How Useful is the Concept of Post-Truth in Analysing Genocide Denial?
Analysis of Online Comments on the Jedwabne Massacre[1]

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Abstract

The choice of "post-truth" as the OED's 2016 word of the year spawned a large number of academic and popular texts. Some authors considered genocide denial to be an example of post-truth rhetoric. This study analysed the emerging literature on the subject and identified the notion of "indifference to truth" as a key defining characteristic that was distinct from neighbouring concepts. User comments to four online Newsweek Polska articles concerning the 1941 Jedwabne massacre of Jews were then scrutinized through the conceptual lens of indifference to truth. As a result, five types of post-truth rhetoric were constructed, identifying, tentatively, new forms of online genocide denial: (i) Explicit Indifference, (ii) Unsubstantiated Fabrication, (iii) Unconcerned Contradiction, (iv) Political Instrumentalization, and (v) Gratuitous Perversion.

Keywords: *post-truth, genocide denial, Holocaust, Jedwabne, indifference, Newsweek Polska, typology*

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Introduction

Since the tumultuous year of 2016, which saw the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the British vote to leave the European Union, the concept of post-truth has been widely discussed in the media and subsequently became the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year (Midgley 2016). However, there have been few scientific studies devoted to this concept and it is not at all clear whether the term post-truth has any heuristic value. Does it help us identify and explain a genuinely new phenomenon? Can it help us look at past discursive events in a new light and discover things that we would not have originally contemplated? In this study, I will attempt to ascertain whether "post-truth" has any relevance in the field of genocide denial. First, I will review the literature, both scientific and journalistic, that discusses post-truth in order to identify any distinctive characteristics of what observers understand by post-truth rhetoric. Second, I propose to analyse the online comments linked to four articles by *Newsweek Polska*, in order to discern — if at all possible — evidence of this post-truth rhetoric.

Literature Review

Before I embark on this literature review, it is worth clarifying precisely what my objectives are in this section and what they are not. I am interested in finding a nominal definition of post-truth in the literature that is *distinct* from other neighbouring concepts. It is not my objective to explicate the concept of post-truth in the sense of linking the concept with actual perceptions of real-world phenomena (Chaffee 1991: 1-2). In other words, I am not trying to construct a concept that accurately describes most manifestations of "post-truth"– that would be a task beyond the scope of this study. Such a selected nominal definition is thus

to some extent arbitrary and certainly has no pretension of being entirely evidence-based. Nevertheless, it may be useful in its ability to act as a conceptual lens through which one can analyse discourse on genocide and discover new insights.

One of the first people to discuss the idea of post-truth was James Ettema, former Professor of Communication Studies at Northwestern University, who used the term "post-factual" as early as 1987 in the scholarly journal *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (Ettema 1987). The Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas mentions the term post-truth in a 1992 scholarly article (Malpas 1992), as does the Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in an article for the magazine *The Nation* of the same year (Tesich 1992). Then in 2004 the American author and lecturer Ralph Keyes published the first book on the subject entitled *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (Keyes 2004). But it was only in 2016, characterized by the rise of populist movements in many countries, which amongst others propelled Donald Trump into office and successfully produced a UK pro-Brexit referendum result, that the word entered the public consciousness and triggered much media debate. Academia followed suit in 2017 and 2018 with a number of texts in various languages exploring the concept of post-truth.

I have been able to consult some 40 or so documents, including scholarly books/university dissertations – the most important of which for our purposes is *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* by Bruce McComiskey – popular/non-academic books, scholarly articles/chapters and journalistic articles/chapters. Most of the documents cite the Oxford English Dictionary definition, namely "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". However, this is rather vague for our purposes of discourse analysis and fails to clearly differentiate post-truth rhetoric from say populist, nationalist or

xenophobic rhetoric. In fact, even when authors go into more detail, identifying various characteristics of post-truth rhetoric, we end up with the same problem: there is nothing actually *new* about them, which could not pertain to other already well-established concepts.

The literature identifies the following traits that frequently seem to appear in texts commonly labelled as post-truth: emotion – particularly anger and resentment (Ball 2017, Conclusion, para. 6; Butler-Adam 2017; Czapliński 2017: 13, 15; d'Ancona 2017b; McComiskey 2017: 27); references to personal belief and experience (d'Ancona 2017b, Section 6, para. 1); hyperbole – exaggeration, caricature (de Saint-Laurent *et al.* 2017:149; McComiskey 2017: 29, 33); brazen disregard for facts (Rabin-Havt 2016, Chapter 8, para. 30; Viner 2016); reference to what one *feels* to be true – also known as "truthiness"[2] (Gilbert 2016: 94-98; Viner 2016); strong in-group identity (Enfield 2017: 21; Leith 2017); blurring between fact and opinion (Enfield 2017: 21; Jones 2016); contradictions (Ball 2017, Introduction, para. 8; Weigant 2016); unethical rhetorical devices – especially ad hominem arguments (d'Ancona 2017a, Chapter 2, para. 59; McComiskey 2017: 29-31, 41-43); no reference to facts (Devine 2018: 164; McComiskey 2017: 6, 8); anti-establishmentism, political or anti-expert cynicism (Kinna 2017: 4; Sismondo 2017: 4; Tallis 2016: 9); lack of public trust in institutions (Bendyk 2017: 8-9); metaphors (McComiskey 2017: 32); irony (Gutsche 2018: 43; Pawełczyk & Jakubowski 2017: 206); xenophobia (Higdon & Baham 2017, para. 29; McComiskey 2017: 33); and moral or epistemological relativism (Rubio 2017: 63; Wieviorka 2017, para. 16).

None of these traits or groups of traits can, in my view, be considered a new phenomenon. Nationalist discourse, for example, manifests many if not all these characteristics. Some authors suggest the novelty of post-truth rhetoric is the *extremity* of a particular characteristic. Thus, for Constance de Saint-Laurent and her group of researchers,

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[2] This term was first coined by American comedian Stephen Colbert in 2005. (Pierlott 2009, p. 77)

post-truth rhetoric is partly characterized by extreme caricature, exemplified by the comments of UK Brexiteer and former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Boris Johnson, likening the European Union to Nazi Germany (de Saint-Laurent *et al.* 2017: 149). But at what precise point does caricature become *extreme* caricature that would warrant a new classification? Clusters of attributes are no more informative. Bruce McComiskey, in his detailed monographic analysis of Trump's discourse, identifies three key strategies to elicit an emotional response from his alt-right audience: metaphors, hyperbole, and ad hominem attacks (McComiskey 2017: 29-33). But we are still left with the perplexing problem of discerning anything that is substantially new here.

