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Restoring trust? Public communication from Swedish Universities about the post-truth crisis

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we engage with five Swedish universities' discursive articulation of, and responses to, an alleged post-truth crisis in communication, aimed at the public. Taking discourse theory as our point of departure, the aim is to analyse how universities are trying to maintain or restore trustworthiness against a backdrop of problems with fact resistance, fake news, and mistrust in academic institutions. The dilemma for universities is how to counteract post-truth without falling into the trap of returning to a realist paradigm, with its strict notions of truth and objectivity. The paper shows how public events are characterised by a crisis rhetoric, a dislocation, together with imaginaries of both external and internal threats of disorder, which convey a narrow and simplified understanding of scientific knowledge as objective and neutral. 'Defenders of truth' seem to foreclose any discussion by deeming knowledge relativism an irrational and dangerous position that fuels arguments claiming a truth crisis. A conclusion is that universities risk increasing polarisation, rather than trying to tackle problems of trustworthiness. The authors argue that, instead, universities need to be attentive to matters of democracy, power, and privilege, as well as a plurality of epistemological ideals, when discussing the so-called post-truth crisis.

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Introduction

During recent years, notions of post-truth, right-wing populism, and the growing digital circulation of 'bogus knowledge' have triggered major debates and posed challenges for established institutions of knowledge, including higher education. Such debates and challenges have been described as evidence of an ongoing global truth crisis. A global 'March for Science' was initiated in April 2017 due to concerns about mistrust in research in the aftermath of Donald Trump's presidential installation. To highlight the importance of research, and to combat public mistrust, several Swedish universities, together with other societal agencies (such as NGOs, unions, libraries, and museums), joined the global movement and mobilised to safeguard scientific knowledge through the public campaign #Hurvetdudet? (#Howdoyouknowthat?) In addition, Stockholm University

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launched a web portal called Faktatillit (Trustinfacts) which featured articles, panel debates, and social media content on issues related to the problem of this truth crisis.

However, these initiatives are faced with a dilemma; while it is undoubtedly important to separate academically produced knowledge, evidence-based knowledge, and facts from propaganda and disinformation, the question nevertheless remains: how can different approaches to knowledge production be included in these counter-strategies? At the same time as universities are trying to restore trust and communicate with the public, there is a risk that these initiatives will fail to capture the plurality of epistemological ideals and variety of ways of producing knowledge that flourish in academic institutions. As Bruno Latour (2004) highlighted back in 2004, paradoxically, climate-change deniers and conspiracy theorists use arguments reminiscent of constructivist criticisms of naturalised objectified facts, such as the 'lack of scientific certainty', to convince the public. Latour writes: 'like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless' (Latour, 2004, p. 228). The widespread worries about post-truth became a topic of public debate in western countries in the wake of Brexit and the election of Trump, and in these discussions the success of right-wing populism was partly attributed to 'postmodern' philosophy and its alleged relativism (Hämäläinen, 2019, p. 11). Lee McIntyre, for example, claimed that postmodernism is 'the godfather of post-truth' (McIntyre, 2018, p. 150). Likewise, in Swedish debates, a couple of participating academics blamed so-called postmodernist thinking and constructivist theory for the problem of 'knowledge resistance' and the rise of 'alternative facts' (Jarrick, 2017; Wikforss, 2019).

In this paper, we engage with five Swedish universities' discursive articulation of, and responses to, a post-truth crisis in communication aimed at the public. The question is whether the co-existence of multiple disciplines and various epistemic approaches are communicated in university initiatives to counteract what has been labelled post-truth. Our aim is to analyse how universities as well as individual researchers are trying to publicly maintain or re-establish trustworthiness in relation to notions of post-truth. The following research questions are posed: How are problems of post-truth understood in university communication efforts? What and who are regarded as the causes and problems of post-truth? In what ways do public initiatives seek to re-establish trust in academic knowledge production? With these questions as a point of departure, our analytical approach to university initiatives views them as parts of a hegemonic struggle to restore and maintain the legitimacy of universities during a time of alleged post-truth.

We argue that Swedish universities provide a particularly interesting case when discussing problems with post-truth and trust in established knowledge institutions, because, historically and in comparison with many other European countries, trust in Swedish public institutions in general has been high, and universities are no exception. Public trust in universities has remained at approximately the same high level since data was first systematically collected in 1997 (Falk, 2022). Since Swedish higher education is publicly funded, with the aim of contributing to the core societal values of democracy and equality, citizens' trust in the institution is of central concern to universities. In the final conclusion of the article, we discuss how problems of trustworthiness in the face of the post-truth crisis are related to universities as democratic institutions. However, while the figures have remained stable, degrees of trust vary between different social groups, according to their level of education – and trust is not evenly distributed between the

natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. In general, trust is higher in the natural sciences and medicine, and the humanities is the area of research that is regarded as least trustworthy (Jönsson, 2020). It is noteworthy that the term vetenskap (usually translated as science), includes all research areas in Swedish (as in the German Wissenschaft). We have therefore translated 'vetenskap' as 'scientific knowledge' or 'research' in order to signal this broader meaning.

