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Post-Truth Rhetoric and Modern World Picturing

On January 22, 2020, Senator Mike Braun (R-Indiana) tweeted the following:

REPORTER: So you're saying that it's okay for a President to ask a foreign leader to investigate a political rival and withhold foreign aid to coerce him into doing so?

BRAUN: No, I'm not saying that's okay. I'm not saying that's appropriate. I'm saying that it DIDN'T HAPPEN.¹

The senior producer of MSNBC's *The Last Word*, Kyle Griffin, responded with a quote tweet:

"Trump stood outside of the White House in October and publicly called on both Ukraine and China to investigate Biden."²

As the world deals with the coronavirus pandemic, this opening gesture may seem odd. If I want to focus on a politician misleading the public on a social media platform, why would I not turn to Donald Trump and his tweets, where he recently ignored the advice of his advisors and medical professionals by telling people the country will be safe and ready for normal operating status by Easter—only to backtrack a few days later. While Trump is a central focus of this paper, I begin with the brief exchange between Mike Braun and Kyle Griffin because while many assume that post-truth rhetoric began with Trump, that is not the case. Nevertheless, I—

¹ Mike Braun (@SenatorBraun), "REPORTER: So you're saying that it's okay for a President to ask a foreign leader to investigate a political rival and withhold foreign aid to coerce him into doing so? BRAUN: No, I'm not saying that's okay. I'm not saying that's appropriate. I'm saying that it DIDN'T HAPPEN," Tweet, January 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/SenatorBraun/status/1220152773808918529>.

² Kyle Griffin (@kylegriffin1), "Trump stood outside of the White House in October and publicly called on both Ukraine and China to investigate Biden," January 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/kylegriffin1/status/1220345527583281152>.

along with other scholars—believe that there was a cultural shift in the relationship between politicians, the public, and “truth” when Trump became president.³

In Ryan Neville-Shepard’s article on post-presumption argumentation, he asks, “As President Trump refuses to follow the norms of democratic communication, and few institutions seem willing to endure the resentment he directs their way, how can the presumptions of veracity, institutions, and deliberation be recovered?”⁴ I would add some further questions. What are institutions and individuals doing to prevent the loss of veracity and deliberation? Are their approaches different from what was done to hold politicians in check before Trump? Will these methods be needed in a post-Trump world? Will truth hold the same currency in the world after the Trump presidency ends or is our current state the new normal? To me, these questions are vital to processes of world picturing as we move forward with and hopefully beyond the Trump presidency. In this essay, I aim to explore what kind of world picturing happens in the post-truth world. To do so, I will first establish the pattern of post-truth rhetoric employed today. While Trump is a primary focus, I demonstrate that the problem is larger than one person, so I will refer to controversies such as climate change and vaccinations. Second, I will turn to ways individuals and various media outlets counter Trump’s post-truth and conspiracy rhetoric.

Post-Truth’s Past and Present Prominence

It is important to note that the phenomenon of post-truth politics preceded Trump’s presidency. According to Steven Fuller, the Sophists and Plato “saw politics as a game” and thus

³ See Robin T. Lakoff, “The Hollow Man: Donald Trump, Populism, and Post-Truth Politics,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 16, no. 4 (2017), 595-606; Bruce McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2017).

⁴ Ryan Neville-Shepard, “Post-Presumption Argumentation and the Post-Truth World: On the Conspiracy Rhetoric of Donald Trump,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 55, no. 3, 189

embraced a post-truth orientation in political speeches.⁵ Growing up, there were many jokes my father, grandparents, and friends made about how much you could trust a politician. “How can you tell if a politician is lying? His lips are moving,” was one of my father’s favorites, so politicians being estranged from the truth is not a recent occurrence. In fact, viewing post-truth as novel assumes we “once lived in an era of unproblematic truth,” a fantasy which ignores especially the experiences of marginalized people.⁶ Terry Smith argues that the current trend of post-truth does not constitute an era as “there is no longer (there never was) a dominant, singular world picture that operates as a total, world-defining regime of truth . . . that is a lazy fallacy that evacuates the very idea of truth.”⁷ While post-truths may not be novel, there appears to be a growing awareness of them among the public. Therefore, it behooves us to turn a critical lens upon how post-truths continue to be delivered, consumed, and accepted despite their acknowledgement.

