth of fact-checking itself. The practice of verification is seen as important because it unmask false statements. To do this it makes statements about whether a claim has been made and whether it conforms to the facts. When successful, fact-checking has uttered a truth-by-correspondence counter to a falsehood. The problem is that its statements about facts are insufficient as communications of truth about the topics they touch upon; they add supporting evidence, but the statements they verify are only part of wider claims to truth, with broad effects and contexts.

9. That Wauquiez uttered something counter to fact is only a step towards deciding about him relative to other politicians and sources of information, in a world of competing ideologies where truthfulness by politicians is at best a relative term. Fact is a piece of evidence; it corroborates in a particular way. It might be a necessary step under certain conditions. However, it is neither sufficient nor neutral.

10. Politicians manipulate facts to bolster an ideology and a set of political claims and objectives. We window dress facts to further individual and group ambitions, to satisfy the demands of a particular set of clients and funders, to bend to the requirements of personal and corporate marketing, and to satisfy the wide range of desires running through us. Against this, the checking of statements determines their correspondence to facts. However, this scrutiny is insufficient. Facts do not amount to the whole truth of any political position, nor is fact-checking always an effective critical tool. In terms of the truth of Wauquiez's politics, beyond the falsity of the figures of his statement on refugees, it is also important whether it is right and good to welcome refugees. Facts alone cannot determine the truth and value of a statement about the future such as 'It will be better for France to welcome all refugees' or an ethical statement like 'It is France's duty, with its violent history as a colonial nation, to welcome all refugees'. Furthermore, fact-checking verifies proposed facts, rather than the strategies of selection and the often hidden ideologies, desires and goals they are designed to support. This is significant because critical fact-checking can become part of a political strategy that invites checking in order to further distort truth, by focusing the investigation on unimportant or unhelpful evidence. This happens, for instance, when an apparently fact-based marketing campaign is designed to keep attention on strengths and away from weaknesses.

11. If it is taken as a sufficient view of truth, the problem with fact-checking is that it leaves us in a weak position with respect to understanding, criticising and resolving larger questions about truth. These questions focus on strategy, prediction, speculation, rightfulness, goodness and ideology. It also encourages us to think about truth as encompassed in a series of neutral facts, when these are themselves constructed and dependent on larger systems. If we are to counter false moves in any of those spheres, under certain conditions we will need fact-checking, but we'll require much more and, in particular, we'll need a different understanding of truth than the one implied by the current concern with facts as counter to untruths.

12. If we define truth as simply reporting facts, then a sophisticated operation of dissimulation under an avalanche of facts, or through selective presentation of facts, by a PR firm during a scandal can be defined as truth-telling. These PR operations are attempts to crowd out or forestall unwanted investigation and examination; to take control of the story. The propositions they disseminate certainly correspond to reality, but they are also attempts to curtail and silence other truths and

other facts. Ethically and politically they are reprehensible attitudes to truth. They aren't fully truth-telling at all, but rather ways of lying by telling truths, if we define lying as strategically stating one thing in order to hide another thing that others might benefit from discovering. Note how fact-checking contributes to this avalanche of facts, thereby diluting any given checked fact among many others.

13. Public Relations activities do not need to be fraudulent. They can be presented as ethical truth-telling strategies. For the practice of getting all the negative sides of a story out quickly to avoid a deeper investigation, Simon Walker gives this pungent advice to other PR professionals: 'If you have a pile of dung in your front hall, you must take the biggest shovel available and get it outside as rapidly as possible. It minimizes the damage, and gets over what is inevitable.'⁴ With its apparently honest approach, this seems like an ethical attitude to truth and to facts. However, the reason speed and scale are important is not honesty but control, and the reason control is important is to make sure unwanted enquiries, judgements, facts and stories do not gain traction against different claims to truth implied by aims, positions, constructions and ideologies. In PR, honesty and truth are subsumed into a strategy about publicity, damage control and the retention of power.

14. In his advice for PR professionals, Walker is outlining a subtle form of manipulation, like the publishing of unwelcome government news just before Christmas, or making sure your version of the facts remains on top of internet searches by paying search engine and social network providers, or attracting positive reviews through incentives, or controlling feedback through the nature of online forms, or carefully crafting the questions on a survey to achieve a given outcome, or selecting the right graph or statistic to underpin an argument when others aren't quite so supportive, or setting a news item in the 'right' context, or working towards a goal through a series of unconscious nudges. The aim here is obfuscation through true propositions. In a prescient warning, Andrew St George pointed to the importance of search engines for crisis management in PR, his warning was well-heeded and making sure you stay in the top results for any search is both imperative and very expensive (a sense of the large sums involved can be garnered from the €2.4bn fine handed down to Google by the European Commission in 2017 for promoting Google Shopping in search results).⁵

15. The important point here is not about how businesses manage the reception of bad news, but rather about how any set of facts depends upon and changes a scene. This scene is multi-dimensional, because it brings together all the different claims and processes around truth. Facts are brought to the fore thanks to their scene and in order to change it. This occurs not only in a crowded space of information (the competition between different facts) but also according to a wide range of times (the differing time-scales of different strategies to truth and claims on attention). So a fact is never a relation to a neutral space, determined by a statement's denotation of a state of affairs. Statements of fact take place in complex systems of funnel and tunnel effects working over time.

