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A postfoundational perspective.

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CHAPTER 3

“It is, perhaps more than ever before, a matter of participation”

Ontological tension and boundary work in a free trade blog

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This chapter presents a discourse-analytical approach to a series of blogposts uploaded to the website of Brussels-based libertarian think tank between 2015 and 2018 in reaction to the controversy over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). In these blogposts, economic experts and professionals reflect about how to successfully persuade the public of the case for free trade. We argue that these blogposts rest on two ultimately incompatible ontologies – one founded in economic science, the other based on a rudimentarily constructionist understanding of media and the public debate. The tension generated by the clash of these ontologies turns the blogposts into an interesting example of the negotiation of professional identities at a time when participation, collaboration and engagement are increasingly getting sedimented as the baseline for news-making practices.

Keywords: free trade, political economy, Discourse Theory, postfoundationalism, ontology, discourse, media, pragmatics, newsmaking, participation

Introduction

In an era of social media, populism and fake news, postfoundational thinking (see Macgilchrist 2016 for a good sketch, as well as Chapters 1 and 7 in this volume) has become an important source of inspiration for media linguists: it has helped them shed light on how traditional groundings in newsmaking that used to be firm, solid and pervasive (most notably objectivity, neutrality) have become fluid and contingent with new foundations emerging to impact on newsmakers' professional practices (Phelan and Dahlberg 2011; Cotter and Perrin 2017). Additionally, media

linguists are increasingly looking beyond the newsroom and have come to study how various ‘outside’ stakeholders, including lobbyists, industry representatives and activists, try to ‘manage the news’ (Jacobs 2018a). Yet little or no attention has so far been devoted to the intersection of these two tendencies: viz. the study of emerging foundations and groundings in how outside external stakeholders engage with newsmaking. In this chapter we set out to study how a specific group of stakeholders who reside outside the newsroom relate an emerging conception of news media and public debate as sites for contesting the long-held principles governing their own day-to-day professional activities. To this end, we propose a case study examining the dynamics of what might be considered a ‘clash of ontologies’. Our aim is to improve our understanding of the complex discursive work that can be seen to go into reconciling what are fundamentally incompatible and contradictory worldviews on newsmaking.

In this chapter we will turn to the domain of economics and free trade. We will argue that free trade economists have recently started to engage in a highly interesting critical self-reflection on the politicisation of their discipline and the need for a radically new communication strategy (including a revised perspective on their relationship with the media, both legacy and new). In doing so, we will turn to a specific group of stakeholders who have a strong interest in setting the media’s agenda. Our focus is on the activities of the Brussels-based libertarian think tank ECIPE, the European Centre for International Political Economy, which is dedicated to trade policy and other international and EU-related economic policy issues. In particular, we draw on an on-going series of blogposts that have been published since 2015 on ECIPE’s website concerning the topic of ‘communicating trade’ (www.ecipe.org/blog). In these blogposts, various trade policy experts give advice on how proponents of free trade can more successfully make their case in the public sphere and the media.

Put simply, we will argue that the authors of these blogposts recognize that the shifts and changes within the foundations that govern how the news is made, affect their attempts to manage the news. Our goal is to study how they deal with this realization, including the need to participate, collaborate and engage, not unlike Chapter 4 in this volume, which tackles a broadly similar question in a journalistic context, and with a focus on writing practices. We want to analyse how ‘news-managing’ stakeholders such as economists, policy-makers, and lobbyists combine an emerging understanding of newsmaking as a sphere where persuasion, fake news, and the collaborative construction of meaning take precedence over the cold, hard truth with the long-held principles governing their own day-to-day professional activities as economic experts, which are rooted in the understanding of (neo)liberal economics as an absolute science. Our aim is to improve our understanding of the complex discursive work that goes into reconciling the

fundamentally incompatible and contradictory views on the public debate that are entailed by respectively political communication and economic science.

Our case study thus examines the dynamics of a ‘clash of ontologies’. As explicated in the first chapter of this volume, foundations that structure social life are indispensable, and they tend to be firmly rooted and relatively stable. All foundations of our social world nevertheless remain historically situated, contingent, and contestable. When their seemingly common-sensical nature becomes uprooted, fundamental changes in our understanding of society become possible (Jacobs 2019b). As such, the way in which the authors of the blogposts analysed in this contribution make an effort to reflect on the foundations underlying their thinking demonstrates that they are grappling with very fundamental questions. But the lingering tension between two incompatible worldviews also speaks to the fact that these issues have not been resolved yet.