A prime example of an organization peddling post-truths is the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC). This organization was designed solely to refute the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) research and assessments of climate change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established the IPCC in 1988 to “study the causes, effects, and both mitigation and adaptation strategies to address climate change effects.”⁸ Made up of thousands of scientists across the globe, the IPCC is undoubtedly the most qualified organization on climate change. The NIPCC, on the other

⁵ Steve Fuller, “The Post-Truth about Philosophy and Rhetoric,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 4 (2017), 476.

⁶ Robert Mejia, Kay Beckerman, Curtis Sullivan, “White Lies: A Racial History of the (Post)Truth,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018), 111.

⁷ Terry Smith, “Truth in Transition, as the Decade Breaks,” in *Fabricating Publics: The Dissemination of Culture in the Post-Truth Era*, eds. Carolina Rito and Bill Balaska, (Liverpool: Open Humanities Press, 2020), 7.

⁸ Nicholas S. Paliewicz and George F. (Guy) McHendry, “When Good Arguments Do Not Work: Post-Dialectics, Argument Assemblages, and the Networks of Climate Skepticism,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 53, no. 4 (2017), 295.

hand, is a private organization with its primary investors being Exxon Mobil, Koch Industries, the Center for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change, the Heartland Institute, and the Heritage Foundation—all corporations invested in a carbon-based economy. As such, it may come as little surprise that Nicolas S. Paliewicz and Guy McHendry summarize the NIPCC’s findings as “humans do not cause global warming; even if they did, they should not change habits of consumption because global warming is good for you.”⁹ The NIPCC claims that rising temperatures are beneficial for global societies, that increased temperature and carbon emissions have positive effects on animal and human health, and that any warming only helps crop cycles. As Paliewicz and McHendry note, these claims “contradict reality, as it is the presumption within established scientific communities, namely the IPCC, that climate change is an observable, anthropogenic phenomenon that presents perilous risks for societies, economies, and ecosystems.”¹⁰ Despite this, as recently as 2014, one out of every four Americans were firmly skeptical about the existence of global warming.¹¹

There are a variety of reasons why the post-truth rhetoric of the NIPCC has been successful. One is that “the IPCC assemblage largely moves across academic and environmental platforms” while the NIPCC and “the climate skeptical assemblage [move] across key political and industrial actors to disseminate skepticism among policy-makers and the general public.”¹² Academic work is less accessible to the general public, so the IPCC’s findings trickle down far more slowly than the NIPCC’s do. A second reason is that “the very existential presence of the NIPCC’s reports makes the argument that there are two sides to the story.”¹³ Despite the fact

⁹ Ibid., 287.

¹⁰ Ibid., 288.

¹¹ Lydia Saad, “One in Four in U.S. Are Solidly Skeptical of Global Warming,” *Gallup*, April 22, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/168620/one-four-solidly-skeptical-global-warming.aspx>.

¹² Paliewicz and McHendry, “When Good Arguments Do Not Work,” 296-297.

¹³ Ibid., 301.

that, as of the IPCC's *Fifth Assessment Report*, ninety-seven percent of experts agree "that anthropogenic climate change poses irrevocable perils to global ecosystems, food supplies, and the very existence of human and non-human species on a scale never before witnessed by humanity," the mere existence of another side leads many to believe that climate change itself is actually up for debate.¹⁴ A similar phenomenon is seen in the anti-vaccination controversy. A single study—a study that was later retracted—planted the seed of doubt, but because an anti-vaccination side was presented, many believed there to be an even-handed debate.¹⁵

A third reason why the NIPCC may be so successful in creating climate skepticism is its mimetic methods. After the IPCC published their *Fifth Assessment Report*, the NIPCC published its "Climate Change Reconsidered II." While the IPCC's report contains nearly 6000 citations, 500 lead authors, and 2000 expert reviewers; the NIPCC's report has three lead authors, thirty-five contributors, and does not even try to meet the same rigorous standards for scientific evaluation. Despite this, both reports are over 1000 pages long, share natural imagery on the cover page, and divide the table of contents into nearly identical sections. Paliewicz and McHendry argue that the "mimicry makes it superfluous for viewers to read and evaluate the content of the NIPCC's arguments. The form of the report is argumentatively forceful by itself because its visual appearance asserts the argument that the NIPCC is the counterpart to the IPCC."¹⁶ At over 1000 pages, few would venture to read the tome of a report regardless, but when two reports on differing opinions are produced, even fewer will, assuming that both are equally valid. Through disseminating post-truths, the NIPCC and its sponsors successfully muddy the waters. I argue their goal is not to convince people to believe climate change does not

¹⁴ Ibid., 288.