A more fruitful approach to the study of post-truth is to restrict one's focus to the attitude towards truth itself, in other words, popular epistemology. The classic book by philosopher Harry Frankfurt from 2005 entitled *On Bullshit* has become the basis of many contemporary descriptions of the phenomenon. In a nutshell, Frankfurt, argues that bullshit – which many today regard as a synonym of post-truth – is essentially an *indifference* to the truth. It is not the same as a lie – although Ari Rabin-Havt (2016) and Piotr Pawełczyk and Jakub Jakubowski (2017) do indeed conflate post-truth with lying. Most authors, however, take the lead from Frankfurt and try to distinguish between post-truth and diverse forms of disinformation. Liars are very much concerned by the truth and they will go to great rhetorical lengths to deceive their audience. These rhetorical lengths – or what may be termed justifications and rationalizations – expose the lie more than the notion of falsehood, which, after all, can be generated quite innocently through error or ignorance. The Guardian journalist Jonathan Freedland, in his extensive lecture on the subject at King's College London in 2017 entitled "Post-truth, lies and fake news", correctly emphasizes these strategies that are typical for the liar. He gives the example of

President Nixon whose statements had a "convoluted tortured quality to them in which you can tell the person is trying to stay within the bounds of truth" (Freedland 2017, 25:40). His examples include: "there was no break-in *at that time*" (26:08) and "mistakes *were made*–without saying who made them" (26:18). In contrast, the purveyor of post-truth makes no attempt to justify their comments or provide any corroborative evidence.

The notion of "indifference to truth" has already been cogently argued by a number of philosophers as a defining feature of the post-truth phenomenon. The Spanish philosopher Fernando Broncano, for example, has written that "The key to understanding this phenomenon [of post-truth] is the strategic use of indifference to truth... Post-truth is not the abusive use of lies... It is the generalized indifference towards epistemic properties. It is the indifference towards the verification of the facts." (Broncano 2018) As for the Polish Catholic philosopher Sylwester Warzyński, he writes that "Post-truth exhibits a certain essential property of today's West. It is about indifference—indifference to the truth. It is no longer a question of its negation, nor some sort of scepticism of sources or its uselessness. It is about not taking [truth] into account, not taking into account the actual state of affairs." (Warzyński 2017: 138) The French philosopher Mazarine Pingeot provides an Arendtian analysis of post-truth in which "the danger of post-truth is not the lie, which in itself may even constitute a form of freedom from factuality, but indifference to the distinction between the lie and the truth." (Pingeot 2017) Other academics have similarly emphasized this epistemological characteristic of post-truth. (Baird & Calvard 2018, "Epistemic Insouciance"; Cassam 2018; Clem 2017: 97, 102; Hopkin & Rosamond 2017: 7; McComiskey 2017: 12; Vaccaro 2018, para. 3)

Applicability of "Indifference to Truth" to Empirical Cases

Bearing this *indifference to truth* in mind, it is interesting to re-examine some examples that are traditionally given to illustrate post-truth.

One of the best examples, also described by Freedland, refers to a comment made by Donald Trump to his former butler in his Florida Mar-a-Lago property: after instructing his butler to tell visitors that the drawings on the tiles were done by Walt Disney, the butler asked "is that true" invoking the response "who cares" from Trump (Freedland 2017, 28:12). A similar example can be found in the fallout to Sean Spicer's remarks about President Trump's alleged larger inaugural crowd than Barack Obama's: Trump aide Kellyanne Conway subsequently defended Spicer stating that he had merely presented "alternative facts" (McIntyre 2018: 6).

Indifference to truth is more difficult to ascertain in other cases. Let us consider the infamous Brexit slogan, that was presented in much of the literature to illustrate post-truth (Ahmed 2017: 98-99; Muñoz Sanhueza 2017: 19; Speed, Mannion 2017: 250; Wieviorka 2017, para. 9-10), and that some observers believe may have swayed public opinion: "We send the EU £350 million a week: let's fund our NHS instead. Vote Leave." Whereas this is a clear case of deception or disinformation, it is not entirely clear that it is an instance of post-truth. The figure of £350 million was not, randomly, plucked out of thin air, but was in fact the gross figure paid to the European Union. It deceived the voters in that it implied a net figure that could be spent on the NHS, which was false. But the fact that a real figure was chosen shows that a small but nevertheless discernable concern for the truth nonetheless existed. One could argue, therefore, that when a claim is made containing a drop of truth, no matter how outrageous or misleading, it cannot be said to be indifferent towards facts that post-truth implies. And yet, this drop of truth is so small as to render any associated concern for truth redundant

– indeed we may have to think of indifference to truth as a continuous variable, which becomes post-truth after exceeding a certain threshold. If this is so, the "£350 million" Brexit slogan could be classified as post-truth – the problem, though, with continuous variables is where to set the threshold. In any case, some of the most controversial stories during the Brexit campaign are, in essence, no different to the nationalist, populist or xenophobic discourses prevalent in previous decades that have been analysed in detail by Teun van Dijk, Ruth Wodak and others.

Another difficult case of post-truth is the Brexit campaign poster featuring great throngs of non-white people in a long meandering queue with the caption, "Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders" (Ball 2017, Chapter 2, para. 40-41). While the journalist James Ball and others have noted that the picture was in fact showing refugees on the Croatia/Slovenia border, it is difficult to discern indifference to truth regarding what is a decontextualized metaphorical photograph – i.e. no clear and explicit truth claim regarding the picture is made and it is therefore not possible to identify any particular attitude towards truth. Of course, the reason why observers *have* classified this as post-truth is due to the poster's hidden message, but what this message actually is lies very much in the eye of the beholder. If the allusion is that *these particular people* are in fact lining up to enter Britain or are already somewhere in Britain, then there is good reason to consider this as post-truth. But if the allusion is that *people like these* are entering Britain, then we are dealing with a xenophobic argument which is nonetheless grounded in certain statistics and widely held stereotypes, and as such is not a case of post-truth. Interestingly many commentators have likened this Brexit poster to a similar looking Nazi propaganda video, which would indeed suggest that the analysis of "Breaking Point" makes more sense in the context of European nationalism.

In order to recognize indifference to truth more easily, especially when the statement contains no clear rhetorical flags such as "who cares" or "alternative facts", I would add a supplementary characteristic: *the unlikelihood of the claim being a simple error*. Post-truth claims may be unique in that they are created – often spontaneously – without even the veneer of argument, and as such, exhibit a quality that to imagine them as human error would seem more preposterous than the claim itself. Taking into account this counterfactual condition, let us consider the following oft-quoted – and in my mind indubitable – example of post-truth from Donald Trump that has been shown to be entirely fictional: "I watched in Jersey City, NJ, where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building [World Trade Center] was coming down" (Ball 2017, Chapter 1, para. 15-19). This is a personal claim that to all intents and purposes can only be either true or fabricated. Any kind of human error – such as mistaking the actual televised small number of joyous Palestinian youth in East Jerusalem for "thousands and thousands" in Jersey City – is so improbable as to make the counterfactual absurd. Unless the then presidential candidate had previously suffered some sort of extreme visual impairment or cognitive dysfunction, such an anecdote is a clear case of improvised memory, blatantly indifferent to facts, serving a xenophobic agenda.

