

# The epistemological chaos of platform capitalism and the future of the social sciences

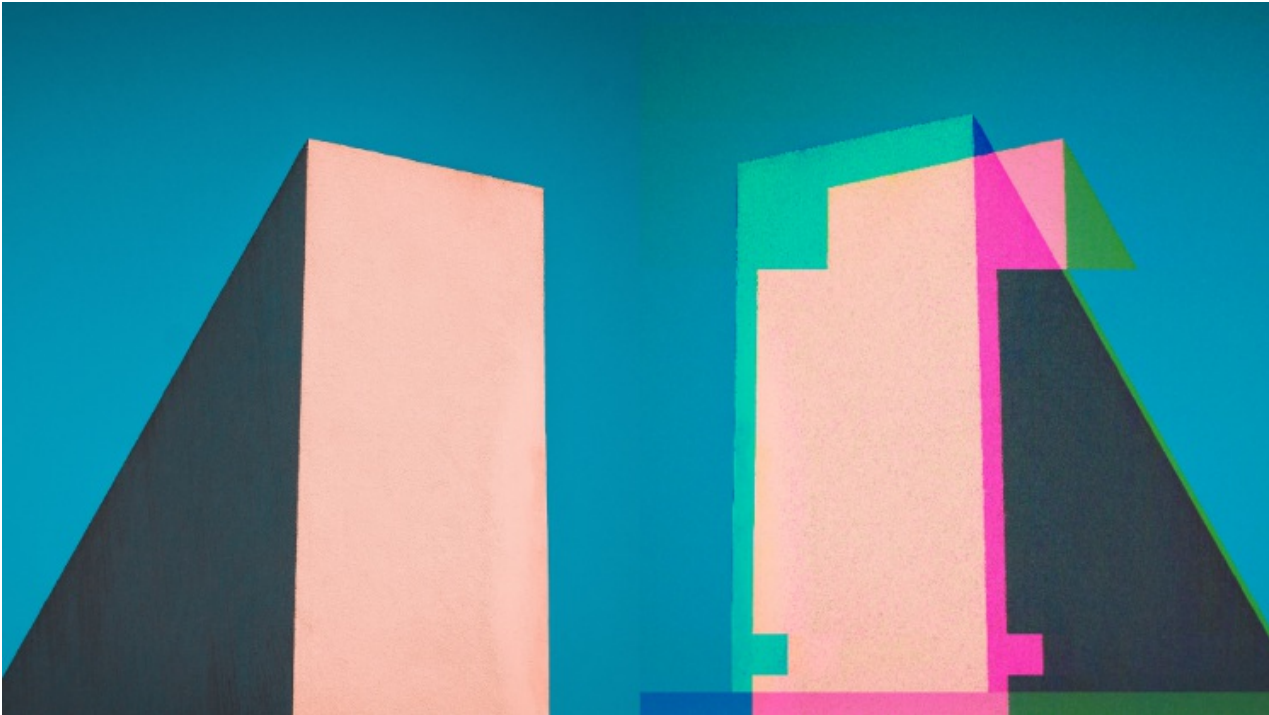
*Networked digital platforms have destabilised and reconfigured long-established forms of knowledge production and communication, changing the ways in which we consume media and engage with the public sphere and expert knowledge. In this extract from their new book, [The Public and Their Platforms](#), Mark Carrigan and Lambros Fatsis, outline how these platforms have reshaped the creation of public knowledge and why researchers should seek to engage with this transformed knowledge hierarchy in new ways.*

Apparent threats to the integrity of [social scientific knowledge](#) proliferate amid a [broader crisis of expertise](#). This has only become more significant during the COVID-19 crisis, to the extent that misinformation has the [potential to extend](#) the most significant public health crisis in over a century. There are many other examples we could point to here: the flat earth movement, the proliferation of conspiracy theories and climate change denial are simply three of the most jarring. Each can seem like an egregious attack on factualness that is pre-modern in its implications. However, we encounter a more nuanced reality if we look slightly further into them. Within the flat earth movement there is a passionate commitment to empirical inquiry, built around [the practice of DIY field experiments](#). It's a pre-modern empiricism which distrusts anything which can't be seen with one's own eyes but it's an empiricism nonetheless. Within the alt-right media there is a passionate commitment to investigative journalism, built around an enthusiasm for the [information sources which the internet has generated](#). It is a jarring facsimile of what this looks like elsewhere, oscillating between cynicism and childishness in its willingness to draw connections between discrete elements absent any justification for this inference. But, it is a commitment to investigation, nonetheless.