Recently, the question of trust in research has become ideologically polarised and there is an increasing gap that relates to party political belonging. That is, with the rise of right-wing populist parties, trust issues have increasingly been understood as political, and voters who lean to the right are more likely to mistrust researchers and the universities as institutions of knowledge production (Jönsson, 2020). Notably, this political polarisation is greatest when it comes to trust in the humanities, according to the Swedish Public Opinion Survey (SOM) that is conducted annually (Jönsson, 2020). As of 2022, the situation for critical researchers has become further aggravated with the newly elected conservative government, which has built its majority with the support of the right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats. In this paper we argue that, while restoring and maintaining trust in academic knowledge production in general is important, it may be even more essential in relation to the social sciences and humanities.

Understanding post-truth and trust in higher education

Post-truth is a periodic concept, sometimes understood as a period *after* or *beyond* truth (Harsin, 2018, p. 2). It signifies a state in which society finds itself and is distinguished by an anxiety that popular movements and autocratic political leaders are not respecting truth or facts. Post-truth and trust in higher education have been studied relatively extensively from a philosophical angle, discussing how the concept of post-truth and related terms, such as fact resistance, fake news, alternative facts, etc., are understood both in current public discourses and historically by western philosophy (Fuller, 2018; Hallberg, 2020; Hämäläinen, 2019; Rider, 2018, 2020).

Hallberg (2020) focuses on the difficulties of defining truth, or settling its definition, in any straightforward way, and thus highlights the risks inherent in public communication from researchers that simplifies concepts such as truth and evidence. Hämäläinen (2019) argues that postmodernism was not an attack on *truth*, and that this misunderstanding will certainly not be of any help when we seek to understand current problems of right-wing populisms.

Other researchers, such as Fuller (2020) and Harsin (2018), question the very idea that post-truth denotes an era after or beyond truth. Fuller shows that there has never been a single homogeneous philosophical understanding of truth; instead, he claims that truth, and the concepts surrounding it, are essentially contested (Fuller, 2020). Likewise, Hämäläinen claims that we do not live in an era of post-truth, but in a time when notions of knowledge and truth appear to be fatally threatened in new ways (Hämäläinen, 2019, p. 158).

Importantly, the concept of post-truth has been linked to mistrust and polarisation. This has been done, firstly, by members of the public who do not trust the truth claims of the authorities (Durnová, 2019), and, secondly, by the authorities, who worry about the general public's lack of trust in experts (e.g. 'science denial') (Fischer, 2019). Rider

elaborates upon the opposition between true and false, and shows that another binary has emerged; namely, one that separates those who are educated (belonging to an elite) from those who are not. Thus, a 'division' or even a 'barrier' is created (Rider, 2018, p. 29). Such a division raises the question of what happens when citizens and the research community, especially in the social sciences and humanities, seem to be drifting apart and, more specifically, how this situation is handled by universities.

The concerns about post-truth and transnational populism have also been analysed within the context of neoliberal marketisation and the audit culture of higher education. Nestore and Robertson (2022, p. 83) argue that the idea of a deep chasm between educated elites and the non-educated masses could create 'false dichotomies' and should also be understood in relation to economic models and globalised neoliberal politics, and that educational systems have become parts of these same neoliberal dynamics. As Dillabough (2022) and Giroux (2018), amongst others, point out, the public dimensions of higher education – its role in supporting global, national, and regional democratic practices and civic engagement and its ability to counteract anti-democratic tendencies – have been under threat for decades from institutional neoliberalism (marketisation, bureaucratisation, and competition), which tends to undermine the ability of universities to act as democratic vehicles.

Similar tendencies have been noted in Swedish higher education; the commodification of research and increased competition has led to a situation in which easily measurable knowledge is prioritised at the expense of critical and analytical knowledge (Abraham, 2017; Hasselberg, 2012). While we notice that these trends are important factors for understanding higher education and problems of post-truth, in this study we have not focused on these aspects as such, but rather on how the universities themselves articulate the problems and solutions relating to post-truth issues.

In the literature, there are different explanations of how education can remedy or mitigate post-truth problems through focusing on various underlying factors related to people's ways of knowing (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020). The endangered role of research due to post-truth is addressed by Kienhues et al. (2020), who argue that the general public might have unrealistic expectations of research; hence, research might appear incomplete because it is not capable of solving everything (Kienhues et al., 2020). While some scholars focus on post-truth and threats to people's ability to know what is true, others study how right-wing populism presents specific problems for critical research, such as gender studies, in terms of posing a threat to academic freedom (Burke & Carolissen, 2018; Read, 2018).

However, there is less empirical research on how the problem is understood in universities' external public communication. We therefore intend to critically explore how universities and individual researchers defend their positions within a conceived crisis of truth and trust. In order to uncover the specific articulations produced by Swedish universities in relation to post-truth, we have primarily focused on texts and filmed public debates collected from university websites. This is described in the next section.