The next example from the UK's Brexit campaign is also frequently employed to illustrate post-truth, but is again problematic: the *Daily Mail*'s headline "We're from Europe – Let Us In!" on a photograph of migrants exiting the back of a lorry, insinuated that these were European stowaways when in fact they were from the Middle East. This seems to be post-truth in that the headline was subsequently demonstrated to be as false as Trump's New Jersey anecdote (Khomami 2016). Yet, one could argue that had the *Daily Mail* been totally indifferent to the factual content of their article, they would not have bothered to is-

sue a 54-word correction the very next day – voluntarily, under no compulsion from the Independent Press Standards Organisation – arguing that they had "published a reputable news agency's story". One may, for good reason, consider this justification to be belated, superficial and disingenuous, but it *is* a justification nonetheless. On the other hand, if we consider the counterfactual condition (what if this were a simple error?), it does appear unconvincing: EU citizens have full rights of entry and therefore have absolutely no need to smuggle themselves into Britain, dangerously cooped up in a lorry. The idea of EU stowaways is blatantly illogical, and unless the *Daily Mail*'s journalists were exceptionally ignorant, it is highly unlikely that this is a case of human error. On balance then, I would classify "We're from Europe" as a case of post-truth.

Post-Truth and Genocide Denial

If we take a broader definition of "post-truth" that is not dependent on the precise attitude to truth, but rather incorporates a number of characteristics such as the intention to deceive, falseness and distrust of authoritative knowledge-producing institutions, it is perhaps unsurprising that a number of authors have suggested that Holocaust and genocide denial are either a direct manifestation of post-truth or have been exacerbated by a so-called "post-truth climate".

The Guardian journalist Matthew d'Ancona is probably the most important exponent of this thesis. He states that "The most vile manifestation of post truth has been the reinvigoration of Holocaust denial, especially online" (d'Ancona 2017b). This thesis is repeated, albeit somewhat convolutedly, in Chapter 3 of his book on post-truth entitled *Conspiracy and Denial: The Friends of Post-Truth*: "No less alarming is the reinvigoration of Holocaust denial, especially online…. In one sense modern anti-Semitism is the template for what has become Post-

Truth... If ideas have a genealogy, this [Hitler's 1925 uncritical acceptance of the discredited Protocols in Mein Kampf] was a germinal moment for the trends that have coalesced, almost a century later, in the Post-Truth era. / The same disregard for evidence underpins Holocaust denial" (d'Ancona 2017a, Chapter 3, para. 42-47).

One of few academics that I found to unequivocally associate genocide denial with post-truth is the Manhattanville College professor of philosophy, Siobhan Nash-Marshall, whose 2017 book on the denial of the Armenian genocide constitutes the first part of a trilogy exploring the roots of the post-truth phenomenon:

"There is no specific page in my new book [*The Sins of the Fathers*] on which I claim that contemporary examples of "post-truth" are not significant examples at all, but that the denial of the Armenian Genocide, which has been taking place for nearly a century, is the proto-type of today's "post-truth" claims. This latter point is a subtext of the entire book. My claim in the book is that the denial of truth – the propagation of genocide negationist claims – is simply part of a genocidal project, and that genocidal projects are nothing but the concrete application of modern philosophy's demiurgical designs." (personal communication, March 7, 2018)

Similarly, in an article for the magazine *Editor & Publisher*, the journalist Rob Tornoe also appears to categorize Holocaust denial under post-truth: "If you head over to Google and search, 'Did the Holocaust happen?' or 'Is the Holocaust real?' the top results for both are fringe, anti-Semitic websites that deny the Holocaust's existence." (Tornoe 2017: 26) Jonathan Freedland makes the same point about Google Holocaust search results (Freedland 2017, 1:01:06), but in addition ends his lecture with an anecdote about his personal and emotional response to the way denier David Irving in the historic 2001 court case – in which he sued the historian Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books for libel – flippantly, dismissed any piece of evidence that supported the veracity

of the Holocaust (1:05:09). Other authors do not mention genocide denial as such, but do suggest that one important aspect of post-truth comprises a false or distorted view of the past. Constance de Saint-Laurent et al write that "The past has never been as relevant for the present as it is in today's Post-truth world" partly because "many of our political leaders are promising to bring us back to a past that never existed – the Great America of Trump, the Lost Empire of Farage or the French Resistance of Le Pen" (de Saint-Laurent *et al.* 2017: 147). A past without a Holocaust of 6 million deaths would certainly fit this description.

However, I began this study with profound doubts as to the pertinence of post-truth in the analysis of genocide denial. As I have argued earlier, the only clear *new* rhetorical element of post-truth is the total indifference towards truth, which is most obviously manifested by the absence of any form of rationalization or justification. Once a rhetor starts to justify their denial with an argument, no matter how flimsy or fallacious it is, they are, properly speaking, in an endeavour that is very much concerned with the truth and *proving* it to others.

Let us now turn to our empirical case: online debate on the Jedwabne massacre in 2016-2018.

The Jedwabne Massacre

Before we take a look at some of the online comments posted on the *Newsweek Polska* forum from the perspective of post-truth, it will be helpful to recap on the current historical knowledge about the massacre. From 1939 to 1941, the Kresy or pre-war eastern Poland was occupied by the Soviet Union as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. During this rule of terror some 315 thousand inhabitants of all ethnicities were deported to Siberia and the number of deaths through execution or in custody is estimated at 55,000 (Snyder, 2010, p. 151). Nazi Germany, which had been occupying western Poland for

the last two years, subsequently reneged on the agreement and invaded hitherto Soviet-occupied eastern Poland in what was called Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941. As far as the Jewish populations of the wider region were concerned, this second occupation by another totalitarian state would result in a death rate of 97%, the highest in Europe (Snyder 2015, Chapter 7, para. 4). As Timothy Snyder convincingly outlines in his book *Black Earth*, the Shoah reached its apex here because the pre-war state infrastructure was destroyed twice over (Snyder 2015, Chapter 5).

However, the particular phenomenon of Jedwabne – a murderous pogrom conducted by local Catholic Poles – does not typify the entire Kresy region, but rather a specific area of about 2475 km² between the provincial towns of Łomża and Augustów. From late June to early July 1941, Catholic Poles participated in bloody pogroms in, amongst others, Szczuczyn, Goniądz, Kolno, Grajewo, Wąsosz, Stawiski, Rajgród, Wizna and Radziłów. Written orders dating 17 June and 29 June 1941 from SS leader Reinhard Heydrich to his Einsatzgruppen (Nazi paramilitary death squad) commanders instruct them to incite pogroms, but without an "iota" of SS involvement. There is no evidence to suggest that Einsatzgruppen personnel took part in the murder of Jews in this area of Poland. The anarchical conditions produced a social vacuum, which when coupled with very high levels of popular Polish anti-Semitism – prewar support for National Democracy, the main nationalist anti-Semitic party, was high here – proved to be lethal to the approximately 17,000 local Jews. (Bender 2013)

As for Jedwabne, a small town located 15 kilometres from the city of Łomża with about 2,500 inhabitants, a large-scale massacre of Jews took place on 10 July 1941, just a couple of weeks after German reoccupation. Following the torture and murder of a group of 40-50 Jews by Catholic Poles, in the limited presence of German officers, at least 40 Catholic Poles herded the 300 or so remaining Jews into a barn and

burnt them alive (Dmitrów 2002, p. 336; Machcewicz 2002, p. 17).[3] After the war, under Communist rule in the early 1960s, a monument was erected in Jedwabne which falsely attributed the deaths to "[the] Gestapo and Hitlerite gendarmes" (Fox 2001: 90)