Research design

This chapter consists of four main parts. In the present section, we will outline our research design, and briefly sketch its theoretical and methodological backdrop. Secondly, we will introduce ECIPE, their blog series on communicating trade, and their view of free trade. We will equally offer a brief discussion of the history of international trade politics and the turbulences by which it has recently been struck. The third part will analyse a number of key linguistic discursive and (meta)pragmatic characteristics of the ECIPE blogposts. Singling out four distinct sets of discourses, the analysis will reveal how these blogposts constitute a site of tension, where free trade-economists-turned-media-experts struggle to negotiate conflicting professional identities, and where the ontologies of economic science and political communication clash. Put differently, this part argues that throughout the ECIPE blogposts, the ontology of economics and that of public communication co-exist in an uneasy and problematic fashion. The fourth and final part seeks to build a political-strategic reflection on the analysis in part three. We think through what the implications of this ontological tension are, and how it affects the communication advice extended in the ECIPE blogposts with regards to how proponents of free trade approach the public debate. In particular, we will briefly zoom in on three reasons why we believe the analysis presented in this chapter does not bode well for those who consider taking their marching orders from ECIPE.

Drawing on an analysis of the wide-ranging discursive, pragmatic, and metapragmatic practices underlying the ECIPE blogposts, we show that the communication advice in our data is grounded in two fundamentally different and ultimately incompatible ontologies. The authors see themselves simultaneously as economists

and as media experts. Their economic arguments are rooted in a correspondence theory of truth, the implication being that their neoliberal understanding of economics is scientifically true and superior to any other economic theory out there. The foundations of these arguments are deemed to be factual, and the role of the author is simply to transmit these facts to the passive audience. Yet the blogpost arguments about strategic communication and public engagement are based on a constructionist theory of truth. Persuasion is not seen as a matter of fact and correspondence to reality, but as the product of discursive construction. For the blogpost authors, this explains why at least part of the public and the media fail to see that the economic arguments advanced by free trade's proponents are true and correct – because in the public debate, veracity simply takes a backseat for discursive struggle. Hence – and this is where this chapter ties in with the volume's overall focus –, it becomes paramount to activate the public and to have them participate in the argument for free trade again, as this will allow the public to withstand the 'fake news' siren songs that make up the case against free trade.

The result of the combination of these two ontologies is a problematic ontological dualism that is difficult to sustain, where one ontological plane (economics) concerns itself with truth and falsehood in absolute terms, and the other (media and communication) is all about discursive construction, participation and public engagement, as well as distortion, framing, and 'fake news'.

We will argue that the conflict between ECIPE's brand of economics and their take on the media and political communication turns the blogposts into an interesting example of what happens when professionals struggle to effectively negotiate the boundaries of the different identities they set out to assume (economists versus media experts). In order to minimize the conflict between these two identities and to reduce the tension between the two incompatible ontologies, the authors of the ECIPE blogposts articulate a fairly simplistic and limited understanding of news media and communication, one in which "fake news" and facts-free debate are claimed to "distort" the objective truth about the societal benefits of free trade. Their view of neo-classical economics as "true" can support no more than a reductionist and superficial view of public debate, as a more sophisticated elaboration of its nature would threaten the true character of economics as a science. We will argue that ECIPE's negative and limited appreciation of media and public communication weakens the communication advice extended in these blogposts, as it creates many inconsistencies and moments of dissonance, and prevents a thorough engagement with the complexity of meaning-making in the public sphere and the intricacies of news production practices in today's complex mediascape. As such, the reflections of the blogpost authors about how to engage the public and have it actively participate in the case for free trade once again are hindered by their reductionist conception of public communication.

While theory definitely takes a backseat in favour of empirical analysis throughout this chapter, broadly speaking, our conceptualization of the empirical phenomena under analysis draws on a mix of post-Marxist Discourse Theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) and linguistic pragmatics (Verschueren and Ostman 2009) that was pioneered by Zienkowski (2017). We assess the linguistic pragmatic and metapragmatic (Verschueren 2004) features of the texts in our data, and then use this assessment to make an argument about discursive strategies that is rooted in the discourse-theoretical notion of articulation (Nonhoff 2019; Jacobs 2019a). This means that pragmatics provides the methodological approach and ethos, while Discourse Theory provides the concepts and the analytical logic with which we build our case.¹ The type of analysis that is informed by this methodology, is explicitly normative and evaluative in nature.

The use of Discourse Theory for the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of communication strategies is rather new. Even though it was initially elaborated with the explicit goal of studying how political projects contest and achieve hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), the notion of strategy progressively disappeared, as the focus of Discourse Theory shifted more to psycho-analysis and deconstruction (Jacobs 2019b, for interesting exceptions see Nonhoff 2019 and Macgilchrist 2007; 2016). Still, we argue that Discourse Theory remains an excellent framework for studying the political dimension of social construction, i.e. why society is socially constructed in its current guise, and not in any of the alternative, equally feasible possibilities (Jacobs 2019a).

