Troubling Truths: The Construction of Knowledge and Ignorance in a Time of Global Crises

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Project Description:

In an era defined by complex challenges around the world, the critical examination of how knowledge is constructed, disseminated, and obscured by various organisations—ranging from think tanks and media outlets to pressure groups and lobbyists—has never been more urgent.

This doctoral research project focuses on the intricate dynamics shaping public discourse, policymaking, and social practices amid ongoing global crises—termed polycrises (Henig and Knight, 2023)—such as climate change, pandemics, poverty, and issues of global justice. These crises, primarily resulting from human activity, pose a range of significant threats from democratic ideals to the future existence and survival of human and non-human animals, which necessitate a nuanced exploration of mechanisms that manipulate both truth and ignorance (McGoey, 2019).

The project aims to dissect the roles of formal and informal organisations in influencing public perception and actions, particularly how they may serve vested interests detrimental to global and climate justice (e.g., Bowden et al., 2021; Munro, 2017). Through a critical lens, this research will unveil how these entities organise knowledge and strategically foster ignorance to protect specific agendas.

Below we set out four proposed aims of this project, although we are open to suggestion and adaptation around these from candidates.

Aims:
1. To explore how knowledge is organised by media outlets, think tanks and pressure groups/lobbyists, to have effects, for example in undermining the goals of global/ climate justice.
2. To investigate how various strategies of ignorance are deployed and sustained by these groups in relation to the polycrises we are now facing (e.g., climate, pandemics, poverty, global justice) to protect specific vested interests.
3. To consider how anthropogenic acts and their effects (e.g., those enacted by multi-national corporations), are ignored, sidelined, downplayed, denied, silenced, and distracted from and by specific groups, while being amplified by others.
4. To surface the ways in which actors at the state/capital nexus collaborate in manufacturing doubt about current and future polycrises.

Theoretical positioning:
Underpinning this investigation is a theoretical framework that draws upon the ideas of different thinkers: Hannah Arendt's exploration of the public realm and truth-telling, Michel Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge, biopolitics, and parrhesia, Noam Chomsky's critique of manufacturing

consent, and Francesca Ferrando's philosophical posthumanism. These thinkers provide pertinent critical lenses through which the project will examine the interplay between power, knowledge, and ethics in organising and managing (Fleming and Spicer, 2014).

Methods and approach:
This opportunity will appeal to those who enjoy qualitative methods and have a strong commitment to social justice. We would be open to students undertaking ethnographic work (including interviews and observations) and multi-modal methodologies, including document analysis, visual analysis, and any other relevant approach in the form of bricolage (Fineman, 2000). There could well be a socio-digital element, given the importance of communicative technologies in this context (Kozinets and Gambetti, 2020).

A critical approach is essential, focussing on deconstructing those 'taken for granted' assumptions that are rarely interrogated (Alvesson and Deetz, 2020). One example of this would be how the activity of watching *The News* is described, obscuring how it is socially constructed, and funded by those whose wealth allows them to disproportionately exercise power and self-interest over what constitutes both knowledge and news.

The research is particularly concerned with advancing innovative approaches to understanding the deliberate production of ignorance and the ethical responsibilities of organisations in ensuring transparency and accountability. It invites proposals that suggest novel methods for analysing narrative and discursive framing techniques, the role of digital platforms in amplifying misinformation, and the strategies employed by actors at the state/capital nexus to manufacture doubt about current and future polycrises.

By setting out to critically engage with these themes, the project aligns with a broader commitment to conducting transformative research aimed at addressing structural inequalities and fostering societal change. Through this doctoral research, we aim to contribute to the development of a more informed, equitable, and just society, capable of navigating the complexities of the contemporary world with a deepened understanding of the dynamics of truth and power.

Applicants :
Applicants should demonstrate an understanding of the complexities of organising and truth-telling in contemporary society and a readiness to engage with others working to address these critical issues. In your proposal, you are invited to describe the design of your study, outline the methods you will use to collect data, and suggest techniques you will use to analyse your data. You should also think about the conceptual framework that connects key concepts, theories, and relationships, and the ethical considerations that are likely to be relevant to your research.

Successful applicants will join a vibrant community of researchers who are committed to tackling the world's existential challenges through multidimensional transformative research. The project call is aligned with the Open University's commitment to conducting transformative research aimed at addressing structural inequalities and fostering societal change.

About the Supervisors:

Richard Longman: is engaged in different streams of work looking at how organisations/individuals are implicated in organising truth. His work emerges from expertise in alternative theories and practices of organising—specifically, *alternative ways of organising* and *what we can learn from organising alternative things*. He builds his research on qualitative and socio-digital research methods suitable for interrogating alternative settings and exploring individual/collective subjectivities. Richard

is engaged in a project (with Caroline Clarke and others) exploring the strategic production of ignorance with a focus on how this protects economic and political interests at the expense of the planet and other people.

Caroline Clarke: has research interests with roots in identity and emotion. Also of interest are issues relating to age, anthropomorphism, anthropocentricism, and wider concerns around speciesism, the nature of non-human/human animal relations and how these enable pandemic outbreaks. She is currently studying the deliberate strategies of spreading ignorance about the climate crisis, particularly in relation to the Fossil Fuel Industry and the Animal Industrial Complex. Her work is qualitative, and is situated within a critical interpretive framework, with a particular interest and focus on discourse.

References:
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