In 2001, the Polish-American sociologist, Jan Gross, published a short but shocking book revealing – for the first time to a mass audience – the direct role of Poles in the murder of their Jewish neighbours. Mindful of the caution against intellectualization of genocide made by the renowned scholar of genocide denial Israel Charny (Charny 2000: 23), I would like to complement this somewhat cold dispassionate description, with a quote from Halina Popiołek, an eyewitness, published in Gross' book that arguably produced a turning point in Polish collective memory:

"I was not there when they were cutting heads off or stabbing Jews with sharp poles. I know this from my neighbours. Neither did I witness our people ordering young Jewish girls to drown in the lake. My mum's sister saw that. Tears were flooding her face when she came to tell us about it. What I saw myself were Jewish boys ordered to lift the statue of Lenin, carry it around and shout 'the war was our fault!'. I saw how they were beaten with rubber straps. I saw how Jews were tortured in the synagogue and how mutilated Lewaniuk, who was still breathing, was buried alive... People herded them all to the barn. They soaked all four

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[3] The precise number of Jewish victims at Jedwabne is very difficult if not impossible to establish. Marcin Urynowicz, one of the contributors to the extensive volume on Jedwabne published by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), devoted a whole study on Jedwabne's ethnic demographics before and during the war. A variety of documents put the Jewish population of Jedwabne before the war to about 1000. A contemporaneous Soviet document gives a somewhat unlikely figure of only 562 Jews in Jedwabne in 1940. Jan Gross' figure and those of witnesses and postwar trial testifiers suggesting 1440 to 1642 victims is, thus, according to Urynowicz, untenable. Population movements during the Soviet occupation and the fact that the exhumation performed in 2001 was only partial further complicate the matter. Nevertheless, if the pre-massacre figure of Jewish inhabitants in Jedwabne amounts to between 562 and 1000, and the estimated total number of murders is between 340 and 450, we can in any case be certain of an extremely large-scale massacre of Jews taking place in July 1941. (Urynowicz 2002: 95-104)

sides of the building in paraffin. It all lasted two minutes, but this scream… It's still ringing in my ears" (Gross 2016)[4].

You can imagine how accounts like this overwhelmed a public that was educated to believe in its own ethnic national martyrdom and heroic wartime deeds. Perhaps, not dissimilar to France's fin de siècle Dreyfus affair and Germany's late 1980s Historikerstreit, the Jedwabne affair of 2001 was enormous and occupied the entire media for months on end. It culminated in the then President Aleksander Kwaśniewski's participation in a state commemoration marking the 60th anniversary of the massacre, in which his apology for the Polish crime, triggered further consternation amongst the conservative and nationalist right, exacerbated by the fact that he was a former communist and subsequently labelled (falsely) as a crypto-Jew (Forecki 2008: 116-118, 128-130). We can summarize the controversy as one that polarised Polish society between progressive Catholics, the left and the centre-right on one side, and nationalist Catholics and the radical anti-Communist right on the other (Weinbaum 2002; Wolentarska-Ochman 2003: 177-178, 180, 184). Moreover, the controversy radicalised the political elite in so far as it helped give rise, in the wake of the controversy, to two new major parties that have since come to dominate the political scene, the centre-right Civic Platform and the far-right Law and Justice, which is the current ruling party (Forecki 2008: 97; Karpiński 2006: 26, 173-174; Wolentarska-Ochman 2003: 180-181, 188n120, 189n125).

Concerning the defensive or denialist Jedwabne discourse which predominated, it went through a number of phases, from outright negation – i.e. Catholic Poles simply could not have done it – to reluctant acknowledgement accompanied by minimization and trivialization. Stanley Cohen's outstanding and much cited *States of Denial*, the most influential and theoretically extensive work on genocide denial, offers

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4 I have opted for POLIN's translation of Gross' original Polish citation (p. 67) from his second edition of *Sąsiedzi* [Neighbours], rather than Gross' own Princeton translation (p. 88-89). The latter, amongst others, mistranslates "Żydówka" as "Jewess" which, unlike its Polish counterpart, is derogatory in English.

a very useful tripartite typology of denial – i.e. literal denial, interpretive denial and implicatory denial (Cohen 2001: 7-9) – which appears to coincide with the chronology of these Polish phases reasonably accurately. To summarize these types, literal denial is outright negation, interpretive denial acknowledges the basic facts but interprets it in a way that maintains an unblemished virtuous national image, and implicatory denial acknowledges both facts and mainstream historical interpretation but disavows the personal and ethical consequences that such knowledge would entail. The concept of denial is therefore heuristic with a considerable weight of theoretical and empirical studies that have increased in volume with the passage of time. My objective in this study, however, is to test the validity and usefulness of "post-truth" as a concept when applied to the phenomenon of genocide denial as exemplified by the Jedwabne controversy in Poland. Can it help us understand the phenomenon in ways which traditional theory on denial has not?

Methodology

Nearly all the literature on post-truth that I outlined at the beginning of this article mention the role of the Internet in disseminating post-truth stories – indeed many consider social media, interactive forums and fake news sites as a fundamental aspect of what we call post-truth (Keyes 2004, Chapter 13; Pawełczyk, Jakubowski 2017: 204-206). It made sense, therefore, to analyse Polish online comments on Jedwabne to see if something new had permeated the discourse compared to the print media of 2001. And if there was, my objective was to construct a preliminary typology of post-truth rhetoric.

I chose to analyse the comment sections to four online articles that appeared in *Newsweek Polska* from 10 July 2016 to 8 February 2018.

Each set of comments is analysed separately below. Employing an inductive discourse analysis, I hoped to read all the comments carefully, bearing in mind both the essential feature of post-truth identified above and traditional denialist discourse that has been already widely discussed by numerous academics especially Israel Charny, Stanley Cohen and Michael Shafir. This "traditional" denialist discourse can be summarized as one which exhibits a whole host of elaborate rhetorical strategies that aim to deny or minimise a genocide or its historical or ethical importance. While "denial" is not quite the same thing as "lying", it shares one key characteristic: a concern – albeit an insincere one – for truth. The denier is not indifferent to the truth as is the purveyor of post-truth, and will go to great lengths to demonstrate a counter-truth backed up by lots of evidence, even if they are distorted, manipulated or otherwise falsified.

My reasons for choosing *Newsweek Polska* – a weekly current-affairs magazine, published in Poland since 2001 – is that it is a major news portal with a comparatively large number of articles on Jedwabne. I also wanted a portal that could attract a plurality of voices to see if any post-truth rhetoric was distributed across the board. The earliest Jedwabne-related article I could find on *Newsweek Polska* dates back to 28 March 2004, but the number of comments generated by articles between 2004 and 2011 is insignificant, ranging from 1 to 13 (as of 22.02.18) – many of these were created years after the original posting. The number of comments for open access *Newsweek Polska* Jedwabne-related articles from 20.10.12 to 08.02.18 range from 6 to 390 with an average of 115 comments per article.