¹⁵ The study was conducted by Andrew Wakefield in 1997 and published in *The Lancet*, but it was quickly discredited due to procedural errors and ethical violations.

¹⁶ Paliewicz and McHendry, "When Good Arguments Do Not Work," 298-299.

exist. Rather, it is to keep people confused about the impacts, ensuring the continuance of the carbon-based economy we currently have. [Figures]

As democratic communication has always depended “upon the communicability of intersubjective perspectives,” the absence of truth cannot be held responsible for all the chaos in our current political moment.¹⁷ There has, as I proposed earlier, been a shift since Trump became president. Bruce McComiskey argues that as the continuum between facts, fake news, post-truth, and truth collapses, “facts, realities, and truths become overrated and disappear from the epistemological continuum,” meaning that “their opposites (lies, fallacies, and doublespeak) also disappear” and that “language becomes purely strategic.”¹⁸ As established, politicians have always lied. The difference is, as Gleb Tsipursky posits, previously politicians “either toned down or withdrew their claims” when checked by the media, but with the public’s declining trust in journalism, political leaders have been more inclined to take “advantage of these vulnerabilities to promote their agendas.”¹⁹ My opening example is a clear case in point. Braun did not retract his statement after Griffin provided evidence that he was wrong. There is a very small overlap in people who follow Braun on Twitter and the people who follow Griffin, so Braun suffered almost no consequences for tweeting a lie. No quote sums up this issue more than a 2016 response from Trump: When asked why he assails the press, he replied, “I do it to discredit you all and demean you all so when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you.”²⁰

¹⁷ S. Coleman, “The Elusiveness of Political Truth: From Conceit of Objectivity to Intersubjective Judgment,” *European Journal of Communication* 33, no. 2 (2018), 159.

¹⁸ McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, 8.

¹⁹ Gleb Tsipursky, “Towards a Post-Lies Future: Fighting ‘Alternative Facts’ and ‘Post-Truth’ Politics,” *The Humanist* 77, no. 2, 13.

²⁰ Michiko Kakutani, “The 2010s Were the End of Normal: A Decade of Distrust,” *New York Times*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/27/opinion/sunday/2010s-america-trump.html>.

Donald Trump is perhaps the poster child of post-truth rhetoric, as he has embraced post-truth discourse “so openly, almost gleefully.”²¹ Trump “stands out from past politicians in the way he has openly embrace[s] conspiracy rhetoric.”²² Engaging in conspiracies even before his presidency, Trump is credited with starting the birther conspiracy, which claims Barack Obama was born in Kenya. As president, Trump peddles conspiracy theories to make himself look better or make his opponents look worse. Shortly after the *Access Hollywood* tape was released, Trump claimed it was just locker room talk, latently acknowledging it was him on the recording. Later, however, he claimed that the voice was not his; that the tape was edited by the liberal media to make him look bad. A similar conspiracy is his claim that the investigation into Russian interference with the 2016 election was just a distraction from the fact that Obama tapped his residence during the election. In effect, “by answering every charge of misconduct with an attack on institutions, Trump has not only sowed seeds of doubt about his accusers, but also disrupted the possibility of anyone being able to craft an official narrative that might be presumed factual.”²³

Trump’s method of delivering lies and conspiracy rhetoric is unlike many other politicians and even conspiracy theorists. For one, Trump does not seem to “take the whole thing very seriously” or “contribute significant amounts of work, thought, and even expertise to the cause.”²⁴ Instead, he makes claims freely with little attention to details, often contradicting things he previously said—such as the *Access Hollywood* tape being locker room talk then actually being an edited tape. As well, he often makes enthymematic arguments, where he will say *just*

²¹ Barton Swaim, “Politics Has Always Been Post-Truth. Trump’s Just Honest About It,” *Washington Post*, January 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/politicshas-always-been-post-truth-trumps-just-honest-about-it/2017/01/05/091cb36c-d2a5-11e6-9cb0-54ab630851e8_story.html?utm_term=.76ace740ff59.