Data archive

We have collected material aimed at the Swedish public from the websites of five of the largest universities in Sweden: the University of Gothenburg, Uppsala University, Lund University, Umeå University, and Stockholm University. We

used Swedish search words for 'post-truth', 'alternative facts', 'fake news', and 'fact resistance' from the end of 2019 until the end of 2021. Material was also collected from the campaign #Howdoyouknowthat? (www.hurvetdudet.nu/), in which several Swedish universities participated (Lund University, Umeå University, and the University of Gothenburg, among others). Its web portal gathers information, links to articles, videos, and podcasts related to the importance of scientific knowledge production. The campaign was connected to the global initiative 'March for Science'. In Sweden, these marches were co-ordinated by the NGO *Vetenskap och Allmänhet* (Research and the Public).

The searches yielded a total of 181 (relevant) samples, including texts, filmed panel debates, and podcasts. The documents contained topics such as various activities at the universities, e.g. education, research, and events that were related more or less directly to the chosen keywords. For example, information was given about upcoming and completed filmed events on the topic of post-truth, and how research can counteract alternative facts. Stockholm University stood out because it had the most publicly targeted intervention against post-truth on its web portal, which was called *Faktatillit* (Trustinfacts).

All the selected documents were analysed, coded, and categorised using a qualitative research strategy. The material was read through several times, and was also discussed repeatedly by the three authors. The filmed material (around 270 minutes) was coded and categorised with the help of software for qualitative text analysis (atlas.ti). We started with an inductive approach, openly searching for topics related to the research questions, and after having sorted and decided on three main topics (*establishing a sense of urgency*, *building a straw man?* and *scientification*), we employed a close reading of the material using discourse theory as an analytical framework (described in more detail below). All quotes from the material presented in the analysis section were translated from Swedish into English by the authors.

During the readings and discussions, we asked the following questions: How are problems of post-truth understood in university communication efforts? What and/or who are regarded as the causes and solutions of the post-truth crisis facing society? In what ways do public interventions seek to re-establish trust in academic knowledge production? The excerpts from the material were chosen both because they exemplify arguments that were repeated throughout the material, and also in order to represent a variety of universities. The excerpts and examples presented in the analysis section that follows are sometimes from vice-chancellors representing their universities, but frequently from individual researchers who are speaking for themselves and for their research positions. We approach these examples as part of 'university initiatives' that are aimed at responding to the post-truth crisis. These university initiatives include communication from university management as well as individual academics presenting their perspectives independently from the administration of the university. Since all these texts constitute the universities external communication and are targeted to the public, we are interested in how these initiatives form a discourse about the problems of post-truth and its solutions.

Theory as method: analysing public communication on post-truth as discourse

Instead of considering problems with post-truth as something purely external, to which universities and individual researchers have simply responded in different ways, this paper explores how these problems are simultaneously produced by the universities themselves. In order to better understand how post-truth has been handled and understood, the paper is informed by discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), which is applied to investigate different discourses relating to the notion of post-truth. According to discourse theory, the meaning of social phenomena can never be fully fixed; rather, meaning is the result of antagonistic struggles between different social systems (discourses) that produce knowledge and meaning. As Laclau (2007, p. 68) notes: 'something is what it is only through its differential relations to something else'.

In our study, the articulatory practices of the public events are traced to investigate the meaning production of post-truth problems, how different elements (meanings and relations) are articulated in relation to excluded elements, and how these can be understood as an antagonistic struggle over the causes of and remedies for post-truth problems. We work with the concept of 'articulation' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105) to analyse how post-truth is given meaning, and trace how the meaning-making process both *includes* certain meanings, and simultaneously *excludes* others. For instance, in linking the identity of the 'university' to elements such as 'scientific truth', 'objectivity', and 'evidence', a certain meaning of the university emerges. However, if the 'university' is linked to elements such as 'democracy', 'bildung', and 'critical thinking', a somewhat different meaning is evoked.

Furthermore, we argue that the concept of *dislocation* is useful when explaining responses to the predicament in which the universities find themselves. A dislocatory event is, to use Glynos and Howarth's words, a 'moment of crisis' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 79). Dislocatory events signify a rupture in established cultural and social understandings of social reality, and Glynos and Howarth argue: 'can provoke an *ideological* response which aims to repair and cover over the dislocatory event before it becomes a source for new political construction' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 117, emphasis in original). We draw upon the concept of dislocation in order to develop an understanding of crisis as a constitutive feature of the social. Crisis as dislocation refers to undecidability. The disruptions or cracks in a discourse that emerge through dislocation are to be understood as openings for attaching new meanings to concepts.

In the analysed university initiatives, we have identified how universities and researchers respond to, and at the same time produce, the problem of what is here labelled a post-truth crisis. We discuss how such a crisis is constituted by using the analytical term dislocation in order to answer the question of how post-truth is understood. In doing so, we analyse the attempts to restore the trustworthiness of scientific knowledge, and what and who are regarded as the causes and problems of post-truth. While these articulations can be seen as a temporary fixing of meaning, they are also questioned and negotiated, illustrating how the dislocation enables new signifying practices, as we attempt to demonstrate in the analysis that follows.