⁴ Simon Walker, 'A Long Way from Watergate' in Julia Hobsbawm (ed.) *Where the Truth Lies: Trust and Morality in the Business of PR, Journalism and Communications*, London: Atlantic Books, 2006, pp 212-221, esp. p 215.

⁵ Nick Wood 'Google slapped with €2.4bn EU fine, Total Telecom Online, 27 June 2017, Terrapin Holdings Ltd) Andrew St George 'Crises and their Discontents' in Julia Hobsbawm (ed.) *Where the Truth Lies: Trust and Morality in the Business of PR, Journalism and Communications*, London: Atlantic Books, 2006, pp 200-211, esp. p 211

They bring a vast reserve of information to a more limited scene – the funnel effect. This scene then presents this more limited number to an equally complicated mix of claims, aims and types of attention – the tunnel effect. The right analogy for truth claims is therefore never one-to-one relations, but rather the imposition of a new network on a changing grid of dependencies. Truth-making is more like building new avenues and sightlines through an old town than drawing a line between two well-known places.

16. *Libération* and its outstanding fact-checking service are a good example of scene-making, funnel and tunnel effects, and the demands on attention that accompany any presentation of facts. Adapting to changes in modern media, politics and financing (including a long running funding crisis abetted by a wealthy backer) the once Maoist newspaper has gradually moved further right.⁶ Since the 1980s, it has shifted further: from in-depth political and social analysis and reporting, still with a left-wing stance, to a site for many groups to transmit information (via blogs, for instance) and an overall fact-checking and truth-telling role responsive to readers' questions (as chosen by the newspaper). On the 31st of December 2018, the newspaper dedicated its front page to celebrating its own 'checknews.fr' service and its answers to readers' most 'subtle and strange' questions during the year.⁷ *Libération* has shifted scene from a coherent political angle directing many different kinds of reporter-led news items, to a much more fragmented but fact-based testimony and critique. The generally left and humanist funnelling of news and commentary from an in-house newsroom has been replaced by a more disparate and event-led aggregation of news, opinion and fact-checking. In turn, this calls for a different kind of attention from readers. It is based on scanning according to an already established interest that seeks confirmation, rather than the more in-depth and cover-to-cover reading that took place before digitisation and the competition for more flighty interest that accompanies it. The shifts are far-reaching with respect to truth, since critical engagement works differently between the slow and deep challenge presented by a consistent view and the fast and confirming function of fact checking. These distinctions are neither fixed in their values nor their opposition; consistency can work too fast as well, when it leaves a reader in the comfort of a given ideology or common sense. Speedy confirmation also has slow and long term effects when repeated over time, such as the gradual setting of an opinion through repeated minor confirmations.

17. Facts relevant to power, ideology, social structures and classes don't disappear in the shift from a simple relation to a scene about processes. They become less clear-cut, more varied and less homogenous – more truthful. They take their place in a complex web of many types of evidence and many perspectives on society, requiring further theories and ideas to draw them together. The scene of fact-checking is a construction, with effects on truth that cannot simply be understood as truths or lies. For instance, where *Libération* was once generally critical of ruling parties and market forces, it is now predominantly an aggregator of news sources and blogs, and a defender of facts. In its commitment to step-by-step improvement through truth-telling, it can be seen as upholding a positive version of the current political and economic status quo, by showing how it is open to stepwise improvement and worth defending when threatened by what it defines as extremism, whether from the left or right.

⁶ <https://www.revue-internationale.com/2011/06/liberation-de-sartre-a-rothschild/>

⁷ <https://www.liberation.fr/liseuse/publication/31-12-2018/1/>

18. The idea of lies as particularly damaging and hence reprehensible lends support to the critical power of fact-checking. The standard definition of a lie is 'a false statement made with intent to deceive' (I have given a different definition as 'strategically stating one thing in order to hide another thing that others might benefit from discovering'). The idea of a false statement supports the connection to facts and the possibility of checking the basis of the statement against them (in the sense of checking a statement such as 'The policeman was called a plebeian').⁸ The idea of *intent* avoids categorising well-intentioned departures from the facts as lies (for example, when someone stated that their VW diesel did not emit high levels of particulates, prior to the emissions scandal, though subsequently it was shown that the car was highly polluting). However, both these conditions are of little use in refuting the political and PR strategies of telling unhelpful truths, such as the now wearingly familiar politician's tactic of answering a different question to the one posed.⁹

19. For the conflict between fact-checking and the spreading of unhelpful truths, the deep problem is not about false statements but the misuse of true ones. It is not about the intention to deceive, the origin of the statement, but about weighing up the different effects of statements: their wider patterns of consequences. Facts are an essential aspect of these strategic concerns, when a correspondence to a state of affairs is to be established, but truth as concern and product of strategy goes well beyond fact and extends instead to models, worldviews and ideologies, in their relation to time, forecasting and values. Crucially, it is not the case that fact-checking or scientific models do not imply ideologies, since they imply scenes, as well as funnel and tunnel effects. For instance, when economists claim to be ideology free, they are also making a wide series of assumptions, not only about values, but also about their own experiments and around their theories. When Simon Wren-Lewis says that 'an ideology is a collection of ideas that can form a political imperative that overrides evidence' he is missing the point that the selection and dissemination of evidence also involves ideologies.¹⁰ There is ideology in the selection, presentation and prioritisation of evidence, because evidence presupposes and constructs a particular scene. It funnels a wide range of information and then tunnels attention to it. None of this is ideology neutral.