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Within climate change denial there is a [proto-sociological fixation](#) on the vested interests of climate scientists lurking beneath their purported objectivity. This doesn't mean we are refusing to take these seriously as problems. In fact we would suggest that taking them seriously *necessitates* closer scrutiny, including reflexivity about our instinctive reactions to them and the wider purposes these might unintentionally serve. If we simply dismiss them as pre-modern throwbacks we fail to grapple with the peculiarly modern conditions which have generated them. As Seymour [points out](#), 'the "fake news" trope is like a conspiracy theory in that it asserts a huge epistemological gap between the knowledgeable elect, and a mass of deluded "sheeple"'. But the idea that somewhere there was a *knowing lie* which others have been deceived by evades the more unsettling question: why is there such an enthusiastic embrace of these ideas in the first place?

Seymour [suggest they function](#) as a 'shorthand political sociology, explaining how their lives got so bad, and how official politics became so remote and oppressive'. It would be naive to imagine we could simply meet this need with longhand political sociology, reproducing the deficit model which was embraced by the public engagement agenda in its early years. But it does help explain why we cannot merely hurl facts at our adversaries, as [Davies so memorably put it](#), in the expectation they will *eventually* acquiesce to the authority of what we are saying. A ready to hand diagnosis for this can be found in the ['backfire effect'](#) in which being presented with falsifying evidence can actually strengthen belief.



However, attributing this to a psychological mechanism fails to do justice to either the empirical variability of its operation or the role of the context in which evidence is presented and accepted or rejected. It also underestimates the difference between laboratory studies with their inevitably contrivances and everyday settings in which debate and discussion occur. Treating these issues through a psychological lens lends credence to approaches which see these problems as expressions of cognitive propensities that can be ameliorated through action leading to better informed individuals. However, in spite of the hopes of the nascent fact checking industry, it seems unlikely that contemporary polarization over matters of fact can be resolved through the provision of *more* facts. Nor through *better* facts or a corresponding change in the seriousness with which people *treat* facts. The problem, as [Davies convincingly argues](#), is the erosion of factfulness itself as an institutional form grounded in trusting disinterested experts.

If there's any meaning to be found in the cliché of post truth, it is surely the increasing awareness among the powerful of the apparent erosion of the capacity to consecrate facts, even if the belief they once could relied at least in part on being [imagined by themselves and others as being at the heart of public affairs](#). As [Boczkowski and Papacharissi put it](#), 'Journalism no longer has a monopoly on deciding what's news' as a consequence of the direct connections which social media opens up between groups that previously relied on journalists as mediators, though 'perhaps, it never really did'. The faith in facts as a solution to the problems of factfulness carries the dream of a return to this role, how it was perceived by others and how it felt to be occupying it. If only we can improve the quality of our facts, ensuring we have the *best* facts, it is hoped that things can return to normal. As [Marres provocatively reminds us](#), 'we cannot have our facts back' and the incessant call for their return leaves us swamped with centrist nostalgia and failing to address the pressing normative questions which now confront us: 'what ideal of public knowledge should we invoke? What role for facts in the public sphere should we strive towards?'

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These are the pressing questions which the epistemological chaos of platform capitalism pose for the social sciences. While media literacy projects undoubtedly have a role to play in addressing these challenges, it's far too easy for them to take on a technocratic orientation that evades philosophical inquiry by seeking to elevate deficient individuals in order to render them adequate for factfulness. If we see the problem as resolvable through technical intervention, we inevitably miss the deeper underlying shift which is underway. Not only is a renewed commitment to factfulness unlikely to be successful, ignoring as it does the underlying social epistemological changes described previously, it also ['re-instates a highly problematic normative hierarchy of knowing and un-knowing subjects, which ultimately stalls the quest for a thriving knowledge democracy'](#). Even if social scientists are a minor part of this knowledge apparatus, the ease with which social media encourages the public making of knowledge claims by those with traditional bases of (academic) authority means that we cannot help but become embroiled in the ensuing politics.

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*This post first appeared on [The Post-Pandemic University](#) and is an extract from [The Public and Their Platforms](#), published by University of Bristol Press in June 2021.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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