A final theoretical note pertains to what we mean when we say that we set out to analyse the pragmatic and metapragmatic features of the blogposts in our corpus. Following Verschueren (1999; 2004) we see pragmatics as the (inevitably interdisciplinary) study of language (in) use, examining wide-ranging phenomena of more or less implicit meaning in context. It includes multimodality, as very briefly exemplified in the concluding section of this chapter. Metapragmatics, on the other hand, has to do with language users' reflections on their own language use. While pragmatics is by definition everywhere, metapragmatics tends to be more scattered, with some discourses promoting more reflexivity than others (see Verschueren 1985 and Jacobs 1999 for early explorations of metapragmatics in the news; for a more recent contribution see Peterson 2015). As the authors of the blogposts that we focus on here engage in a critical self-reflection on the politicisation of the free trade domain as well as on the need for a radically new communication strategy (including a revised perspective on their relationship with the media), it is to be

1. Introducing pragmatics and Discourse Theory is beyond the scope of this paper. Zienkowski, Ostman and Verschueren (2011) provide an excellent overview of pragmatics, Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) and Jacobs (2019b) are thorough introductions to Discourse Theory.

expected that metapragmatics will feature prominently in our analysis. While it could equally be argued that our approach is a discourse-analytic one, focusing more on broad discursive strategies than on specific linguistic features, we set out to refer to (meta)pragmatics here as it underscores the centrality of broad language choices and sustained language awareness in our data.

Before engaging in any empirical analysis, however, we will first introduce ECIPE, their blog series on communicating trade, their view of free trade, and the general turbulences that have recently struck international trade politics.

The politics of free trade, the European centre for international political economy and their blog

While we realize that including some background elements inevitably implies excluding others (Blommaert 1997), we want to start by situating the current politics of international trade in their historical context. In the wake of a major wave of trade liberalisations following World War Two through the GATT, the European Economic Community, and later the European Union, the WTO, and NAFTA, the argument in favour of free trade went almost uncontested for many decades. As ECIPE puts it on their website,

trade has (...) been an inseparable element of the global post-war recovery and development. (...) it has played the role of a superhero contributing to job creation, innovation and economic growth. (2018b)

In recent years, however, there has been a slowdown in liberalisation, with the threat of what ECIPE refers to as a “retreat to further protectionism” (ECIPE 2019). Some of this started back in 1999 with the WTO riots in Seattle, where a civil movement was born which went on to dominate and influence trade policy-making and discussions for years to come. The anti- and alter-globalization movements awoke free-marketeers, perhaps for the first time, to the need for scrutiny of their own communication practices. The outcome was that they made up their minds – in ECIPE’s words – to redouble ongoing efforts to “soberly review current policies and present independent facts-based analyses of concrete cases” (ECIPE 2019).

It was not until 2015 that doubt started to finally creep in as to whether such a perspective casting deregulation and liberalisation as the sole economic truth could in fact inform a successful political strategy. Around that time, the hegemonic free trade regime came under significant pressure. Popular mass mobilization in Europe (against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) promoting trade between the EU and the US and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between the EU and Canada) and left-wing as well as

right-wing political pressure in the U.S. (with progressive Democrats scuppering the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) between the U.S. and several Pacific countries and Donald Trump engaging in a trade war with China) alarmed proponents of free trade like ECIPE, and they began to question their own communicative practices.

One of the many products of the effort to critically rethink how to best promote free trade, was a series of blogposts published on the website of ECIPE, the European Centre for International Political Economy. ECIPE is a Brussels-based non-profit policy research think tank dedicated to free trade policy. In the mission statement on its website, it describes itself in the following manner:

ECIPE is rooted in the classical tradition of free trade and an open world economic order. Progressive reduction of barriers to the movement of goods, services, capital and people across borders creates prosperity, and improves the conditions for peace, security and individual freedom. But discussion and advocacy of abstract ideas is far from enough. [...] We aim to foster a ‘culture of evaluation’ – largely lacking in Europe – so that better public awareness and understanding of complex issues in concrete situations can lead to intelligent discussion and improved policies [...].
(ECIPE 2019)

As is stated on their website, ECIPE’s day-to-day business consists of policy research, the publication of papers, briefs, and books, and the organization of seminars, conferences and roundtables. ECIPE can be understood as one of handful of new sites of commercialized knowledge production with close ties to the political sphere, competing with universities and reflecting changing hierarchies within the cultural field (Arnoldi 2007).