Establishing a sense of urgency: post-truth as a crisis

In this first section, we discuss how the meaning of post-truth (the problem at hand) was constructed as an external disorder by emphasising a sense of urgency, with the future portrayed as dystopian, and a frightening hypothetical scenario being presented. In the discourse under study, the notion of post-truth was understood as an unexpected crisis that was creating disharmony and anxiety and due to which the legitimacy of universities as knowledge-producing institutions was seen as threatened. In our first example, a blog by the vice-chancellor of Uppsala University, fact resistance was linked to insecurity and chaos:

> The world around us is troubled. We have seen how terror causes chaos, and political decisions create uncertainty. One force that helped us to navigate – Hans Rosling – has left us all too soon. Without him, we must continue to combat fact resistance for a more just world. When the world shakes around us, it is more important than ever that we stand our ground and stick to our principles. We do this by continuing to fight for a more open society. *(Uppsala University, 2017)*

In this quote, the vice-chancellor is commenting on the passing of a famous Swedish academic and public speaker, who is positioned as an important 'force' in the fight against 'fact resistance'. This articulatory practice of linking fact resistance with insecurity and political chaos, as a problem external to universities, and emphasising that 'we must stick to our principles' signals that the universities are already doing what is necessary to combat post-truth tendencies. In an article published by Lund University, the experience of crisis was stressed:

> Right now, we are experiencing a bit of a crisis that is connected to the concept of 'post-truth', which became this year's new word in the Oxford Dictionary. We see fact resistance on so many levels: the climate deniers, the election of Trump, and here at home Jan Björklund [minister of education], who said that now he ignores the researchers and does as he pleases with the schools. *(Lund University, 2016)*

This stressing of the problem as a matter of 'knowledge relativism' was also reflected in the motivation behind *Trustinfacts* (a web portal launched by Stockholm University, and one of the major initiatives against 'fact resistance'): 'It is becoming increasingly important to clearly stand up for research and best practice at a time when knowledge relativism and opinion bubbles are flooding the public debate' (Stockholm University, 2022).

In a speech given in relation to the installation of doctors at Umeå University, the vice-chancellor addresses both the public and the newly appointed doctors:

> When parts of the world suffer from contempt for knowledge and turn to alternative facts, it is important that we who have an academic education keep on questioning and reminding others about the importance of sticking to truths that are available through studies and research. 'Made-up stories' are for fairy tales and fables, but when important decisions are to be made about our future society we need to stick to the real facts, that have been won through a research approach. *(Umeå University, 2017a)*

In this speech, a division is emphasised between the educated and non-educated, and the problem of 'made-up stories' is articulated as being external to universities, thus

constituting an outside for the 'research approach'. In a debate article from the University of Gothenburg, researchers express their concerns about contemporary trends:

> . . . scientific findings are attacked almost routinely by politicians and special interest groups, who suggest alternative descriptions of reality or even reject science outright. This movement is based on 'alternative facts' that are presented as valid science but fall outside the scientific method and the expert review process. *(University of Gothenburg, 2017)*

In this quote, the problem is articulated as a matter of 'attacks' from the outside by 'politicians' and 'special interest groups', and the scientific method is presented as being in opposition to 'alternative facts'. Furthermore, when the vice-chancellor of Stockholm University was being interviewed about the reasons behind the initiative *Trustinfacts*, the following exchange took place:

> [Interviewer] Fact resistance, fake news, knowledge relativism, they have been debated a lot during the winter and spring. Has something serious happened with the knowledge climate today? Astrid Söderberg Widding, how worried are you on a scale from one to ten?
>
> [Vice-chancellor] Somewhere in-between, I guess. Because certainly, there are reasons to be worried. It's a new situation and a completely new media landscape, where there are opportunities in a totally different way than before to systematically spread disinformation to the public. And this is something new. [. . .] We see it as important to actively participate and to offer an antidote to fact resistance. *(Stockholms University, 2017)*

This articulation of the situation as new signals that post-truth is a dislocation, a crisis, and one that is constructed as a major problem against which the universities must act. The term 'antidote' draws upon a medicalised vocabulary, implying that post-truth problems are seen as a disease that has become viral, and the university as such is represented as the solution to this crisis. According to Farkas and Schou (2020), framing post-truth as a disease is common in post-truth debates. Their research shows that dominant discourses tend to depoliticise the problem of post-truth by portraying it in medical terms, as an epidemic spreading uncontrollably across various digital media. The metaphor 'new knowledge climate' is likewise a signifier that is made meaningful by the notion of post-truth as a dislocatory event (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). The rise of the post-truth condition occurred like a sudden natural disaster in the sense that it connects knowledge with climate (and possibly the climate crisis), and stresses that universities need to respond to it before it is too late.