20. An understanding of the transition from fact to strategy can be gained from games and their evolution. The facts about the state of a game are significant but incomplete variables in any strategy for playing it. For instance, in poker, the cards on the table need to be extended through models of the behaviour, skills and aims of the players and these extra factors are not about facts but about signs: uncertain and changeable windows on to a world calling for open-ended interpretation. Strategy is about the mobility of facts; it is about uncertain and changeable events and environments before they become tamed into fact. An early feel for the trend to professional online card sharks was very important in avoiding losing large amounts of money, because apparent amateurs were operating a bait and switch strategy once their opponents were in deep enough. All such hoodwinks depend on a grey area as situations shift. The sweat on the brow of an opposing poker player might be a 'tell', but then it might not be, this hot summer. Even in chess, strategy has

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989

⁹ There's a particularly excruciating example of the genre of non-answers in Theresa May's evasive responses to questions posed by the dogged reporter Michael Crick about her past actions to secure the release of Nelson Mandela before her visit to Robben Island in August 2018. <https://www.channel4.com/news/what-did-you-do-to-help-the-release-of-nelson-mandela-theresa-may-questioned-over-apartheid-stance>

¹⁰ <https://mainlymacro.blogspot.com/2019/05/why-are-we-governed-by-incompetents.html>

to be extended into the different abilities of opponents and wider context of the game; for example, in players' capacities to operate under the time constraints of various stages of tournament chess.¹¹ The role of strategic concerns for truth is underappreciated when we associate truth and facts too strongly. Similarly, economic models depend on boundaries over time in relation to probabilities, but that's to make a series of assumptions about the desirability of those boundaries and about the different degrees of confidence we are going to aim for, both for the models themselves and what we want them to guide us about. It might be the case that we should value a boundary 50 years hence, even if this cannot be modelled well. To claim that a short boundary is better is already ideological, as is the assumption that we should seek the greater good (or indeed the good only for a few).

21. When he returned to the idea of the society of the spectacle in 1988, the situationist philosopher Guy Debord analysed the strategic importance of the practice of accusing others of disinformation. The standard definition of disinformation is very close to the standard definition of a lie. Disinformation is 'false information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media.'¹² If we follow Debord, the simple definition fails to take account of how the label of disinformation is part of a wider strategy about truth. The definition therefore perpetuates the belief that truthful statements about facts and intentions are sufficient to counter strategies of disinformation and alleging disinformation. This is incorrect because those strategies are not about facts but about deflection. Their primary aim is not about true or false statements, but about manipulating critical attention.

22. Debord focuses on disinformation as an allegation made against others (similar to the cry of 'fake news'). Alleging disinformation is a practice with these features:

1. Imported from Russia, disinformation serves the management of modern states
2. It is used by economic and political actors holding at least a fragment of power to maintain 'that which has been established'
3. It always has a function of counter-offense
4. Defenders of that which has been established are concerned with disinformation because it contains a portion of truth dangerous to them
5. The accusation of disinformation is not to defend a pure truth but rather to deflect criticism by labelling it as without significance.

For Debord, disinformation is a relatively new strategy. Against the standard definition, it is not a label attributed to a statement, but rather a strategy used by agents when they imply disinformation is used against them. Disinformation pertains to the management of states or portions of them. It is deployed from a position of power to protect something established counter to a new challenge. The aim is to bury any truth carried by that challenge by accusing it of manipulation and blunting its critical force by picturing it as insignificant.

¹¹ The Carlsen defeat of Caruana in the rapid games of the 2018 World Chess Championship, after a draw in the long form ones, is an example of these strategic variables based on different abilities.
<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/live/2018/nov/28/magnus-carlsen-v-fabiano-caruana-world-chess-championship-tie-breakers-live>

¹² 'Disinformation' Oxford English Dictionary definition

23. Examples of disinformation, in Debord's sense, would be the undermining of a critical press by accusing it of fake news, or a company imputing some part of a legitimate attack against it to the jealousy of its competitors, or an academic group dismissing a valid criticism by attacking the wider theories of another group, or a politician answering a correct critical statement from another party by attacking its ideology or social aims. In each case, truth is drowned out thanks to the suggestion that it depends on a broader and flawed wider set of motivations. The metaphor of drowning is significant here. In each of these cases, the important points are: first, the critical truth is not disproved; second, the accusation of disinformation cannot be dismissed as a lie; third, truth is obscured because critical points are lost to more general and vague accusations. In an allegation of disinformation truth is submerged and loses its critical power. It is not refuted.¹³

24. The allegation of disinformation also teaches us about truth as something dependent on facts but going beyond them. Truth doesn't only play out in the realm of facts but also in the realm of pictures with their influence on a scene. The point of strategy isn't ever to simply tell the truth. For the power deploying the allegation of disinformation the point is to picture an attack as insignificant. The picture frames something – in the double sense of delineating it and setting it up. For the critical attack itself, once the label and picture of disinformation stick, there has to be a strategy designed to counter the allegation. Is repeating facts enough of a strategy in this case?