On its website, ECIPE runs a blog to which its own collaborators as well as various trade policy experts from the public and private sector are invited to contribute. While this blog is updated several times a month, in this study we zoom in on seven of these blogposts, published between January 2015 and May 2018. All of the blogposts focus on the issue of ‘communicating trade’. They pay attention not to the economics of free trade, but to its politics, to how the economics of free trade is contested, argued, and communicated in the public sphere. The reason why we have selected these seven blogposts is that all of them end with the disclaimer that “[i]n this series of blogposts, [ECIPE] would like to present initiatives and practices aiming at promoting free trade within society.” This clearly shows that it is not just our analytical gaze that brings the blogposts together but that ECIPE itself understands them as sharing a single focus as well. Furthermore, this disclaimer clearly hints at the presence of metapragmatic practices.

Our goal is to study the ECIPE blogposts as artefacts of economists struggling with the politicisation of their discipline. Trade policy was for very long a highly technical and administrative issue. But in Europe, the TTIP and CETA episodes hinted at above marked a first important step in the fundamental politicization

of trade politics, one that has thoroughly changed how trade policy is made and discussed (Gstöhl and De Bièvre 2017). In 2014, massive street protests broke out all over Europe against the prospect of a transatlantic trade deal with the U.S. called TTIP. More than three million people signed a petition against the deal, which eventually never went through. The CETA agreement with Canada did get ratified, but not without significant contestation, public debate, and wide-ranging changes to the agreement's text. During this turmoil, a variety of arguments were raised against these free trade deals: they were alleged to reduce regulatory freedom and national sovereignty, to threaten environmental and social protection, to be negotiated as opaque backroom deals, and to promote unlimited corporate power at the expense of democratic and accountable governance (Gheyle and De Ville 2017; Gheyle 2019). Against this backdrop, ECIPE's launch in 2015 of a series of blogposts on the topic of 'communicating trade' can be understood as a reaction to the politicization of trade policy and the increasing intensity of the debate about free trade (Gheyle 2019).

This broader development in the politics of free trade can be captured in discourse-theoretical terms by noting that the dislocated character of the discursive order of trade politics was reactivated, and that the social logics hegemonizing the order were politicized (Laclau 1990; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Jacobs 2018b). More plainly, we can say that the common sense view of trade policy and how it was to be conducted became destabilized. As a result, numerous practices and discourses that drew on this common sense to establish themselves as day-to-day routines lost their self-evident character, as suddenly new ways of shaping and governing international trade became imaginable. One can assume that this had a significant impact on professionals for whom these day-to-day routines were part and parcel of their professional identity.

In this situation, it is not surprising that a reflection on how to re-stabilise the situation was initiated by those whose professional identity was under siege. For the authors of the ECIPE blogposts, their professional practices and the self-evidence of their professional identity must have been deeply intertwined with the social logics of the traditional, neoliberal trade policy paradigm. The destabilization of this paradigm therefore also put their professional identities in jeopardy, sparking a search for how to re-entrench the ideas and the worldview upon which this identity was built. In a political climate where the social logics of free trade were rapidly losing their hegemonic status, the blogpost authors presumably started to look for discursive strategies to safeguard these logics, and therefore by extension their own professional selfhood, as will be demonstrated in our analysis below.

The next section will analyse a number of key discursive, pragmatic, and metapragmatic characteristics of the ECIPE blogposts under consideration. Singling out four distinct sets of discourses, the analysis will reveal how these blogposts

constitute a site of tension, where free trade economists turned media experts struggle to negotiate conflicting professional identities, and where the ontologies of economic science and political communication co-exist uneasily. Put differently, this part shows the tension that is apparent throughout the ECIPE blogposts between the ontology that its authors ascribe to economics and the ontology that they associate with public communication.

Evidence of conflicting ontologies in a free trade blog

If the blogpost authors could identify a single phenomenon as the culprit of their problems, it would be that, in their view, the public debate has lost its rational character and has assumed a discursive and communicative character, one in which form rather than content is what convinces. For free traders, the fact that neoclassical economics and the free trade doctrine are rational and fact-based no longer seems to carry sufficient weight to persuade the reasonable and rational citizen. In this ‘post-truth’ era, what seems to matter is not what is true, but what rings true. Hence, it starts to dawn on them that it is necessary to engage in a reflection about how the true and correct arguments in favour of free trade can be presented in a way that also makes them convincing.