As we have argued in this part of the paper, the problem of post-truth has been constituted as a disorder that exists *externally* to universities, and functions in such a way as to claim that the status of universities should be maintained in order to prevent this chaos from spreading out of control. To summarise, in this section we have identified how elements such as 'fake news', 'fact resistance', 'alternative facts', 'made-up stories', 'filter bubbles', 'knowledge relativism', and a 'new media landscape' are articulated together with elements such as 'worries', 'chaos', 'terror', 'risks', and 'uncertainty', thereby constituting the problem as serious, and as a dislocation (Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

We argue that, while the notion of post-truth certainly represents a crisis for universities, there is at the same time an opening for attaching new meanings to the concepts associated with knowledge production – that it is possible to rearrange the ideals attached

to knowledge and truth in order to potentially include more perspectives or broaden the understanding of knowledge, rather than to fix them in narrow ways.

Building a straw man – an illusionary position?

We now move on to discuss what and who are regarded as the causes and problems of post-truth, by analysing how imaginaries about an *internal disorder* were made intelligible by separating legitimate research perspectives from their illegitimate counterparts. The legitimacy of scientific principles based on 'objectivity', 'truth', and 'evidence-based knowledge' was created by transferring responsibility for problems related to the post-truth situation to 'postmodernism', 'knowledge relativism', and 'constructivism', as well as 'critical students' and 'colleagues'.

In a series of three filmed panel debates, aimed at the public and broadcast by Stockholm University, invited experts from Swedish universities discussed post-truth problems such as fact-resistance and fake news and the universities' role in combating such problems. A professor in political science argued:

> I can note that there are quite widespread opinions among both students and some researchers and colleagues where they want to be critical of the system, or they want to be radical and thus also really reject the possibility of knowledge. That is a theoretical perspective that has been popular [. . .] and within the social sciences such perspectives are still at least partly popular. [. . .] If you don't believe in knowledge, then, strictly speaking, you have no place at the university. *(Stockholm University, 2017a)*

The articulation of 'critical' and 'radical' 'researchers and students', together with the idea that some people 'reject the possibility of knowledge' was one way in which an internal disorder was produced. This positioned the 'critical' and 'radical' as being on the outside of eligible research and teaching. Such patterns of representation were repeated throughout the material. This professor also pointed out that critical thinking was a democratic ideal that the universities should encourage, but that critical thinking and 'perspectivism' had gone too far in relation to teaching.

'Knowledge relativism' and 'postmodernism' were articulated together with mistrust in scientific knowledge and research in general, because such ideas were claimed to also be spreading outside the universities. In another of the filmed public panel discussions, an invited professor of history, who was discussing alternative facts and the lies of Donald Trump in US politics, put it this way:

> It seems that, in some ways, this idea which has been around in some places in academia, that facts do not exist externally to us, but are something we construct [. . .], this idea, which is about to vanish within academia, has now been exported to global politics. And then it has a potency which is much more dangerous than it has been within academia. *(Stockholm University, 2017b)*

In this example, US politics and alt-facts are articulated together with an 'idea' that is framed as something that exists only in the marginal 'some places' since it is about to 'vanish within academia' but at the same time as something with 'potency' that has been 'exported to global politics' today. The relationship that is constituted between what is implicitly understood as 'constructivism' and 'global politics' (Trumpism in this case) is what makes 'constructivism' even more 'dangerous' and thus less trustworthy in the context of universities and higher education.

In addition, a similar division was made between 'trendy' critical theories and 'objective knowledge', which disconnects certain theories and perspectives from what is considered trustworthy. One philosophy professor, who was an active participant in the studied material, argued:

> There is a scepticism towards objective knowledge. In any case, this has also existed within the university. It's been a bit trendy, you know. And it's spilled out, outside the university, I think. So, it pops up a little here and there. When you're out there talking about the truth, people say things like this: 'well, the truth with a capital T', and 'don't be so dogmatic!', and things like that. So, I come across that as a philosopher quite often, I can certainly say that. *(Stockholm University, 2017b)*

Moreover, 'postmodern ideas' in general were framed as dangerous and destructive within academia because such ideas were believed to undermine the concepts of 'truth', 'knowledge', and 'objectivity'. In the excerpt below, taken from one of the filmed episodes called 'the status of knowledge today', the moderator asked the invited experts to explain to the audience what 'postmodern thinking' within academia is all about. One of the invited professors explained that:

> There are those who are radical and say [. . .] that we cannot talk about facts that are independent of our worldviews. Facts only exist because we organise our thinking about the world in a certain manner. There are no giraffes, there are no cars, they only exist because that's how we've chosen to organise the world. [. . .] It might be that the First Nations people came to America from the underworld, but it might also be the case that they came over the Bering Land Bridge. We cannot distinguish between true and false here, it depends only on our worldview. *(Stockholms University, 2017)*

It can be argued that the portrayal of critical perspectives such as 'postmodern theory' rests on a misrepresentation of such theories, or a hyperbolic description of them (Hämäläinen, 2019). As Harsin (2018) points out, some of the theorists who have been labelled 'postmodern', such as Baudrillard (1995), share very little with post-truth, but provide a theoretical understanding of the ongoing post-truth condition. Such theories can be used to explain the mediation and the play of illusion in global politics, rather than being the cause of it. However, there was a negotiation around the meanings of concepts such as 'relativism' and 'postmodern theory'. One of the participants in the same debate, a professor of the history of ideas, commented on the statement above: 'But this is . . . that is . . . nobody argues in line with those [. . .] positions. At least nobody in what is usually, and derogatorily, called postmodernism'.