Given the amplitude of the original 2001 media controversy over Jedwabne, the reader may be curious to know if such figures are small or large compared to other news stories or news portals. While a study of the salience of Polish-Jewish topics in the media is beyond the scope of this article, the following comparative data may be of interest. Let us

take the widely reported interview with Minister of National Education, Anna Zalewska, who refused to acknowledge Polish responsibility for the Jedwabne massacre. The *Newsweek Polska* article on this, dated 14.07.16, generated 331 comments. Other articles on that same day generated between 2 and 168 comments. The same story about Zalewska produced the following number of comments in other popular news sites: 1318 (onet), 180 (wyborcza.pl), 137 (natemat.pl), 130 (tvn24.pl), 26 (dziennik.pl), and 17 (rp.pl). It would appear, however, that most discussion on news takes place on social media websites rather than online news fora: the *Newsweek Polska* and *naTemat* articles about Zalewska's comments were shared 7921 and 2295 times respectively on Facebook as of 13.03.18.

One major preoccupation during the research was whether correct interpretation of online anonymous comments could be made without being certain of the authors' motivation. What if, for example, an author was adopting a denialist position vis-à-vis Jedwabne not for the purpose of defending a "truth" from a nationalist perspective, but merely to shock other contributors? The first motivation would thus not be a case of post-truth, while the second would. In the end I came to the conclusion that what mattered was not the author's *private motivation* but the comment's *public effect*.[5] In other words, if the effect of the comment was to defend an image of Polish innocence, that would be how I understood it, without trying to second-guess the author's true intentions. Thus, even if the comment was produced by a troll bot, such artificially generated text is still meaningful in that it contributes to public discourse and can potentially influence others.

Further methodological notes are provided within the descriptions of the below findings for each set of comments.

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[5] My thanks to Prof. Dariusz Stola for making this very pertinent observation.

Analysis of comments to *Newsweek Polska* article 1

On 25 July 2016, *Newsweek Polska*'s online edition published an article entitled *According to Poles, Who Murdered Jews in Jedwabne? A Newsweek Survey* (Szaniawski 2016). The article showed that when presented with "the statement that Poles burnt Jews in a barn in Jedwabne", 33% thought it was a fact, 29% thought it was an opinion, and 38% opted for "don't know/difficult to say". The article finishes with a reminder of the controversial comments made by Education Minister, Anna Zalewska, when she stated on public television that the Jedwabne massacre was a "historical fact, which has led to many misunderstandings and many tendentious opinions." When the interviewer Monika Olejnik affirmed that Poles did burn Jews in a barn, the minister replied "this is your opinion, echoed from Mr Gross" and later finished by saying "I am not the person to give an opinion. I am saying that the dramatic events in Jedwabne are controversial. Many historians portray a totally different picture." The article spurned 120 anonymous comments, many in acrimonious dialogue with one another.

I only considered the one essential characteristic of post-truth rhetoric that I identified earlier: indifference to truth and facts. While it may seem like a relatively simple process – go through the list of comments and tick those that are indifferent to truth – it turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. First of all, I separated all the comments into two groups: one that was "closed", i.e. broadly denialist according to Stanley Cohen's theory; and another one that was "open", i.e. comprising those who fully acknowledged Polish responsibility for the crime. The 120 comments were made by 82 contributors: 34 were "open" and 39 were "closed", with 9 that I could not ascribe a position to with any degree of certainty.

If the authors claiming genocide denial is a manifestation of post-truth are correct, we can hypothesize that post-truth rhetoric will be

particularly high in the closed group and low in the open group. It seems simple enough, except, how do we ascertain that somebody is indifferent to the truth?

Let's take another look at the work that considers the epistemological aspect of post-truth to a greater or lesser extent. Katherine Viner speaks of a "brazen disregard for facts" (Viner 2016). Ari Rabin-Havt talks about "never having to acknowledge facts" (Rabin-Havt 2016, Chapter 8, para. 30). Benjamin Tallis discerns "outright lies, empirical falsehoods, and misleading associations" (Tallis 2016: 9).

The trouble with these definitions, if used as a single criterion of post-truth, is that they produce a tautological conclusion when analysing cases of denial. In other words, when indifference and denial both mean a simple "disregard for facts", the concepts are synonymous. Post-truth in this simple sense of indifference is therefore of little analytical use to us.

Here are two examples of denial where there *is* a discernable concern for the truth, which the reader may contrast with instances of post-truth rhetoric later in the article:

> This was no fault of ours. There is material evidence that it was the Germans [03.08.16]
>
> [*Niema naszych win. Są materialne dowody, że to Niemcy.*][6]

> Have you gone mad? And is there even one piece of evidence that Poles murdered in Jedwabne? Just because Kwaśniewski fooled around drunk (not for the first time, actually) is no proof. However, there is proof that the Germans did the killing. Material evidence – ammunition from German machine guns – the favourite tool to liquidate larger groups of people with incredible effectiveness. [03.08.16]

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[6] While Polish originals have been italicized for clarity, they appear exactly the same as they do online without further modification.

[*Ocipiałaś? A gdzie choćby jeden dowód, że to Polacy mordowali w Jedwab-*
nem? Że Kwaśniewski się wydurnił po pijanemu (nie pierwszy raz zresztą) nie
jest żadnym dowodem. Są natomiast dowody, że zabijali Niemcy. Materialne
dowody – amunicja z niemieckich karabinów maszynowych – ulubionego
narzędzia przy likwidacji większych grup ludzi o niesamowitej skuteczności.]

The following, by contrast, is ironic and facetious, as well as being de-
void of any attempt to justify the claim. This is the sort of statement that
may warrant a new classification of "post-truth":

The direct murderer in Jedwabne was the fire with a tiny bit of help from
the mythical Nazis; after all, it couldn't have been the Germans.
[25.07.16]
[*Bezpośrednim zabójca w Jedwabnem był ogień z drobną pomocą mitycznych*
nazistów, bo przecież nie Niemców.]

Clearly a simple indifference to truth – while it may be a key element of
post-truth in general – is not analytically useful when analysing geno-
cide denial, since the latter by definition incorporates the former. How-
ever, a way out of this impasse is offered by the American philosopher
Justin E.H. Smith. He makes the following comment in response to
a 2004 justification for the US invasion of Iraq that appears as an ar-
chetype of post-truth:

"Here we see a disregard for truth that quite plainly cannot be un-
derstood in terms of bullshit. This is not the deviation from truth we
expect from a grifter or a con man, nor is it the pathological indifference
to truth we expect from a loud-mouthed boaster. It is rather the auda-
cious rejection of truth as a standard by which we all must be judged,
by a self-styled *Übermensch...*" (Smith 2016).

If we take a stricter definition of indifference to truth, where it is not
sufficient merely to disregard the facts, but to show, in addition, *explicit*

and active contempt for the truth, or what Smith calls an "audacious rejection of the truth", we may arguably have a useful concept. How can such rhetoric be recognised? Analysis of these first set of *Newsweek Polska* comments have allowed me to identify three types of post-truth rhetoric that comprise this stricter interpretation of the concept:

1. **Explicit Indifference.** This type is identified by expressions such as Donald Trump's "who cares" or Kellyanne Conway's "alternative facts".

2. **Unsubstantiated Fabrication.** These are narratives that are not only false (in the sense of extreme exaggeration or caricature) but are total fabrications, *not even based on common stereotypes or myths*, and invoking no evidence at all.

3. **Unconcerned Contradiction.** Here the statement or claim contains an apparent contradiction, where for example the speaker may say 'I believe x, whether it is true or not'. Equally, such a case is demonstrated by a suggestion that x *and* not-x are true and that this state of affairs is of no great import.