25. I use the term 'picture' in contrast to 'proposition'. This is to convey the sense of an artefact with meaning, significance and effects irreducible to a set of claims to be verified against reality. Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* has a history and a very complicated reference, but what it can teach us, its strategic truthfulness, extends far beyond the various referents we can identify.¹⁴ The painting is truthful and important, not only because it can be reduced to a series of propositions traceable to facts, but also because it carries a wider series of meanings, sensations and effects. Paintings like *Nightwatch*, *Bharat Mata*, or *Guernica*, or *Travellers among Mountains and Streams*, or *Liberty Leading the People* can be co-opted into strategies of truth and politics that exceed their simple subject matter; for example, when they become part of nationalist propaganda, or signals for a cherished golden age, or touchstones for remembrance, or sparks for new waves of creativity and action.

¹³ Still young, the concept of disinformation has recently been imported from Russia, along with many other inventions useful for the management of modern states. It is always highly used by a power or, as a corollary, by those holding a fragment of political or economic authority, to maintain that which has been established; and always by using it in a counter-offensive function... Contrary to a pure lie, disinformation must always include a portion of truth, but deliberately manipulated by a capable enemy, and that's why it is of interest for defenders of the dominant society. A power that speaks of disinformation does not believe itself to be absolutely faultless, but it knows it will be able to attribute the excessive lack of significance natural to disinformation to any precise criticism; thereby it will never have to admit to any particular fault. Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988, p 51 [my translation]

¹⁴ For instance, we can seek to verify propositions ascribing each painted figure to the militiamen of the Damrak and Nieuwendijk watches, but the significance and truth of Rembrandt appearing in his own painting, or of his inclusion of children in the work, are matters beyond simple correspondence yet of greater interest and import than correspondence to historical figures for questions about the importance of painters and the meaning of children in portraits of adults. Willem Hijmans, Luitsen Kuiper, Annemarie Vels Heijn *Rembrandt's Nightwatch*, Alphen aan den Rijn: A. W. Sijthoff, 1978, pp 46-66

26. The cases of a press release and an iconic painting explain why I claim truth is about signs. The text handed to the press, or the interview with the director of a company, or the paintings chosen by incoming politicians from the national art collection to adorn their new offices are signs. Critical journalists must interpret these signs to arrive at a sense of what is being done to truths about a situation by these new signs.

27. These process signs have very wide boundaries in terms of influences and effects: the process ripples inwards and outwards. A short sign such as Elon Musk's notorious tweet about the Tesla car company ('Am considering taking Tesla private at \$420. Funding secured'¹⁵) ended up requiring knowledge of the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia and of the effects of the hypnotic drug Ambien when taken with wine¹⁶ to begin to assess its truthfulness in relation to factual claims such as 'the funding was *legally* secured at date of tweet', 'Elon Musk was *lucidly* considering taking Tesla private around the time of the tweet' or 'the tweet was part of a wider private equity scheme'.

28. Strategies about facts and disinformation act upon truth, not only directly, by unmasking lies or pushing critical points away, but also indirectly, in revaluing or devaluing the currency of enquiry and exploiting a richer picture. These strategies and the cynicism or enthusiasms they can breed are unavoidable, because they are built into the structure of truth. This is a controversial claim, since it denies truth can be decided by correspondence to facts or by logical analysis.

29. Truth by correspondence to a matter of fact is always vulnerable to a regression, where each checked proposition leads to others also requiring verification in an endless subdivision. For instance, in the financial forensics needed to check a statement such as 'funding secured', we could stop at someone's corroborating word, or at a particular contract, but the value of the contract depends on further tangible guarantees, themselves dependent on further accounted assets, themselves dependent on valuations, themselves dependent on assumptions about currencies, interest rates, the fluidity of markets, and assumptions about risk, themselves dependent on fluid and open debates in economics and politics. Even if there is consensus at a given time, this comes from agreements that are open to change and challenge and from simple facts.

30. The practice of fact-checking depends on the idea that a fact can be decided upon, given a set of restrictions. This idea is reinforced when there is an assumption that some kind of lie has been committed, making the check easier, since all it needs to do is uncover the specific untruth, which serves as the restricting criterion. However, if we assume the fact is itself controversial, then regress, debate and justified disagreement come to the fore. If we discount certain strong versions of determinism, any statement about the future falls into this controversial category, but so does any statement dependent on an inaccessible or ambiguous or manipulated state, such as a belief or an intention or an artificially restricted choice – as shown by the difficult factual status of self-reports, in opinion polls and experimental philosophy, when the report is taken as basis for broader claims and explanations.