Furthermore, in a podcast arranged by Stockholm University, threats against 'academic freedom' were discussed by a professor of history, who used the same line of argument to claim that the threat against academic freedom is not only external, but also something internal to the universities, and more specifically that the threat comes from researchers themselves, who do not 'seek the truth':

> There is also an intellectual threat against academic freedom posed by researchers themselves, namely those researchers who no longer see it as an important goal to seek the truth, but instead believe that the difference between true and false isn't important. *(Stockholm University, 2019)*

While there was not total unity about how to understand the role of critical perspectives on knowledge in this context, one conclusion that can be drawn from the material we studied is that some of the content of the public debates on this issue

seems to consist of the construction of a straw man, whereby invited experts attribute elements to 'the enemy' based on a distorted version of what these theories mean. Straw man arguments thus build an illusionary position of the opposing point of view by caricaturing and misrepresenting the opposing position. In this debate, researchers with a more reflective approach to scientific knowledge had to argue from a defensive position, as though these traditions lack any claims to knowledge (see also Hämäläinen, 2019, p. 35).

According to previous research (Braun, 2019; Burke & Carolissen, 2018; Nagle, 2017; Read, 2018), attacks from right-wing populist movements and autocratic governments are more often directed against institutions of 'critical thinking', such as gender studies and cultural studies. However, our analysis shows that such attacking tendencies can also be found more generally in the studied material. Those perspectives were portrayed as 'dangerous', 'ideologically biased', and not in search of 'the truth', and thus complicit with the crisis that has arisen. Paradoxically, the representatives of the universities participating in debates about post-truth seem to side, to some extent, with right-wing populist movements in their concern over 'trendy' critical paradigms within academia.

While some of what was emphasised in the material could be seen as just rhetorical arguments – the construction of a straw man – it nevertheless resulted in a belittling representation of certain perspectives on knowledge production within academia. The responses to the threat of post-truth are thus not just neutral representations of what different individuals within academia think about these issues. They can also be interpreted within the framework of an 'ordering device' (Braun, 2019, p. 432) that makes visible what seems to be at the core of this public university discourse on post-truth. By distinguishing between what is right/wrong, objective/subjective, rational/irrational, neutral/biased, or safe/dangerous, critical perspectives (e.g. 'postmodern theory') are construed as a threat, and as an explanation for the post-truth crisis.

It can also be argued that the crisis rhetoric that has become so central to this discourse puts universities in a position where they are expected to respond in the ways that they do. If the outside world is in chaos, disinformation is flowing freely, and people seem to be losing faith in scientific knowledge, then universities and individual researchers have to act. We identify this as a paradox because the values that are considered important in many other university situations such as in teaching and in university policies – for example, norm criticism, (gender) equality and anti-racism, etc. – appear in this discourse as something threatening. In the university initiatives studied here, some tone-setting participants paradoxically walk hand in hand with the reactionary forces that abound outside the universities. In their criticism of 'postmodernism' or 'radical researchers and students', they are joining forces with self-serving right-wing populists and accusing segments of the humanities and social sciences of being relativistic, while they themselves stand up for the truth (see also Hämäläinen, 2019). Thus, they also paradoxically argue against fundamental research norms of the humanities and social sciences such as 'critical thinking'. While creating a straw man of the imagined enemy, they risk simultaneously making one of themselves, and thus the universities' attempts to restore trust in academic research appear counterproductive. In the following, we discuss how expert authority as truth-seeking was understood to be the major solution to the problem.

Scientification: truth-seeking as a remedy

In this section, we present some of the suggested solutions to the ongoing post-truth crisis in university communication and thus how trustworthiness is believed to be restored. While the problem of 'knowledge relativism' and 'fact-resistance' was articulated together with both external and internal risks, the solution was to a large degree framed as a matter of restoring expert authority through *scientification*. This can be understood as 'a process whereby the use of and claim to systematic and certified knowledge produced in the spirit of "truth-seeking" science becomes the chief legitimating source for activity in virtually all other functional subsystems' (Weingart, 1997, p. 610). For example, in the March for Science initiative, 'evidence-based knowledge' was portrayed as one of the cornerstones. In the organisation's manifesto, it is stated that: 'In order for society to make use of progress in research, and solve global challenges, politicians and other policymakers need to see the value of scientific knowledge and base their decisions on evidence' (hurvetdudet.nu/bakgrund/march-for-science-sverige).