Or at least, this is how the blogpost authors seem to reason. In an early 2015 blogpost on the ECIPE website entitled “The Spiral of Silence – How Anti-TTIP Groups Dominate German Online Media and set the Tone for TTIP Opinion” it is stated that “few anti-TTIP groups representing a small number of activists are waging a resolute battle against TTIP” on Facebook and Twitter. There is an “imbalance in online media penetration, with anti-TTIP campaign groups dominating [the] scene”. In today’s online debate about TTIP, it is argued, populist left-wing and antiglobalisation groups express “minority views – but views that get traction. Pro-market activists are hardly, if at all, visible” (ECIPE 2015). It is concluded that instead of the “sober review” that ECIPE had been traditionally championing there is a need for “participation”. To get out of what is seen as a spiral of silence, “it is time for the advocates of TTIP (...) to make their voice heard beyond conferences and official hearings” (ECIPE 2015).

These words constitute the start of a series of blogposts in which ECIPE addresses free trade’s “communication deficit” and presents – as the disclaimer puts it – “initiatives and voices aiming at promoting free trade within society” (ECIPE 2018a). Essentially, what comes out of these blogposts is that even if the proponents of free trade despise the “overstated fears and emotions” of anti-TTIP groups (ECIPE 2015) and “their scaremongering tactics to exploit people’s insecurities” (ECIPE 2018b), they have to realize that adopting this approach is the only way

to successfully make the case for free trade. Free trade advocates have to copy the political strategies used by free trade's detractors of free trade in some sort of an argumentative arms race.

In this part, we suggest that the authors indeed embrace a new conception of the public sphere. They move to accept that persuasion is a matter of construction, representation, and form, rather than an innate characteristic of true content corresponding to some deeper or overarching reality. Crucially, however, they do so without abandoning their long-standing belief that their understanding of economics is factually true and scientifically correct.

The blogposts we analyse thus rest simultaneously on two different foundations, one long-standing, the other emerging. This ambiguous situation leads their authors into a curious reflection about how to make the one and only truth look convincing and persuasive, and about how to get the public to participate in this truth. This prevents them from exploring *au fond* how validity and persuasive power are achieved in the public sphere, despite the latter endeavour looking far more promising from the point of view of our postfoundational perspective. The ontological tensions between economics as a science and political practices of persuasion are widely apparent throughout these blogposts and we will present them in the form of four findings. Each of these findings highlights a distinct set of discourses that participates in the postfoundational balancing act that is at the heart of ECIPE's blogposts.

Communication, campaigning, and language

A first set of discourses in which the tension described above becomes clear is concerned with communication, campaigning, and language. In a blogpost about "How to make trade policy cool (again) on social media?" the Chief Trade Economist of the European Commission contends that "trade economists have not been able to communicate effectively the benefits from trade to politicians and voters" (ECIPE 2018a). He refers to a 2016 study conducted by UK-based economists demonstrating how economists tweet less, mention fewer people and have fewer conversations with strangers, and use less accessible language with more abbreviations and a more distant tone than a comparable group of scientists (Della Giusta, Vukadinovic-Greetham and Jaworska 2018). The study also elaborates on differences in register (with economists using a higher number of complex words, specific names, and abbreviations than other scientists) and even on differences in such linguistic nitty-gritty like pronoun use (with inclusive pronouns such as "we" and "our" being used half as much by economists as by other scientists, demonstrating – according to the authors – a lower degree of involvement with the reader). Economists do not seem to be doing a great job at playing by the new rules of

communicating publicly, the Chief Trade Economist of the European Commission concludes in the ECIPE blogpost. He adds that this is in sharp contrast with the opponents of free trade, who – in his view – have a track record of communicating far more skilfully. Just like the other scientists in the UK-based study he draws on, the “anti-trade campaigners are also very good at using simple, visual and often distorted messages on social media to appeal to people’s emotions” (ECIPE 2018a).

The combination of “simple”, “visual” and “highly distorted” (ECIPE 2018a) to characterize the anti-trade messages is highly interesting as it points to the free-traders’ half-hearted and somewhat uneasy embrace of a radically new communication strategy: while the first two echo the UK study’s results in expressing appreciation for the effectiveness of anti-trade communication, the latter reverts to a fact-oriented logic in suggesting that the anti-trade movement distorts the truth. Whether the anti-trade movement’s ambition to appeal to people’s emotions is seen as a good or a bad thing, becomes clear when the Chief Trade Economist of the European Commission goes on to argue that what the proponents of free trade need is “an honest and successful communication strategy about the benefits of trade for the EU society”, one that allows “people to resonate personally with our messages” (ECIPE 2018a). While the use of “honest” is in direct contrast with the distortions by the opponents of free trade, the awareness of the need for public engagement seems to reveal a positive appreciation of their emotional appeal. In other words, here again the blogposts seem to be stuck somewhere half way in between different foundations (ECIPE 2018a).