¹⁵ <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/07/tesla-stock-jumps-on-musks-tweet-that-he-is-considering-taking-compan.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/17/ambien-elon-musk-roseanne-celebrities-blame-sedative-behaviour>

31. Statements with unclear locations in space and time are also problematic, since fact-checking will have to obtain and check those before the fact can be verified. Facts about values are difficult too, as are facts that are relative to vague conventions. When a statement is important it will impinge on the future, involve unclear or even no boundaries and rest upon or recommend relative values. Furthermore, fact checking depends on wider ideas and agreement about meaning. Even at the first check of a statement, there has to be some semantic agreement about the meaning of the initial proposition; for instance, whether 'funding secured' means that there is secured funding backed by collateral or whether there has been a much looser verbal or other agreement to fund.

32. None of this means we cannot check these facts or that checking them is not necessary. However, in order to check facts well and for this checking to matter, we need a wider context set by models, ideologies, strategies, semantics, values and ways of defining truth going beyond facts and logical implications. My contention is that we need a process definition of truth in relation to signs: truth defined as the fullest.

Part B. Truth as the fullest

33. In defining truth as the fullest, my approach has four components. First, it is pragmatic. This means to work practically with historical and contemporary claims about truth, such as fact-checking and accusations of disinformation or fake news. Second, the approach is critical, in the sense of taking the task of philosophy as the sceptical one of undermining certainty in order to examine power. Third, it is speculative, by advancing temporary hypotheses about complex situations in order to see how they advance critique. Fourth, the approach is constructive about language. It sets out a definition of signs designed to explain how they work. Following William James, the common thread to these four constituents is to define truth as a process: 'The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent to it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process; the process namely of its verifying itself, its *very-fication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*.'¹⁷

34. Signs are processes with multiple effects. Truth emerges from these processes in many different interconnected types and degrees, from negative lies and deceptions, to the critical and constructive power of truths about our world and societies. Truth as fullest is when a sign is taken critically and as fully as possible in relation to truth claims, truth-making and dependence on truth. For instance, a journalistic practice of truth as fullest would involve examination of evidence, consideration of broad context and claims, inclusion of competing positions, speculation about future effects and consideration of types of presentation and disciplines (science, art, politics and ethics). Practices seeking truth should therefore aim at critical and creative completeness, both sceptical and inventive. Though this might involve specialist endeavours – such as skills in accurate measurement – truth is not proper to a specific science, logical analysis, or economic measurement. To be at its

¹⁷ William James, 'Pragmatism's Conception of Truth' in S. Blackburn and K. Simmons (eds.) *Truth*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp 53-68, p 54

fullest, truth must be a combination of many specialisms with a broad, critical and speculative overview.

35. Truth as fullest is a pragmatist definition of truth, aligned with the position defined by William James. Truth is made and decided upon as an event-like process. However, there is a departure from James in moving away from deciding truth thanks to verification and validation through benefit: 'Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural, of processes of leading, realized *in rebus*, and having only this quality in common, that they *pay*.'¹⁸ Instead, a different test is given: truth is in practically and critically moving towards the fullest. This test then narrows the idea of gain to a benefit for critical debate: truth in the fullest serves sceptical discussion by seeking to be as full as possible about a sign even if this does not have any current measurable benefit.

36. The reason to move away from James's test is that benefit is only a part of any sign. To overemphasise it hides other aspects and their contribution to truth. There can be general agreement about a given benefit, such as the current contribution to wealth of the knowledge of how to burn oil, but the sign of burning oil also includes ideas of pollution, exploitation, exhaustion, imbalances of wealth, economic dependencies and geopolitical conflicts going far beyond the initial consideration of benefit. Why couldn't we include all of these extra considerations in a new and wider definition of benefit? It is because they are not necessarily consistent and reducible to a single common measure, nor to a single criterion for deciding what overall benefit is. Fullest does not mean full according to a single measure of truth, but rather maintaining many incompatible measures together, in view of an open debate about their merits. This explains the importance of scepticism, as a way of maintaining different positions together in their opposition to one another.

37. Agreement about benefit is a dangerous position for truth, since it can lead to the repudiation of positions merely on the basis of a difference about the nature of benefit. The casual and frequently violent dismissal of countercultures and challenging ideas is a good example of this danger. In the give-and-take implied by utilitarian assessments of benefit over a diverse population and situation, if we apply a single account of benefit to a diverse event and align an idea of truth to this account, the process we have for determining truths is also a process for reinforcing forms of accounting at risk of ignoring or overcoming deeper differences. Though James's pragmatist definition of truth leads to many truths, each of these truths is in danger of riding roughshod over a further multiplicity on the grounds of an assessment of what benefits.

