

EXPERTS, KNOWLEDGE AND CRITICALITY IN THE AGE OF 'ALTERNATIVE FACTS': RE- EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SRHE

*Society for Research
into Higher Education*



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SRHE Academic Practice network

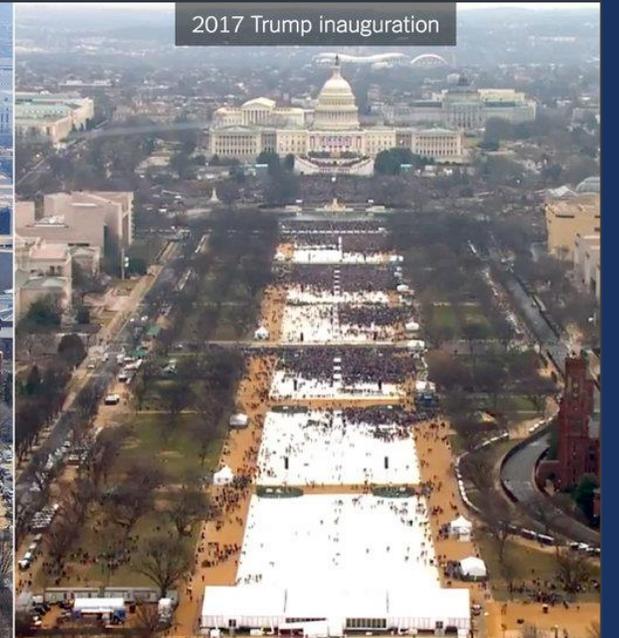


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2009 Obama inauguration



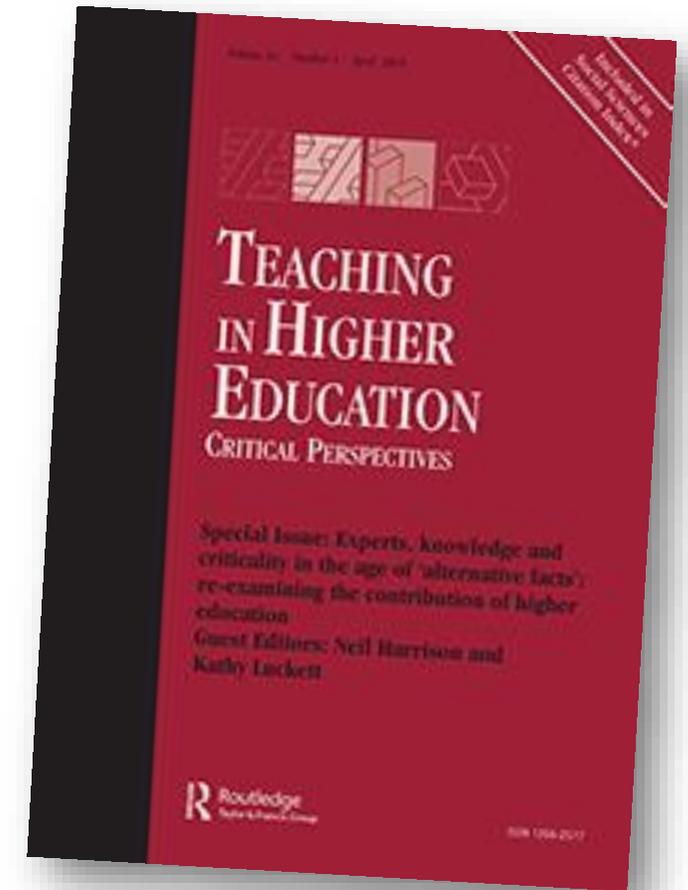
2017 Trump inauguration



WHERE IT BEGAN...



- Special issue of *Teaching in Higher Education*
- Twelve articles from over 100 abstracts – four presented today
- Drawn from UK, US, Canada, Singapore, India and Australia
- Published March 2019
- www.tandfonline.com/toc/cthe20/24/3



EXPERTISE UNDER ATTACK



- Michael Gove: 'people in this country have had enough of experts' (Gove, 2016)
- Erosion of traditional role of experts as creators and mediators of knowledge in society
- Shift to an information-led society where most people have almost endless information freely available
- A “bargain with modernity” governed by specific admixtures of deference and scepticism’ (Giddens, 1991, p.90)
- But all of this has happened before... (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019)