In this way, scientific trustworthiness was articulated together with 'progress in research', 'solve global challenges', and 'evidence'. Another example was displayed on one of the banners in the second March for Science in April 2018: 'Because children and young people have the right to live in a society of evidence-based knowledge'. In a similar vein, the organisation *Research and Society* (*Vetenskap och Allmänhet VA*) co-ordinated campaigns to promote evidence-based policymaking and the use of research-based knowledge in society. In a debate article linked to VA's web portal, advice was given to politicians: 'Reforms should be based on available research results and evidence and their impact systematically evaluated. If possible, undertake pilots before implementing nationally' (Svenska Dagbladet., 2018).

Scientific evidence as a signifying element was thus seen as the cure for many of the problems associated with the idea of a truth crisis. The ability of science to create a better world, and to comprehend the complexities of the world, was emphasised. The national *March for Science*, for example, was presented with the words: 'Societies that lean towards science lead to a better world. With March for Science and #Howdoyouknowthat? we want to give scientific knowledge a larger place in public debate' (Vetenskap & Allmänhet, 2022, n.p.).

A similar point was put forward by a professor of natural sciences in a filmed public panel debate in Almedalen (a large annual event at which politicians, researchers, and stakeholders meet) on the topic: 'Why should we trust scientific knowledge?':

> To this, we can add that scientific knowledge has a long and unique list of merits. There is no other activity in society that has given us so many advantages when it comes to life. This goes for diseases, education, and life in all other respects. We have a pretty good track record to look back on. With this said, I don't mean that science is never wrong, but it has accomplished so much for humanity. *(Vetenskap & Allmänhet, 2017)*

In this quote, 'scientific knowledge' was connected to concepts such as 'progress', 'a long list of merits', 'development', and 'life in all other respects', and the issue of the public's trust in research was established through the historical 'track record' of scientific progress. Likewise, at the start of the same seminar, the moderator rhetorically formulated the problem of trust towards research as follows:

> Research and facts are challenged when knowledge is replaced by a gut feeling. What is it that makes us trust scientific process? Is it research that is free from emotions and guesses? What is good and bad research? *(Vetenskap & Allmänhet, 2017)*

The scientific process is articulated as standing in opposition to knowledge derived from 'gut feelings' and 'guesses', which is instead implicitly linked to the notion of a truth crisis. Thus, a division is created, in which a fact-driven elite of 'experts' is opposed to the 'emotional' or 'ignorant' public. One of the participants on the panel that responded to the questions above said:

> Well, as a researcher I think that one should trust scientific knowledge because we have a system guaranteeing that what we produce is trustworthy. We have different systems of control, and what we produce, before we can publish it, is controlled by – those we call – our peers, our colleagues, [. . .] and this openness guarantees that you can have confidence in the data produced. *(Vetenskap & Allmänhet, 2017)*

Moreover, in one of the filmed panel debates entitled 'The role of the university', arranged by Stockholm University, the trustworthiness of scientific knowledge was established by linking a passion for truth with the calling of the researcher as a solution to the problem:

> As a researcher, you have the truth as your guiding star in some way. We live to generate new knowledge that ought to be systematic and objective. That's what we live for and are passionate about. That's the reason why we work at the university, because we think it's important. So, I'm obviously very worried when I hear terms like alternative facts. *(Stockholm University, 2017a)*

Attempts were made to restore trust by means of stressing the scientific method, which was articulated together with elements that establish the meaning of this method as being more than just a simple technique – it is a 'system' designed to justify academic knowledge production. This system was also conflated with positive elements such as 'openness', 'availability', 'control', and 'confidence'. The legitimacy of the system was thus discursively coupled with 'trustworthiness' against the backdrop of the chaotic and dangerous post-truth situation that has recently arisen. Thus, trust was articulated through claims that universities engage in strictly science-based *methods*, an *internalist account*, according to Scheman (2011, p. 223).

What can be noticed here is that concepts such as 'truth' and 'scientific method' were invoked as crucial for restoring trust in ways which signal that they are part of a hegemonic struggle that is attempting to maintain the legitimacy of academia in general, and certain perspectives in particular. Trustworthiness is thus understood as being achieved in terms of the norms and methods of scientific practice. In this struggle, we have also noticed that 'scientification', as a remedy to the crisis, functioned as a demarcation from critical theories such as constructivism and postmodern theory (which were then seen as not living up to the standards of scientific practice).

Moreover, the studied university initiatives reflected negotiations about how to understand the relationship between scientific knowledge and trust in research. Thus, there were other ways in which the restoration of trust in scientific knowledge was understood to be accomplished. While some of the academics who were actively involved in the studied discourse engage in separating facts from falsehood, the rational from the irrational, and position those who mistrust experts as being emotional or cognitively biased, some participants saw a danger in creating such social division. One professor of philosophy stated:

> I always think it's dangerous to imagine there are those who are uneducated and stupid and believe in lies, and then there's us who are enlightened and educated and don't believe in lies. I really don't believe in such a division. *(Stockholms University, 2017)*

In another example, a broadened concept of knowledge was advocated by a professor of the history of ideas, who argued that trust in academia must be achieved through inclusiveness:

> I think that one of the major problems today, or maybe the last few decades, is that knowledge in society at large and in public authorities has been reduced to a sort of quantifiable knowledge [. . .] A big task today must be to continue to broaden the concept of knowledge. [. . .] When we are seeking to rehabilitate knowledge, and stand up against the lies and ignorance, it can't be only this narrow view of knowledge; instead, we must introduce other perspectives of knowledge production as well.*(Stockholm University, 2017b)*

This means that the scientification discussed above, although one of the most widely used modes of arguing, was not unquestioned. There were also those who argued that the best remedy for restoring trust is 'critical thinking', which is taught at universities. 'The most important thing is not the knowledge as such, but the ability to think critically', a professor of natural sciences argued, when talking to pupils at a public event (Umeå University, 2017b).