38. Defined as the fullest, truth must include other approaches to truth. Correspondence deploys fact and evidence to undermine false beliefs and opinions. Coherence depends on logic to criticise invalid deductions, implications, inferences and induction. Pragmatism with respect to truth shows the genesis of truths and considers where they might lead and offer benefits. Intuitive appeals and speculative ones allows for debate about which truths are to be held not only now, but also imaginatively with respect to the future. Truth as fullest is a way of discarding truth as a simple form while retaining it as many different critical tools. However, this requires undermining truth as a

¹⁸ William James, 'Pragmatism's Conception of Truth' in S. Blackburn and K. Simmons (eds.) *Truth*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp 53-68, p 61

single track – the truth. Truth then becomes a multiplicity: many truths serving as information and challenge for open and critical debate.

39. The furthest position from truth as fullest is the deflationary claim about truth. Crispin Wright defines it as ‘... the proposal that correspondence, coherentist, pragmatist, and even indefinabilist conceptions of truth all err in their common conviction that ‘true’ presents a substantial concept at all.’ So do we need to take account of truth in any way when studying signs? For a pragmatist approach to truth, we need to consider truth because truth claims are a social reality, historically and in the present; there is ample evidence for appeals to truth and it’s those appeals that need to be studied critically in relation to process signs. This answer is contingent on empirical evidence. Appeals to truth might well die out, or we might well work to make some of them or all of them redundant, though this will also require a critical study of signs and truth. Against the deflationary claim about truth, truth as the fullest is inflationary, in distributing truth widely and in many different ways. However, it also dilutes truth, taking away the privileged claims made for specialist definitions of truth; for instance, as correspondence or as determined solely by the natural sciences.

40. The more complex answer to the deflationary challenge is also contingent, but in a manner making truth more resilient over time and varying situations. We need to consider truth because the structure of signs lends itself to treatment in accordance with each of the traditional ways of defining truth: correspondence, coherence and pragmatist. Deflationary arguments miss the structural propensity towards truth of language understood as a system of signs. In the next sections, in addition to defending my definition of truth as fullness, I will be illustrating this structural predisposition of signs towards truth.

41. Here are the components of a process sign to be taken as fully as possible: the selection of a set of elements that allows for the identification or naming of the sign; a series of competing diagrams describing the effects of that selection and the conflict between different descriptions of how the sign works and why it matters; stipulations over the sign, that is, the range of general theories and commitments making prescriptive claims over the sign; and, finally, dialogues about all these components. This latter debate is about which diagrams should take precedence, whether stipulations are legitimate and whether the selection of the sign is desirable. It belongs to an account of the fullest because it is shaped by and informs the other components. I claim that the debate should be an open discussion run according to democratic principles. What form the democracy will take is determined by each sign. Which diagrams and selections are taken most critically depends on the wider debates.

42. Less technically, as a process, each sign involves something being picked out. These are the components of the sign that allow it to be named and recognised; like selecting the clothes you will wear for an interview. This process of selection is familiar to us from common activities such as taking, editing and presenting a photograph. When we frame a subject, choose focus and lighting, arrange a pose and then post an image with a caption, we are making a sign. Truth is involved in this process; for instance, when the sign brings together a caption (‘my great vacation’) and image (a crowded train broken down in a tunnel) purporting to be a truthful representation of something that happened to you.

43. Each selection has effects. The photograph you took amuses or saddens. The clothes you selected make you look like you are trying too hard – or not hard enough. The selection informs people or fools them. It goes viral, or falls flat. You feel that you have communicated something important about you, or failed to. Others take the selected image as an irrelevance. Years later, the photograph is taken as evidence in a court case and you are sentenced to life in prison. There isn't a single view of these effects. Instead, they can be presented in many different ways according to different perspectives, priorities, demands, cases and contexts.

44. The effects of a selected sign can be mapped in dynamic diagrams of how they unfold. A narrative about the photograph is one such mapping; a collection of like images is another; so is an interpretation of it; or a documentary; or simply another sign that follows in connection to it. Yet any mapping is controversial because it stands in contrast to others. For instance, when you are tried for murder, the defence and the prosecution put forward different diagrams of the effects – or relations – of the image to its context. The jury decides on a conflict of diagrams for the same signs.

45. In addition to these mappings or interpretations of the effects of signs, our societies have general theories and commitments about them. Sciences, religions, philosophies, forms of common sense and laws are claims over signs – a dress code, a prohibition, a dominant interpretation, or a claim about cause and effect. These general theories provide broad stipulations designed to organise and legislate over signs and their diagrams – including denials of particular signs, diagrams and even the theory of signs itself. For example, in the case of photographs, general theories and practices about evidence changed quickly once photography appeared. This change had an effect on photographs themselves, since they became privileged forms of legal evidence, but also 'a potentially misleading form of proof'.¹⁹ Similarly, photographs are organised, encouraged and banned in different ways on social media.

46. A stipulation such as 'the combination of testimony and a photograph admitted as an image of the crime scene is a superior form evidence' is not only a potential diagram for a particular sign, it also lays claim to legislate over signs and their diagrams; for instance, by providing a systematic basis for preferring some descriptions or diagrams over others. There are two reasons to include stipulations and general theories when considering truth for process signs. First, they provide counterarguments to the permissiveness of the definition of the sign, by denying some signs and some diagrams and by giving reasons to prefer some over others where truth is concerned. Second, even if these arguments are discarded, stipulations remain important actors within the selection of signs, the drawing up of diagrams and debates about truth in relation to signs and their effects.