Taking into account this strict definition of post-truth rhetoric, I have been able to identify 3 cases out of the 58 comments from the closed group and one case from the 44 comments of the open group:

> I don't know the [Jedwabne] case precisely, but I have been reading all the netizens' statements with great interest – and all of them are very possible. I believe I read somewhere (I don't know if it's true), that the Jewish population in Jedwabne was denounced by somebody to the Germans. If this is true, that informer incurs all the blame. We don't even have to mention that the Germans are guilty of this tragedy – that is obvious. [25.07.16]
>
> [*Nie znam sprawy dokladnie , ale juz od jakiegos czasu , czytam z wielkim zainteresowaniem wszystkie wypowiedzi internautow , no , i wszystkie sa bardzo prawdopodobne . Wydaje mi sie , ze czytalam gdzies (nie wiem czy to*

prawda) , ze zydowska ludnosc , w Jedwabnem zostala zadenucjowana przez

kogos do Niemcow . Jezeli to jest prawda , to ten donosiciel ponosi cala wine

. O Niemcach nie trzeba nawet wspominac , ze sa tej tragedi winni , to jest

oczywiste.]

Here we have a case of an Explicit Indifference: "I believe I read somewhere (I don't know if it's true)". There is also Unconcerned Contradiction: "I have been reading all the netizens' statements with great interest – and all of them are very possible." If 48% of the comments say/insinuate that Poles were responsible and 41% say/insinuate the reverse, the conclusion that "all of them are very possible" is contradictory and flippant. Further examples of Type 2 and Type 3 follow:

You have committed intellectual suicide, because the Law and Justice

party are in fact Jews. [28.07.16]

[*Popełniłeś umysłowe samobójstwo, bo pis to właśnie żydzi*.]

This is a case of Unsubstantiated Fabrication. The notion that Law and Justice (PiS) politicians are Jews is neither true nor based on any common social stereotype.[7]

We should do the exhumation and FINALLY find out what the truth is,

so that we don't have to look at the moaning of the Yids. Otherwise they

will CONTINUE to spit on us… [25.07.16]

[*Zrobić ekshumację i WRESZCIE zobaczyć jaka jest prawda,i nie patrzeć na la-*

bidzenie tych mośków,inaczej DALEJ będą nas opluwać…]

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[7] Compare this to the now defunct early 1990s centre-right party Unia Demokratyczna (Democratic Union), which was stereotyped as being Jewish because some of its well-known members either had Jewish roots (Bronisław Geremek, Adam Michnik) or were erroneously widely believed to have Jewish roots (Tadeusz Mazowiecki). Thus a comment that depicted Unia Demokratyczna as Jewish would be false, hugely exaggerated and misleading, but not a case that I would classify as post-truth rhetoric.

This is a case of Unconcerned Contradiction, because on the one hand the rhetor proposes an exhumation to discover the truth, which could confirm or dispel our current knowledge, and on the other hand, insinuates that this exhumation is bound to reveal some sort of evidence that will absolve the Poles of the crime. Unconcerned Contradiction is also present in the following statement albeit implicitly.

> Finish the exhumation that was blocked by the late Aviator[8] on the "request" of the Jews and things will become clear. [26.07.16]
>
> [*Dokończyć ekshumację zablokowaną przez śp. Aviatora na "prośbę" Żydów i wszystko stanie się jasne.*]

Putting "request" in quotation marks insinuates that the objection to exhumation by some Orthodox Jews was in some sense iniquitous and taps into the widely held opinion that 'the Jews have something to hide'. Implicit is the idea that the Germans were responsible, and yet, contradictorily, the rhetor suggests in an apparent non-committal fashion that "things will become clear".

The one case from the open group goes as follows:

> …The Catholic clergy played a particular role in the propagation of anti-Semitism. And since the Poles are vassals of the Vatican, the Vatican "truths" are visible in the daily life of the Polish nation. [Poles] lead the way in terms of characteristics that are not found in Christianity, but are found in Catholicism. These are hatred, envy, wreaking havoc, anti-Semitism, [and] stirring up Polish society. The 1050-year Vatican enslavement that the Polish nation has suffered, has set its stamp on the behaviour of this nation. Is there an antidote to this poison? Absolutely!!! Get rid of the intruder and occupier from enslaved Poland!!! [25.07.16]

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[8] The "late Aviator" is the former president Lech Kaczyński who died in an air accident in Smolensk. As minister of justice in 2001, he controversially only permitted a partial exhumation of the Jedwabne victims as a result of pressure from orthodox Jewish groups including Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich.

[*...Szczególna rola w sianiu antysemityzmu przypada klerowi katolickiemu. A ponieważ Polacy są wasalami Watykanu to i watykańskie "prawdy" są widoczne w codzienności narodu polskiego. Przodują bowiem w cechach, których nie ma w chrześcijaństwie, a są w katolicyzmie. Są to nienawiść, zawiść, sianie zamętu, antysemityzm, skłócanie polskiego społeczeństwa. 1050-letna niewola watykańska jakiej poddany został naród polski wycisnęło piętno na zachowaniach tego narodu. Czy jest odtrutka na tą truciznę? Zapewne !!! Pozbycie się tego intruza i okupanta ze zniewolonej Polski* !!!]

This is a case of Unsubstantiated Fabrication since it proposes that the Vatican has subjugated the Polish nation for the last millennium despite the fact that the Vatican only came into existence in 1929. No evidence for this supposed subjugation is provided, nor is there to my knowledge any social stereotype of Poland being "enslaved" by the Vatican.

Analysis of comments to *Newsweek Polska* article 2

One major problem with the first analysis was the fact that 53% of the comments were responses to others, forming nested self-contained dialogues that tended to veer off topic. In order to speed up the analytic process, I then decided only to consider comments that were direct responses to the article. The analyses of comments to articles 2, 3 and 4 would take this new approach.

Article 2, entitled "Was this why the IPN law was enacted? PiS Deputy already has a new theory on the Jedwabne crime", was published on 8 February 2018 (MM 2018). The article reports how Jacek Żalek – in fact a deputy from Porozumienie (Agreement), a small coalition partner with the ruling Law and Justice party – blamed the murder of Jews at Jedwabne on the Germans on Polish television. After filtering out the nested dialogues, I was left with 84 direct comments. My first task, as in the first analysis, was to classify each comment as either open or

closed. However, while the comments criticizing Żalek could be logically interpreted as open, in that they seemed to disagree with his denial of Polish responsibility at Jedwabne, it soon became apparent that their "openness" was too superficial to be categorized as such. In fact, these sorts of comments highlighted a relatively new aspect, in which netizens appeared to be merely taking advantage of the Jedwabne controversy in order to score points against their political opponents.[9] I say "relatively new" because the Jedwabne discourse has always included a political dimension – articles and letters to newspapers in 2001 would make political statements *but they were almost always interwoven with an argument about the massacre in question*. What was surprising here was the almost callous disregard for the Jedwabne massacre – usually not mentioning it at all, sometimes just incidentally – while making frivolous political or personal insults. 35 comments – mostly anti-Żalek – fit this description, i.e. 42% of all the direct comments. I see these comments as another type of post-truth rhetoric, as they appear unconcerned with the historicity of Jedwabne, using it only as a convenient vehicle to express political partisan positions:

4. **Political Instrumentalization**. This is a flippant reference – direct or indirect – to a historical atrocity as a vehicle to express personal and political abuse. The political aspect may be explicit (e.g. naming a political party) or implicit (e.g. a purely personal attack that nonetheless emphasizes the in-group/out-group dichotomy).