As we have sought to illustrate in this part of the paper, the authority of the university as a trustworthy knowledge institution was presented as equivalent to being a protector of truth in times of need. The elements of 'truth', 'scientific evidence', 'systems of control', and 'objectivity' were articulated together to create a core meaning of scientific knowledge production. While these internal standards of scientific knowledge production are certainly necessary, the question is whether arguing in this vein is enough to restore or maintain trust, in the midst of a politically polarised situation.

Conclusions

In this article, we have analysed how the notion of post-truth represents a crisis, a dislocation in the public communication provided by Swedish universities, and how universities and members of academia attempt to restore trust within the context of such a crisis. We argue that the notion of post-truth in universities' public communication functions, in the words of Braun (2019), as an *ordering device* dividing the contemporary public debates into good and bad, right and wrong. In this discourse, both an external and an internal disorder is seen as the problem, which threatens trust in scientific knowledge.

In the university initiatives, individual researchers tended to position themselves as the 'passionate truth-teller', set against both the external, the general public, and the internal, other researchers. The position of the objectivist seems to push researchers who are arguing for a broader understanding of knowledge into a defensive posture. While some researchers present themselves as 'defenders of objectivity', anyone who tried to problematise or discuss notions of objective truth ran the risk of being discursively positioned as illegitimate, and as 'post-truthers', in line with the alt-right movement. In a sense, paradoxically, the guardians of reason and objectivity are joining forces with the right-wing extremists in positioning the so-called postmodernists as enemies (see also Hämäläinen, 2019). This represents

a hegemonic intervention that risks recreating a narrow understanding of truth and objectivity (as only evidence-based knowledge), in which more critical understandings of knowledge are marginalised. The simplistic understanding of scientific knowledge and research taken by the defenders of evidence based knowledge undermines not only 'postmodern' theories or critical disciplines such as gender studies, but the status of the humanities in general. We argue that the very discourse of post-truth polarises, and that the arguments put forward by 'defenders of truth' are not necessarily representative of the views of researchers within the social sciences and humanities in general, but must be seen as a reaction to the dislocation caused by the truth-crisis.

Furthermore, we argue that universities ought to consider the problem as largely a matter of lack of trustworthiness. However, in the initiatives we have studied the problem is primarily constituted as a matter of a truth-crisis connected to people's lack of trust in *facts*, rather than a *democratic* problem related to the threat posed by transnational right-wing populism. As a concluding comment we want to problematise the truth crisis in terms of a democratic issue. In line with feminist philosopher Naomi Scheman (2011), we would also like to discuss whether these polarised representations will contribute to restoring or maintaining public trust. Scheman elaborates upon how researchers should go about (re)creating trustworthiness. She argues that the solution cannot be reduced to demonstrating that research is conducted in line with scientific standards, as is to a large extent the case with the university initiatives we have studied. Instead, universities need to work to ensure that, as institutions, they are more genuinely just, in the sense of being equal (Scheman, 2011). Trust is more likely to exist if the public is confident that society at large, as well as the epistemic communities, is more equal and inclusive. Scheman (2020) argues that trust and trustworthiness constitute *a relationship*, and as such are intertwined with power and privilege. Hence, the problem of citizens' seemingly irrational mistrust of those who are apparently trustworthy (experts, academics) cannot be resolved by one-sidedly blaming those who mistrust (Scheman, 2020, p. 34). Accordingly, trustworthiness can be seen as partly a matter of responsibility and acknowledging structural privilege.

Hence, following Scheman, we argue that the reproduction of a narrow scientistic stance identified in this material might not be the way to go about addressing the problem of fact resistance or mistrust in research. That is, while some academics attempt to locate the problem within different paradigms of knowledge, and as problems related to 'postmodernism' spilling over from academia into the general population, the root of the problem might actually be located elsewhere and be related to broader, unequal social structures in society or to the institutional neoliberalisation of universities. The role of higher education in supporting democratic practices and civic engagement has been under threat for decades, since processes of marketisation, bureaucratisation, and competition began to undermine the ability of universities to communicate with the public (Dillabough, 2022; Giroux, 2018). Interventions such as 'Trustinfacts' or 'March for Science' might be important ways of pointing out to politicians and stakeholders the problems that academics face today, but they may not necessarily challenge the root causes of those problems – especially not when they represent research in a simplistic, scientistic way.

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