47. Changes in general theories and material conditions are good ways of understanding the connections and dependencies between these different levels of the sign. As conventions and technologies alter, types of sign alter form and prevalence. A minor example could be the shift in kinds of communication and record keeping that took place with the advent of emails and later types of messaging. With this shift acceptable forms of address, style, storing and content changed rapidly such that the truth of statements about speed of response, responsible communication and

¹⁹ Jennifer L. Mnookin 'The Image of Truth: Photographic Evidence and the Power of Analogy' *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, Volume 10, Issue 1, 5-8-2013, p 4
<http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1181&context=yjlh>

wise record-keeping for messages understood as signs also changed. Truths about signs therefore also change across these levels of the sign – a truth about what constitutes a polite form, for instance. The definition of truth should reflect and criticise these interdependencies. This is another reason why truth as the fullest is the right account of truth, because it reflects the relations between parts and levels of signs as they change over time. Any journalism seeking truth as the fullest will also be historical in approach. Additionally, at its best, it will also be speculative about the future.

48. The basis for the truth of a proposition like ‘You acted appropriately in answering that message’ changes in keeping with the advent of new communication media such as email and messaging. This is a minor instance of wider effects on truth, since it falls under more significant sources of stipulations such as changing roles for science and technology across a given society. Arguments once taken to be a valid can rapidly become classed as absurd or wrong during these high level changes. For instance, responsibility for storing evidence in multiple places and the assumption that all electronic communication is in some sense public are new broad stipulations about messages affecting what can truthfully be said about them.

49. There are many different ways in which interpretations of signs and stipulations over them can be organised and enforced. Legal means, physical power, punishment, threats, financial and other rewards, fears, beliefs and desires, conditioning through the control of media and spaces, education and language can all play a part. Truth has a special relation to them, however, since though it can be part of this organisation and enforcement, it can also serve to question it and to provide independent critical judgements. Deflationary claims about truth view it as dispensable because logically the statement ‘is true’ adds nothing to a proposition. However, this is to miss the critical and sceptical role of truth that occurs when truth and falsity meet. This occurs, for example, where an established claim to truth comes up against a new one. Indeed this occurs within debates about truth itself, for instance, when the idea of truth as useful agreement with reality (James) was challenged by truth as factual (Russell) on the grounds that there can be useful truths that correspond to no real entities.²⁰ Truth matters as an opening to scepticism and doubt.

50. The fluidity and uncertainty in how truth is to be decided and how it is enforced means that, in addition to various claims to truth, there is also the problem of how clashes between them should be settled. In the definition of the process sign, I make the suggestion that there should be an upper level of open dialogue where this decision takes place. The suggestion is itself pragmatic and relative to a given situation and there are alternatives, but these often have the disadvantage of making a claim for a particular stipulation over signs.

51. The commitments of truth as the fullest can include the commitments of other definitions of truth; for instance, to the truth or falsity of statements of fact, to the validity of arguments, to agreement with reality and to comparisons of practical benefit. However, these are set in a wider environment of many signs, interpretations of them, rules over them and dialogue about them, where fact, validity, reality and usefulness are subject to wider and ongoing debates. The

²⁰ Bertrand Russell, ‘William James’s Conception of Truth’ in S. Blackburn and K. Simmons (eds.) *Truth*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp 69-82, p82

importance of truth is not strictly about agreement with reality but also about fostering open and successful critical debate, where success is not in any outcome but rather in the debate itself.

52. Facts do not decide truth, nor does any particular logic, nor any particular access to reality, nor any verification through use, since all of these should be brought together as fully as possible for a given sign. We shouldn't merely present the facts, or the valid arguments, or reality, or the use. They should all be presented, in their many conflicts and variants, as widely as possible, to ensure the best informed critical debate for a given sign. So truth is about the quality of debate defined as inclusive, as free of force and compulsion as possible, decided democratically (subject to the condition that an open debate has taken place), and contested, both as critique of others and self-critique. Accuracy, validity, closeness to reality and use contribute to this quality, but none of them should be taken singly to determine it.

53. Truth must include all four interacting levels of a sign: selection, diagrams, stipulations and debate. For example, let's take a simple sign of a heart rate reading. At the level of selection it can be given as this set {YOUR NAME HERE, 78bpm, DATE, TIME}. For this selection the elements and relations between them can be checked for factual accuracy. Is the reading of 78bpm true or false? However, the significance of the sign goes well beyond the set and its factual accuracy, since the sign has effects on how you view your health, how your doctor views your health, how you exercise, attention to fitness, information about disease, and so on. A diagram is a description or mapping of those effects. For instance, for medical signs such as heart rate readings, different doctors might give different diagrams; in this case they will take the form of diagnoses, prescriptions and accounts of risks, benefits and probabilities of success and failure. In the definition of the sign these diagrams are given as competing with one another. This means that different diagrams cannot be held at the same time without conflict and that there are wider significant effects at stake – whether you are operated upon or not, say. The best medical journalism covers all these levels, thereby allowing readers to make informed decisions, not with certainty, but with the fullest view available.