²² Neville-Shepard, “Post-Presumption Argumentation and the Post-Truth World,” 182.

²³ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁴ Drake Bennett, “Trump is Doing Conspiracy Theory All Wrong,” *Bloomberg*, November 2, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-11-02/trump-is-doingconspiracy-theory-all-wrong>.

enough for his supporters to draw his intended conclusion, but not enough for him to have to defend he has a malicious intent. In fact, “Trump’s ambiguous ways of making claims means that he can deny ever having said anything controversial, limiting a critic’s ability to engage him in a debate.”²⁵ This makes him increasingly difficult to hold accountable as “no accusation can stick, and no argument can be had about one’s guilt, if anyone who might referee the dispute is politically contaminated.”²⁶ An example is Trump’s tweets about the birther conspiracy. Trump implicated Obama in the plane crash that killed Loretta Fuddy by tweeting, “How amazing, the State Health Director who verified copies of Obama’s ‘birth certificate’ died in a plane crash today. All others lived.”²⁷ His tweet references the conspiracy, but it makes no explicit claims. If pressed on whether he was saying Obama had Fuddy killed to conceal the truth, Trump could answer with one of his go to responses: “I’ll answer that question at the right time. I just don’t want to answer it yet,” “I’m not saying that. A lot of other people are though. A lot of people are saying that,” or he could refuse to acknowledge the question, calling the interviewer nasty and their outlet fake news.²⁸ His slippery delivery makes the statement more difficult to debate, and even raising the question provides the theories more airtime, raising the likelihood others will hear them.

Up to this point, I have laid out the ways in which certain individuals and organizations employ post-truth rhetoric and how it is difficult to debate and/or contradict them. Their reasons vary from gaining higher approval ratings to convincing the public of someone’s innocence to creating the illusion of a debate to keep the public in a state of confusion. Each of these reasons

²⁵ Neville-Shepard, “Post-Presumption Argumentation and the Post-Truth World,” 187.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Nathan McDermott, “16 Other Conspiracy Theories Donald Trump Has Pushed,” *BuzzFeed*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/natemcdermott/16-other-conspiracy-theories-donald-trump-has-pushed>.

²⁸ Zeke J. Miller and Tessa Berenson, “Donald Trump’s Campaign Says He’s No Longer a Birther. But Trump Won’t Say It,” *Time*, September 16, 2016, <https://time.com/4496463/trump-obama-born-birther-hawaii-us/>.

contributes to a type of world picturing where veracity is lost. I, however, do not think all hope is lost. Returning to the world questions that began this piece, is there a way to recover veracity? Many individuals and organizations are attempting to do just that, and I now turn to a few examples to highlight these efforts. The efficacy of the following labors is debatable, but the intent behind each is to counter post-truth and engage in world picturing where the continuum between facts and “alternative facts” exists.

Resisting the Post-Truth Trend

Despite Trump and others undermining the press, various media outlets have continued to fact check Trump and attempt to hold him accountable. Smith writes, “finding the truth and reporting it to the people has long been the central purpose of communicative media” and outlets like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and individual reporters on their social media have continued to do just that.²⁹ Lately, the fact checking has centered around COVID-19. Kyle Griffin, after a press conference in which Trump claimed he always knew and was greatly concerned about the severity of COVID-19, tweeted the following:

Trump now: “It’s not the flu. It’s vicious.”
 Trump on March 9: [a screenshot of Trump’s twitter]
 So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!³⁰

While Griffin uses Twitter, which is where Trump turns to spew a large portion of his post-truth rhetoric, others are using more traditional means. Linda Qiu catalogs Trump’s false claims for

²⁹ Smith, “Truth in Transition, as the Decade Breaks,” 5.