The logic of this discourse regarding the success of campaigning strategies and the power of very specific language choices seems to be that the proponents of free trade suffer a communication deficit. “It was mainly one side which dominated the headlines and captured the hearts and minds of the public and stakeholders” during the TTIP and CETA debates (ECIPE 2018c), and that was the side opposing free trade politics. It is this asymmetry in their respective communicative and campaigning acumen that helps explain why the anti-free trade campaigners seem to be winning, despite the argument in favour of free trade actually being “true” and “real”. Elsewhere in the blogposts it is argued that the reason why the NGOs and the opponents of the neoliberal trade strategy are winning the debate is not because they have sound arguments or capture real sentiments among the population, but “because NGOs employ better communication strategies than the European Institutions, mostly in terms of how they are heard and understood easier” (ECIPE 2018d).

The tension between economics and political communication should be clear by now. Their professional identity as economists requires the blogpost authors to insist that they are “honest” and that they provide “factual, relevant information” (ECIPE 2018a), while the other side’s argument is “unpleasant and uninformed”

(ECIPE 2018e), “simply wrong” (ECIPE 2018f), based on “scaremongering” (ECIPE 2018b), “limited and misleading”, and “[leaving] many Europeans in the dark” (ECIPE 2018c). So here is the paradox: how can proponents of free trade be losing the debate if they are correct and their adversaries wrong?

Post-truth

The explanation for this paradox is found in a second set of discourses in which the tension is latent, one that argues that *we live in a ‘post-truth era’*. Consider for instance the following argument:

The numbers also suggest that public opinion is, perhaps more than ever before, a matter of participation. In today’s online debate about TTIP, populist left-wing and anti-globalisation groups express minority views – but views that get traction. Pro-market activists are hardly, if at all, visible.

Empirical research indicates that people tend to be hesitant to voice a minority view when their friends, family or colleagues feel differently. It is called the ‘spiral of silence’ and it holds true for both the online and the offline media. The asymmetry in the current online media discourse bears the risk that ‘praising TTIP’ becomes a widespread minority view, and it may even create a lasting impact on the zeitgeist of globalisation. Therefore, it is time for the advocates of TTIP – not only in Germany – to make their voice heard beyond conferences and official hearings in order to prevent the spiral of silence to put an end to a promising trade agreement.

(ECIPE 2015)

The logical contradiction (opposition to TTIP is presented as both a minority and a majority view) aside, what these paragraphs from an ECIPE blogpost seem to be describing is a situation in which the loudest voices win out, and in which style and form matter more than content. We have shown earlier that the Chief Trade Economist of the European Commission in his blog similarly contends that “resonance” with their personal lifeworlds is what determines whether people accept an argument or not (ECIPE 2018b). In a blogpost discussing the European Commission’s proposal for a digital tax, one ECIPE-economist even explicitly talks about “fake news”. Quoting Machiavelli, he talks about “veil[ing] the facts”, and calls the Commission’s tax justice proposal “heavily biased and therefore misleading” (ECIPE 2018f). The diagnosis is that “evidence-based policymaking” is under pressure from “policy-based evidence-making”, especially since, with the Commission, the post-truth era has reached the level of pan-European governance (ECIPE 2018f). Finally, in a blog for the London School of Economics (LSE) website, the main author of the 2016 UK-based study referred to above writes:

The timing is significant because 2016 has been declared the year of post-truth politics, the year in which appeals to emotions (pathos) superseded the significance of factual evidence-based information (logos), affecting people’s constructions and interpretations of events. (Della Giusta 2018)

Some of the answers to the paradox are apparently to be found beyond what the proponents of free trade can control: it is not just a question of poor communication; the times are said to have turned radically (and abruptly) different. If they want to keep on competing in the public debate, they have to adapt. The author of the LSE blogpost goes on to link this with the growing prominence of political “alt” movements, populism and “fake news” leading to political shock events such as Brexit and the Trump election. It raises prototypically post-truth questions like

Does the public not trust economists? Don’t they understand what economists do and how they work? Is their work misrepresented in the media? And how do economists themselves interact with public opinion? (Della Giusta 2018)

While the latter question points to communication (in particular to the need for interaction and dialogue), and thus to the free traders’ own responsibilities (note the use of ‘themselves’), the others cover more systemic concerns that seem to be beyond the free traders’ control: while miscommunication is our own doing, mistrust, misunderstanding and misrepresentation are deeply rooted signs of a post-truth times, free traders seem to argue. One may wonder, however, how relevant this dichotomy is to good political communication. We would evidently suspect that it is a product of the ontological tension, and that the separation of miscommunications for which one is personally responsible and a post-truth climate of fake news to which one simply has to adapt is necessary to simultaneously sustain a postfoundational theory of political communication and a foundational belief that liberal economics is true and correct.