54. Diagrams and their claims to be accurate mappings of the effects of the sign – its significance – take place within more general context. This is the policing, judging and evaluation of signs according to general theories. These aren't necessary from the point of view of the sign, though they frequently involve claims to necessity and superiority from within. For example, in the case of the heart rate, there are general theories about science, pseudo-science, medicine, religion, logic, the importance of health, morality, pain and the meaning of life that make claims to rightful legislation over signs and their diagrams.

55. When seen as unscientific because they are not evidence-based, signs can be rejected on those grounds. Similarly, signs drawing together elements in ways that do not fit a given theory can be banned or discarded (a sign involving heart rate and palm reading, for instance). Note how it is possible but difficult to think of signs that at a particular time do not fall under a stipulation because none exist or make claims to legislate over it. The possibility stems from the idea of states of things or societies free of stipulations; for example, a purely pragmatic society that doesn't elevate its pragmatism into a general law.

56. The definition of the process sign is maximally permissive. It does not prejudge selections, diagrams or stipulations. Instead, any selection is allowed (the selection of a set for a sign is unconditioned), any diagram can be put forward as a mapping of the effects of a sign, and any stipulation can be considered (though in practice at any given time there will be a limited number of them in circulation). This permissiveness goes hand in hand with the definition of truth as the fullest, since if it is correct that signs can be composed, interpreted and legislated over in many different ways, we require a definition of truth that can encompass and react critically to all of them. Otherwise, with a more restricted definition of truth, debates rapidly descend into polarised positions, where the value of truth is opposed starkly to purported falsehood and the damage it is supposed to wreak. This doesn't mean that we cannot distinguish different claims to truth. It means that we should do so on the basis of a critical and pragmatic debate that takes the widest possible range of evidence and appeals into account.

57. This permissiveness is normative. It claims that there should be no a priori limits on the construction of signs and diagrams, in order to allow for challenges to existent signs, diagrams and theories. From the point of view of the value of critical thought, the theory of the sign should allow for the construction of counterfactuals. From the point of view of pragmatism, the claim is historical. Nature and human imagination have generated signs of an extraordinary variety and of types running far beyond established experience, logic and theories. These signs have often proven to be important and effective. If we are going to have a theory of signs and a definition of truth adapted to this variety, then both need to be open to novelty and variety.

58. However, despite the permissiveness and openness of this definition, principle and claim, they are controlled after the fact by the widest level of the sign, since conflict ought to be articulated in dialogues. This has rarely been the case. Signs, diagrams and stipulations have been imposed by force and coercion. The commitment to dialogue and to democracy at the widest level of the sign involves two assumptions. First, the value of truth is dependent on contestation or the generation of new countersigns. Second, this contestation should take place as open dialogue and debate, in the sense of variable in the forms they take in practice.

59. It does not follow that giving latitude for counterfactuals means we have to abandon all limits on them, or that truth should be secondary to and follow from aims to maximise contestation. Truth could be a way of testing counterfactuals and new signs, rather than something that needs to extend to them or incorporate them. For instance, if some version of naturalism is agreed upon and truths are decided by contemporary sciences, then we might accept all kinds of hypothesis, but these will be subjected to test and decision by the sciences alone, only to be broadened thereafter into other fields. The argument is not only that it should be possible to generate new and counterfactual signs, but also that these signs will raise new challenges to established ways of deciding truth. Pragmatically, it could be the case that at a given time there are few good reasons to take truth outside science. However, this does not mean truth should always be decided by science. For instance, if the sciences return to eugenics or advocate handing more important decisions about humans to artificial intelligence, it could be important to include ethical arguments or emotional ones, backed up by the arts and literature.

60. The aim of taking a sign at its fullest combines descriptive, speculative and argument-based practice. Instead of starting with the question 'Is this true?' applied to a sign, an interpretation, an argument, a stipulation or a position in a debate, the search for truth begins with descriptions of the sign and its selection. What are the elements of the sign? How was it made? Who made it? Why? Where? When? There is then a search for different and conflicting diagrams of the sign. What are the different interpretations, claims, arguments, oppositions and ways of mapping the effects and value of the sign? At the general level, the question is which are the main stipulations over the sign? How do they relate to its selection? How do they interact with the different diagrams? How and what do they stipulate for the sign? What are the effects of this stipulation? Finally, for the dialogues around the sign there is a search for current dialogues and a speculative intervention on them and towards new discussion.

61. The fullest view of truth in relation to process signs is at the same time close to current practice and yet also contentious. From the point of view of investigative journalism, the requirement to look into a sign for how it came about, what it includes and who it benefits is good practice, whether the sign is a statement by a politician, a figure in a financial report, a new medical treatment or a claim about poisoned water. At the next level, setting out the different claims to the sign and the various interpretations, positions and effects of the sign is also part of a thorough approach. This extends to listing the main general theories or orthodoxies about the sign and seeking out the critical arguments that might bring them into question. Finally, instead of passing judgements, the role of journalism is to inform subsequent debates. Truth as the fullest is consistent with such journalism. It depends upon it.