³⁰ Kyle Griffin (@kylegriffin1), “Trump now: ‘It’s not the flu. It’s vicious.’ Trump on March 9: [screenshot],” March 31, 2020, <https://twitter.com/kylegriffin1/status/1245117459612315649>.

the *New York Times* in a column titled “Fact Check,”³¹ and JM Rieger creates videos for *The Washington Post* to detail specific instances when Trump has either lied or downplayed the truth to counter claims he makes about his past record, such as the one Griffin refuted above.³² Other media outlets such as CNN, BBC, and *The Guardian* have columns dedicated to fact checking Trump’s statements as well.

In addition to online media, journalists have begun to exert more pressure on Trump during press conferences. During the White House coronavirus task force briefing, CNN’s Jeremy Diamond and Trump had the following exchange:

Diamond: I also would like to ask about some comments you made on Friday. You were talking about governors and states, you said, "want them to be appreciative."

Trump: I didn't say that.

Diamond: You said if they don't treat you right, "I don't call." These are direct quotes, sir.

Trump: Excuse me. You ready? Take a look a lot what I said. I want them to be appreciative of me, okay? And then you cut it up. It is fake news.³³

The exchange continues with Diamond reading out Trump’s full comment: “I want them to be appreciative, I don't want them to say things that are not true. I want them to be appreciative. We have done a great job. I am not talking about me, I am talking about Mike Pence and the task force and the Army Corp. of Engineers. If they don't treat me right, I don't call.” The insinuation in Trump’s statement being if states are unappreciative of him, they will not receive the medical supplies they need. In typical Trump delivery, however, the conclusion was enthymematic and

³¹ See Linda Qiu, “Trump’s False Claims About His Response to the Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/us/politics/fact-check-trump-coronavirus.html> and Linda Qiu, “Analyzing the Patterns in Trump’s Falsehoods About Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-factcheck.html> for recent examples.

³² JM Rieger, “33 Times Trump Downplayed the Coronavirus,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/33-times-trump-downplayed-the-coronavirus/2020/03/05/790f5afb-4dda-48bf-abe1-b7d152d5138c_video.html.

³³ “Trump Spars with CNN Reporter When Confronted With Past Remarks,” *CNN*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/03/29/trump-coronavirus-unappreciative-governors-diamond-sot-vpx.cnn>.

the comment was slippery enough that it was difficult to engage with, but Diamond attempted.

PBS NewsHour reporter Yamiche Alcindor also challenged Trump with his own words:

Alcindor: You've said repeatedly that you think that some of the equipment that governors are requesting, they don't actually need. You said New York might need—

Trump: I didn't say that. I didn't say that.

Alcindor: You said it on Sean Hannity's, Fox News.

Trump: I didn't say—Come on. Come on.³⁴

Trump was so upset, he denied Alcindor a second question, only for the Diamond to pass the microphone back to her. At one point, media outlets, such as NPR and MSNBC, declared they were going a step further and planned to not even air the White House coronavirus briefings live—instead, electing to discuss Trump's statements afterwards, providing analysis and hoping to curb the influence of Trump's misleading statements.³⁵ This, however, has been more difficult to enact than originally planned. Instead of foregoing the press briefings entirely, MSNBC cuts away to fact check his statements. As of April 14, MSNBC, CNN, and NPR have all adopted this method. While the media's credibility is on shakier and shakier ground due to near constant attacks on their integrity, many organizations are attempting to continue their work in finding the truth and reporting it to the people, particularly when it comes to combating post-truths.

It is not only those in the media that can work to counter post-truth narratives. In 1984, Walter Fisher proposed the narrative paradigm as an alternative to the rational world paradigm, which prefers expert, technical discourses. The focus of the narrative paradigm is on storytelling to convey arguments, as Fisher claims all humans are *homo narrans*, natural storytellers.³⁶

³⁴ David Smith, "'That's a nasty, snarky question': Trump's Media Assault Rages on in Midst of Coronavirus Crisis," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/us-coronavirus-outbreak-donald-trump-media-latest>.

³⁵ See Elizabeth Jensen, "Opinion: NPR's Evolving Coverage of Live White House Corona Briefings," *NPR*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2020/03/26/821327277/opinion-nprs-evolving-coverage-of-live-white-house-coronavirus-briefings>.