Post-truth strategies

This hypothesis seems to be confirmed when we look at the way in which, according to the blogpost authors, the case for free trade should be adapted to the social climate of post-truth and fake news as they have diagnosed it. In this third set of discourses, they argue that the right way to react to what they perceive as a tendency towards a ‘post-truth’ public debate is by *actively adopting the post-truth strategies of the anti-trade campaign*. Crucially though, once mimicked, these post-truth strategies are no longer deemed to be post-truth in a problematic sense as they serve the correct purpose (or at least, their post-truth character is no longer problematic): the

promotion of free trade. This explains how they can admire the other side's "simple and visual" messages, even if they are "distorted". Instead of distancing themselves from what may be seen as devious scheming, the bloggers embrace the idea that "a compelling social media campaign about the benefits of trade could be a great way to build awareness of the importance of trade in our daily lives" (ECIPE 2018a). This leads to a rather ambiguous situation in which methods for mass mobilization are castigated because they promote ideas that are essentially false in nature but simultaneously admired because of their effectiveness.

In one blogpost explicitly concerned with "how to prepare for the next anti-free trade campaign" (ECIPE 2018d), strong admiration is voiced for a recent communication initiative by the movement opposed to the European Commission's free trade strategy. They have launched a mobile game called 'Dodgy Deals', in which players are cast as politicians, journalists or activists in a post-CETA world, and go on missions that lead them to discover all social and environmental problems brought along by the new free trade agreements. While at one point in the ECIPE blogpost the game is frankly denounced as "disinformation", it is described elsewhere as "an attractive communication tool: digital, easy to handle, and free of all conceited jargon usually surrounding political talks" (ECIPE 2018d). The same ambiguity speaks, perhaps slightly more subtly, from the claim that "NGOs are using appealing, modern communication tools to get the public involved in their crusade against free trade, while the political response often lacks these attributes": the fight against free trade is seen as a crusade, i.e. vigorous but irrational and extremist, so ultimately not something you should support; but its communication is seen as "appealing" and "modern" (ECIPE 2018d). It is a view that combines appreciation of strategic effectiveness with consideration of moral qualities and the determination whether a political project is post-truth or not.

This ambiguity is highly apparent when it comes to the discussion of the role of social media in the public debate. Twitter and other social media are considered as a cesspool of "fake news", where even the European Commission isn't afraid to use false data to achieve its goals (ECIPE 2018f). At the same time, it is argued that Twitter should be seized as a tool in the promotion of free trade. The latter is the driving force behind the so-called Trade-NOW initiative:

The trade-now.eu website embraces new digital technologies, which allow reaching out to new groups and provides numerous options to tell these stories. By sharing trade tales (stories and anecdotes in a light tone) or taking out a banner it shows what trade means to different sectors and tells the world they want to welcome a more open trading environment. By using #TradeNOW you become part of a vibrant online community, which is also supported by a tweets and social media posts generator available on the website. Everyone can use it and show why he or she supports free trade.

We believe that it's crucial to bring more voices to this discussion. Without equal representation from civil society, politicians and business the debate is not complete. So visit the website, send us an email and let's make some noise together.
(ECIPE 2018c)

The need to reach out to the public and talk to them about trade in a language they understand is a concern that runs through several of these blogposts. There is lots of talk about “engaging alongside with national government at both national and local level by delivering concrete examples of what trade benefits are” (ECIPE 2018c), about “ensuring that people have a chance to understand the matter at hand” (ECIPE 2018b), about the idea that “[p]ersonal engagement is key to build an understanding and trust and raise the levels of knowledge on both sides” (ECIPE 2018e), about making sure “[v]oters and politicians could finally see how EU trade policy benefits their city or region” (ECIPE 2018a). The blogpost authors seem to agree on the “need to create a new narrative”, one that restores trust and “[addresses] people's apathy, indifference and lack of time” (ECIPE 2018b). All of this, of course, rests on the baseline of participation, collaboration and engagement that constitutes the central focus of this volume (see Chapter 1 for a full overview).

Legacy to new media

The fourth and final major set of discourses that emerges from the ECIPE blogpost data is one in which proponents of free trade are encouraged to turn away from legacy media, abandon traditional Public Relations strategies and embrace the array of new media that those against free trade have been shown to exploit so effectively. By turning to these alternative communications, it is argued, they will be able to reach out to a wider audience and they will do so “at a rate that wouldn't have been achievable just with a few advocacy events or a couple of newspaper articles” (ECIPE 2018a). The reasoning informing this turn from legacy to new media, is of course that the latter fit far better within the postfoundational paradigm. For reasons of space, we cannot go into this set of discourses more deeply. Suffice it to note here that the tension between legacy media and social media is of course well documented in communication science and journalism studies (see e.g. Franklin 2014).