Here is an example of the fourth type with clear party political overtones:

> Żelek [*sic*] is somebody one does not take seriously. He blabbers about whatever his spit brings out of him so long as Kaczor [derogatory term for PiS head Jarosław Kaczyński] receives it well. [18.02.18]

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[9] My thanks to Prof. Stanisław Mocek for bringing this to my attention.

[*Żelek to ktoś kogo nie traktuje się poważnie gada co mu ślina przyniesie byle go Kaczor dobrze odebrał.*]

The next example of Type 4 is purely personal:

What an arrogant jerk! The world hasn't seen such an arrogant jerk yet. But he's been like this since his birth. [11.02.18]

[*Ale buc! Świat jeszcze takiego buca nie widział. Ale ma to od urodzenia.*]

Article 2 also generated four Unsubstantiated Fabrications and one Un-concerned Contradiction:

Comrade Kieres, as head of the IPN [Institute of National Remem-brance] obstructed getting to the truth [08.02.18]

[*Towarzysz Kieres jako szef IPN blokował dotarcie do prawdy*]

Here "Comrade" is a slur to suggest he is similar to the former Com-munists, especially as Leon Kieres is a former centre-right Civic Plat-form senator. The reference to obstruction probably refers to the deci-sion not to perform a full exhumation of the victims at Jedwabne. However, the decision to stop the exhumation was taken by the then Minister of Justice, Lech Kaczyński. Kieres, on the contrary, pushed the IPN to investigate Jedwabne despite massive opposition, which makes this claim entirely fictitious. Another such example goes as follows:

Probably in Jedwabne the grandfather of this PiS freak burnt Jews [08.02.18]

[*pewnie w Jedwabnem dziadek tej pisiej pokraki palil zydow*]

Again the notion that Jacek Żalek's forefathers were in any way involved in the Jedwabne massacre is pure fiction. We also have an example of Unconcerned Contradiction:

> Only an exhumation can explain everything... In any case Poland was then under German occupation, which means that the GERMANS carry the blame for everything... [08.02.18]
>
> [*tylko ekshumacja może wszystko wyjaśnić.... zresztą Polska była wtedy pod niemiecką okupacją tak że za wszystko winę ponoszą NIEMCY....*]

If a full exhumation is supposed to "explain everything", it could – following the author's argument – either exonerate the Poles or confirm their guilt. Yet in contradiction to this, the author feels that whatever the result of the exhumation, the guilt lies with the Germans "in any case".

Analysis of comments to *Newsweek Polska* article 3

Article 3, entitled *Will a Film be Produced that Negates the Truth about Jedwabne? 'It wasn't the Poles who did the killing'*, was published on 3 August 2017 (Kumór 2017). The journalist Waldemar Kumór reports that in a climate of increasing nationalist and anti-Semitic manifestations, some anonymous people on Wirtualna Polska have revealed their wish to create a film that denies the Polish role in the Jedwabne massacre. The article also reports on denialist and anti-Semitic remarks made by nationalist activist Ewa Kurek who has publicly denounced the 2017 decision by the PiS Minister of Justice Zbigniew Ziobro not to reopen the criminal investigation into Jedwabne. This article generated 201 direct comments. This time only 16 comments (8%) could be classified as "Political Instrumentalization". The other categories of post-truth were also present including "Explicit Indifference":

> I am a Pole and I have Polish responsibilities. [03.08.17]
>
> [*Jestem Polakiem i mam obowiązki polskie.*]

One of the problems with terse online comments is that many of them, if not most, contain allusions that have to be deduced taking into account both the original account and the surrounding comments. As there is always a risk of misunderstanding the particular allusion, in-depth studies of online comments would do well to have the comments analysed independently by more than one researcher. In this case, I believe "Polish responsibilities" suggests defending Polish honour, *irrespective of the actual events at Jedwabne in 1941*. The netizen is thus explicitly indifferent to the historical truth of Jedwabne.

The next comment is a case of "Political Instrumentalization":

> When the mind sleeps, cells/Kumórs awaken [03.08.17]
>
> [*Gdy rozum śpi budzą się Kumóry*]

Waldemar Kumór is the writer of the article, who has persistently been critical of Polish anti-Semitism and Jedwabne denialism. The netizen satirizes Kumór's opening line, "When the mind sleeps, demons awaken." Since Kumór's surname sounds similar to "komórka" (cell), the effect is to turn the statement into a pun. The facetious nature of the statement reveals an indifference to the gravity of the Jedwabne crime, and as such I would classify as post-truth.

The following is a case of Unsubstantiated Fabrication:

> In a neighbouring town 20 Poles were hanged. There is a monument. The perpetrators were Jews. Orders were given by Germans. Ah these Jewish murderers. [03.08.17]

[*w sąsiedniej miejscowości powieszono 20 Polaków, jest pomnik, wykonawcami byli Żydzi, rozkazy wydawali Niemcy, ach ci żydowscy mordercy*]

As far as I was able to check, no such incident, where Germans forced Jews to kill Catholics ever took place either near Jedwabne or anywhere else in Nazi occupied territory. There is also a somewhat perverted quality to this statement, similar instances of which I have been able to identify both in this set of comments and the next.[10] This will become my last type of post-truth rhetoric, which I define as follows:

5. **Gratuitous Perversion**. A statement that grotesquely distorts reality for no immediate ideological benefit, sometimes to ridicule but more frequently to shock the audience just for the sake of it.

The following is the only other case of "Gratuitous Perversion" in this particular set of comments:

> It would be interesting to know if the SLEDZIEWSKI [*sic*] family would again give their barn to burn [for the proposed film], but, now, where would we find JEWS in JEDWABNE?—This is the QUESTION [03.08.17]
>
> [*ciekawe czy rodzina SLEDZIEWSKICH tez odda znowu stodole do spalenia , ale skad wziasc tera ZYDOW w JEDWABNEM to jest PYTANIE*]

Other comments by the same author show very clearly that he does, in fact, take an open attitude regarding Jedwabne. Nevertheless, given that a film is a theatrical enactment of historical events, neither the descendants of the real Szleziński or actual Jews are needed. As a result, the image the author produces of a realist re-enactment of the Jedwabne massacre is perverse. One could, of course, interpret this as

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[10] My thanks again to Prof. Stanisław Mocek who first noticed the perverse quality of some of these online comments.

a way to ridicule the idea of making a film that denies Polish responsibility, but its flippant style and facetious rhetorical question reveals very little concern for the gravity of what is in essence a genocidal act.