³⁶ Walter R Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 6.

Everyone can understand and engage with stories, while the rational world paradigm excludes all but the few experts. In thinking about anti-vaccination discourse, Ashley Shelby and Karen Ernst discuss how storytelling can address and counter fear of vaccinations through establishing trust in medical professionals. Shelby and Ernst examine a 2012 narrative entitled “Everlee’s Story” from the blog *Moms Who Vax*, which features doctors saving five-week-old Everlee from a mysterious illness.³⁷ The narrative shifts the focus of the anti-vaccination conversation away from the fear of vaccines and toward the fear of a lethal illness. By focusing on the disease, the perceived harm of medical institutions is minimized, and the doctor takes on the role of protector against a much greater threat—the death of an infant.³⁸

Storytelling is an effective strategy to appeal to skeptical audiences because of—not despite—its lack of facts. It can also be harmful, as seen with how Trump crafts narratives that speak directly to his supporters’ fears. Narratives can easily be used to perpetuate post-truths, but storytelling can also refute affective arguments within discourses such as anti-vaccination advocacy, climate change denial, and Trump’s own braggadocio.

Conclusion

During a preliminary conversation with Dr. Smith about this paper, we were discussing the world picturing that happens in the post-truth politics of the Trump administration, and he said, “Nothing really sticks if there are not some kind of truths associated, right?” I believe that he is right, but the part that needs to be emphasized is “*some kind of truths.*” There is no longer a

³⁷ Ashley Shelby and Karen Ernst, “Story and Science,” *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics* 9, no. 8 (2013), 1798.

³⁸ For this idea, I am indebted to Reed Van Schenck for their discussion of the intersection of “Everlee’s Story” and anti-vaccination rhetoric in their proseminar presentation entitled “Collective Facticity: Actor-Network Theory as Rhetorical Tool in the Age of Fake News” at the University of Pittsburgh in Fall 2019.

straightforward relationship between knowledge and truth as the divide between truths, lies, facts, and alternative facts has started to crumble. This is the reason many in this country do not believe in climate change—as the NIPCC and the carbon-based economy companies espouse their alternative versions of reality; why anti-vaxxers are at this moment campaigning against required vaccinations for college admissions; and why despite Trump openly asking for foreign aid in investigating a potential political opponent, 32.8% people between the ages of 18 and 29 believed Trump was not guilty during the impeachment trial.³⁹

In this paper, I have articulated the past and present of post-truth politics to show how while there has been a notable shift since Trump assumed office, it is not entirely new. I have also detailed attempts by the media and individuals to counter the post-truth narratives that flow so freely from the oval office. The question now is where do we go from here? Is there a way to world picture where veracity is reclaimed? Smith suggests that open strikes—which are “a way of continuing to offer minimal services as usual by some workers, which frees the majority to join in the demonstrations on the street and the many other kinds of work—including artistic and theoretical”—may be a way forward.⁴⁰ I may be overly optimistic in thinking that scholarship can help, in a way. While I understand the limited readership of any given article—this essay will likely be heard by less than twenty people and read by less than five—I do think scholarship can have a domino effect. I write primarily about music and disability, yet after reading Aaron Neville-Shepard’s article on post-truth argumentation, I felt compelled to write about post-truth and conspiracy rhetoric. Maybe this essay—even in the echo chamber that is a Cultural Studies Common Seminar—will spark an interest for someone else. The chain of scholarship may only

³⁹ Marley Coyne, “Exclusive Poll: Majority of Young Voters Think Trump is Guilty of Impeachment Charges,” *Forbes*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marleycoyne/2020/01/23/majority-of-young-voters-believe-trump-is-guilty-of-impeachment-charges/#c53721b50a91>.

⁴⁰ Smith, “Truth in Transition, as the Decade Breaks,” 12.

pass from like-minded thinker to like-minded thinker, but I optimistically picture a world where engagement with the post-truth can establish a shaky foothold in a discourse that is post-post-truth. Whether that engagement comes from journalists, storytellers, artists, academics, or someone else entirely, there is a world picture where veracity may not be fully recovered (as one must ask if it ever truly reigned), but it will, at least, be distinguishable from post-truth.