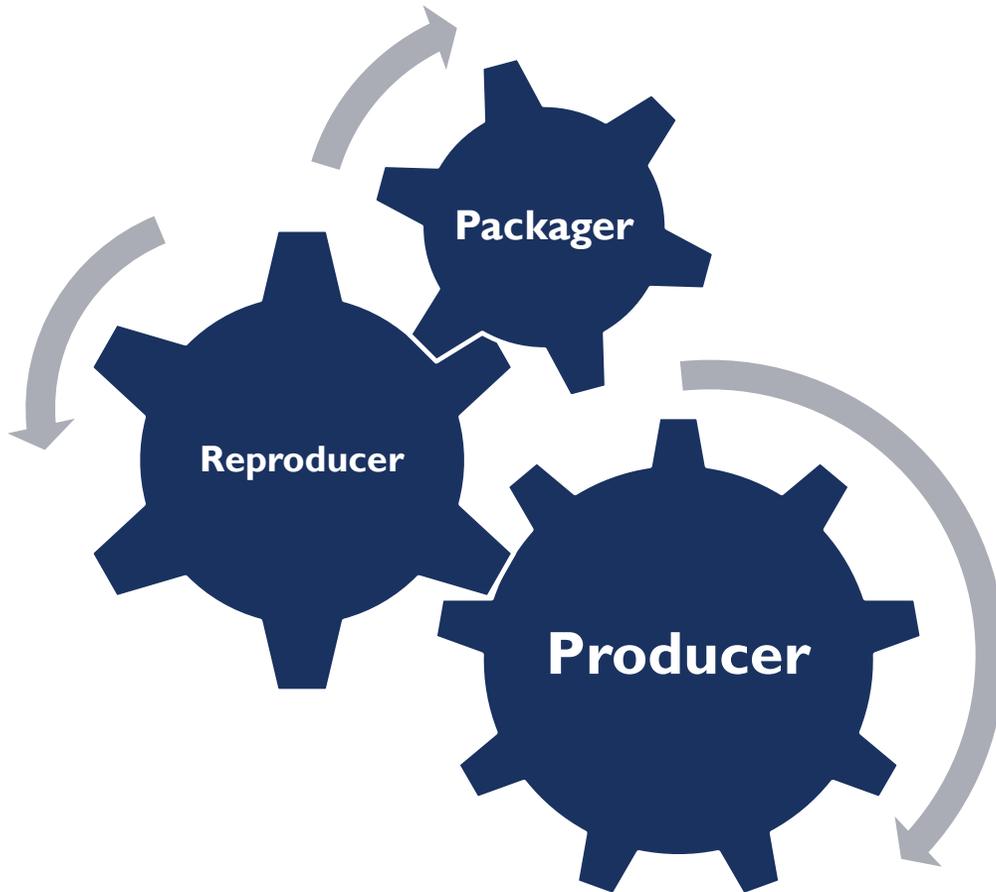
INFORMATION VS. KNOWLEDGE



- Post-Enlightenment shift from facts to interpretations, subjectivities and perspectives (Nietzsche, 1873/1954; Lyotard, 1984)
- It is ‘presentation, personal persuasive power, contacts, access to the media or the like which will provide the “individual finding” with the social attribute of “knowledge”’ (Beck, 1992, p.169)
- The quest ‘to *emancipate* the public from prematurely naturalised, objectified facts’ has backfired to become ‘an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases’ (Latour, 2004, p.227, original emphasis)



THE ROLE(S) OF HIGHER EDUCATION



- Multiple roles of higher education:
 - **Knowledge producer** – through research
 - **Knowledge reproducer** – through teaching and knowledge exchange
 - **Knowledge packager** – increasing role in pulling together knowledge for ‘sale’ in different formats
- Disparate forms of expertise
- Do these roles need to change in light of the post-truth world – and how?

THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM (I)



- **The rise of social media and knowledge through acclamation**
 - ‘Erroneous beliefs [are] reinforced by social recognition’ (Farrow and Moe, 2019)
 - ‘The internet appears to be structured so as to encourage people who enter it to confine their browsing to opinions they already accept’ (Bhatt and MacKenzie, 2019)
- **Loss of epistemic deference and erosion of epistemic communities**
 - ‘Institutions and disciplinary and professional communities responsible for higher expertise have insufficiently recognised the new context of a non-deferential society in which all assertions are challenged’ (Hordern, 2019)
- **Problematic relativism and naïve scepticism**
 - A ‘two sides to every story’ mindset leads to ‘a misreading of debates in postmodern epistemology and ethical relativism’ (Wright, 2019)

THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM (2)



- **Students' desire for epistemic certainty**
 - 'Fear of making mistakes makes students more likely to seek ready-made answers, rather than risking independent assessment of evidence' (Cooper, 2019)
 - Ignorance is not a 'mere lack of knowledge, a benign gap in knowledge or some epistemic oversight that needs only to be filled or rectified' (Bhatt and MacKenzie, 2019)
- **Contestation of curricula**
 - Questioning 'whose authority determines what is to be learned' (Farrow and Moe, 2019)
- **Marketisation of higher education and hegemony of the 'global north'**
 - 'Protest movements may have revealed the flaws in the home curriculum, but that curriculum is nonetheless being exported to [the global south] at an increasing rate' (Park and McGregor, 2019)

THE SEEDS OF A SOLUTION



- 1 Renewed relevance through interdisciplinarity**
Rihla: ‘non-regional, nonconformist, and diversifying’ (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019)
- 2 (Re)claiming spaces through public intellectualism**
‘If educators don’t act to fill public space then others will’ (Farrow and Moe, 2019)
- 3 Reinvigoration of epistemic structures**
‘Interrogate different sets of assumptions and different worldviews’ (Cooper, 2019)
- 4 Teaching for an information-complex world**
‘a critical awareness of [...] how ways of thinking and being are culturally produced and re-produced and sponsored’ (Bhatt and MacKenzie, 2019)

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