Analysis of comments to *Newsweek Polska* article 4

Article 5, entitled *Gross on Jedwabne and the Rewriting of History by PiS*, was published on 10 July 2016 (Gross, MM 2016). The article is based on an interview with Jan T. Gross, author of Neighbours and consisted of a set of seven photographs of him, some with very short excerpts from the interview. These excerpts show Gross commenting on right-wing falsification of history, Jedwabne being just one example, and a comment that Jarosław Kaczyński is the spiritual heir of Endecja (Polish nationalism) rather than Marshal Józef Piłsudski (Poland's interwar dictator). Gross also criticises the role of the Church in denying the truth about Jedwabne and the PiS government for its alleged politics of fear.

Out of 230 comments only 86 (37%) were direct comments and the analysis focused on these alone. This set of comments turned out to be less useful in gauging attitudes on genocide denial for the simple reason that the online article – the full interview in the printed version of *Newsweek Polska* may have been different – was itself mostly political and focused on PiS. This resulted in many negative comments that one should not automatically categorize as "Political Instrumentalization". Political Instrumentalization, as a type of post-truth rhetoric, *can only apply to political comments made in the clear context of a discussion on historical genocide*.

Nevertheless, this last set of comments provides some excellent examples of two of the types that I have hitherto constructed. The first example is that of Gratuitous Perversion:

[The new IPN amendment] is like forbidding to say Polish Fiat 125 because it was Italian but produced in Poland. What idiots are in this PiS!!!!!! [04.02.18]

[*To tak jak zakazac mowienia polski fiat 125 bo on byl wloski ale produkowany w polsce. Ale idioci w tym pisie!!!!!!*]

The author is referring to the controversial 2018 amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance which prohibits attributing blame for Nazi crimes on the Polish nation or state. The implied comparison between "Polish death camps" and "Polish Fiat 125" is perverse and, coupled with the insult to PiS at the end, it is clear that the author is less concerned about the facts of genocide than with his inimical stance towards the ruling party.

The next example is that of Unsubstantiated Fabrication:

Menachem Begin : Our race is the Master Race. We are divine gods on this planet. We are as different from the inferior races as they are from insects. In fact, compared to our race, other races are beasts and animals, cattle at best. Other races are considered as human excrement. Our destiny is to rule over the inferior races. Our earthly kingdom will be ruled by our leader with an iron fist. The masses will lick our feet and serve us as our slaves. [11.07.16]

[*Menachem Begin : Nasza rasa jest Rasą Panów. Jesteśmy świętymi bogami na tej planecie. Różnimy się od niższych ras tak, jak one od insektów. Faktycznie, porównując do naszej rasy, inne rasy to bestie i zwierzęta, bydło w najlepszym wypadku. Inne rasy są uważane za ludzkie odchody. Naszym przeznaczeniem jest sprawowanie władzy nad niższymi rasami. Nasze ziemskie królestwo będzie rządzone przez naszego przywódcę za pomocą żelaznej pięści. Masy będą lizać nasze stopy i służyć nam jako nasi niewolnicy.*]

The author's pseudonym is Menachem Begin, which when attached to the text appears as if the latter was a quote from Begin, the founder of Likud and former prime minister of Israel. It will come as no surprise that the text is, of course, a complete fabrication – not even a highly distorted version of somebody else's real speech – as Yisrael Medad, former Director of Information and Educational Resources at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center in Jerusalem, has shown (Medad 2009).

My final example of post-truth rhetoric in this set of comments reveals Political Instrumentalization:

> YOU CAN SEE FROM THE SZMALCOWNIKS [wartime anti-Jewish denouncers] ON THE FORUM THAT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS IS REAPING A NASTY HARVEST! A CATHOLIC IS A HIT-LERITE AND A PUTINITE. HA HA [10.07.16]
> [*WIDAC PO SZMALCOWNIKACH NQA FORUM ZE RELGIIA WSZKOALCH ZBIWERA PODLE ZNIWA!KATOLIKT O HITLEROWIEC I PUTINOWIEC HAAHH*]

This comment does not tackle the issues raised in the article, namely the attitude of the ruling party towards history or the massacre of Jedwabne. The author has instrumentalized the interview with Gross for the purpose of pursuing an anticlerical agenda. In addition, the flippant usage of the term "szmalcownik" – Poles who denounced Jews to the Nazis, thereby causing their deaths – simply to insult forum contributors who are PiS supporters or Catholic, again suggests an attitude of indifference towards grave historical facts. Flippancy is further accentuated with the explicit expression of laughter, "ha ha", at the end.

Conclusion

With a definition of post-truth rhetoric that focuses exclusively on in-difference to truth, my analysis of four sets of comments responding to online *Newsweek Polska* articles (2016-2018) has revealed five tenta-tive types that may help reveal new, more subtle forms of genocide de-nial in the future. They are (i) Explicit Indifference, (ii) Unsubstantiated Fabrication, (iii) Unconcerned Contradiction, (iv) Political Instrumen-talization, and (v) Gratuitous Perversion. As a result, based on this very limited research, I believe post-truth can indeed be a useful concept for studying denialist discourse. This, I would suggest, may be particularly true with regard to short comments, either in online discussions or spontaneous spoken dialogue. Longer, more elaborate statements of genocide denial are less likely to fit my definition of post-truth because they invariably contain justifications that by definition indicate a con-cern for the truth – or at least a concern *to be seen* as being concerned for the truth – even if such concern is wholly insincere.[11]

It is also worth bearing in mind that my limited sample of online comments reveal post-truth rhetoric in both the 'closed camp' (people who deny the fact or significance of the Polish role in Jedwabne) and the 'open camp' (people who acknowledge Polish responsibility). Un-fortunately, due to time constraints, I was unable to investigate whether post-truth rhetoric was statistically more significant in denialist dis-course, but future research with larger sample sizes should attempt to answer such a question.

This study has also revealed some of the methodological challenges when performing qualitative analysis on online material. Since com-ments are usually short, they generally contain allusions whose correct

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[11] Strictly speaking, this statement is only true if we consider "concern for the truth" as a binary category rather than a continuous variable. If it is the latter, and we consider "concern for truth" salient at a partic-ular threshold, a degree of elaboration in denialist argumentation would not invalidate its classification as post-truth.

interpretation may involve a considerable degree of subjectivity. Erroneous interpretation can easily lead to the irony of the researcher him/herself purveying post-truth while trying to reveal another.[12]

Nevertheless, if as many authors believe, social media and online posts are increasingly shaping public discourse (Joel 2014, pp. 72-74; Lambert *et al.*, 2016, p. 89), then future research into genocide denial may well benefit from a closer look at this burgeoning discursive activity that still, all too often, escapes our attention. The construction of a typology of post-truth rhetoric in the context of genocide denial endeavours to start filling that gap.

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[12] In his otherwise excellent lecture on post-truth, the Guardian journalist Jonathan Freedland mentioned that *The Canary*'s post criticizing *The Sun* for ignoring the Manchester bombing and focusing only on vilifying Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was an example of left-wing fake news because it was based on the first edition of the tabloid that came out at 10pm, *before* the actual bombing. Editor-in-chief for *The Canary*, Kerry-Anne Mendoza, told me in a personal communication that Freedland's account was "completely fabricated", and that their story was corrected "within hours" of *The Sun* informing them of their error, including a 48-hour apology on their Facebook page. If post-truth, as Freedland himself argues, is an indifference to truth, this incident seems to have been a poorly chosen example.

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