To wrap up, in this section we have argued that there is a palpable tension between the different ontologies that simultaneously inform the four sets of discourses characterizing the blogposts under examination. This tension is ontological rather than ontic, in the sense that its empirical traces are more than mere contradictions and inconsistencies, but betray two fundamentally different ways of understanding the nature of society. On the one hand, as economists, the authors continue to

consider their understanding of free trade to be “honest” and “factual” and they deem their analysis of its benefits to be the “real picture” (ECIPE 2018a). On the other hand, as media experts, they have come to realize that, in a world where participation, collaboration and engagement seem to be taking over, honesty and facts do not suffice to convince the public and dominate the political debate, and they advocate openly for adopting the communication strategies of their adversaries, except that as part of the free trade campaign these strategies are no longer to be seen as tools for spreading ‘fake news’, but rather as a legitimate and effective way to achieve a valid goal. The problematic negotiation of these two professional identities, and the difficulties in drawing a clear and coherent boundary between them, negatively affect the communication advice extended in these blogposts, it will be argued in the following, final section.

Implications for the public debate on free trade

In the analysis above, we have illustrated that the arguments pro free trade and the communication advice formulated by the ECIPE blogpost authors are rooted in two distinct and essentially incompatible ontologies. This final part seeks to build a political-strategic reflection on the pragmatic and discursive analysis in the previous section (Jacobs 2019a). We think through the implications and consequences of the ontological tension described in the previous section, and we reflect on how ECIPE’s communicative efforts relate to the ongoing public debate on free trade. In particular, we will zoom in on how the ontological tension identified above sheds light on the communication advice extended in the blogposts.

First of all, and most fundamentally, the tensions shown in this chapter cannot easily be resolved. It leads to a bevy of contradictions, inconsistencies, and problematic reasonings. Consider the following extract from one of the ECIPE blogposts in our data set:

We cannot forget that trade was, is and will continue to be an essential part of both the economy as a whole as well as of every individual household. Yet, if we cannot convince the public that our actions are legitimate, we will not convince our partners either. (ECIPE 2018b)

In line with claims elsewhere in the blogposts that “trade is here to stay”, that “there is little that can stop people from trading”, and that “[i]t is in our human nature to move forward, explore new opportunities and test boundaries, and free trade together with supportive measures can help people with these motivations”, the first part of the extract above implies that free trade is the way to go (ECIPE 2018b). However, even if there can be no doubt that “our actions are legitimate”, the

blogposts are dominated by an awareness of the fact that free trade will get nowhere if the public cannot be convinced of this (ECIPE 2018b).

There are potentially two issues here. One is that ‘legitimacy’ is framed as an innate characteristic of free trade. This framing is a product of the ontology of economic science, but it clashes with the constructionist interpretation of legitimacy as something derived from one or more particular and contingent standards (Van Leeuwen 2007). Secondly, the absolute interpretation of legitimacy is somewhat at odds with the need to “convince the public” (ECIPE 2018b). While legitimacy has been argued to be community-bound, and discursively negotiated, and can differ across communities, it is presented as a natural, fixed trait in the argument above. Also, if convincing is needed, then how can it be ascertained *a priori*, before any actual convincing takes place, that free trade is indeed “legitimate”, “essential”, “here to stay”, a natural part of the human experience, and an unwavering boon to the exploration of new opportunities? (ECIPE 2018b). What our postfoundational lens has made clear is that trade is paradoxically understood as both a natural, extra-discursive reality and as an ideology that is grounded in discourse and needs to convince its subjects like any ideology does.

The same dissonance rings through the statement elsewhere in the ECIPE blogposts that there is a need “[t]o inform and convince people that trade is also a good thing” (ECIPE 2018c). The logic of informing involves pointing out an aspect of an objective reality. The logic of convincing, on the other hand, involves argumentation rather than designation. Put simply, if one could inform someone that “trade is also a good thing”, there would be no need to convince them; alternatively, if one had to convince someone that “trade is also a good thing”, there would be no possibility of just informing them that this is a fact (ECIPE 2018c). A professor convinces a journal to publish her article, but she informs her students when the exam takes place. The logics of convincing and informing describe very different practices, and the ECIPE’s attempt to conflate them confuses their argument.

A second problem is that ECIPE’s view of how the public debate on free trade is developing and of the role that the media (both legacy and new) play in it fundamentally misrecognizes the hegemony mechanism. The following reflection in one of the blogposts on the success of the anti-free trade movement is a case in point: “it was mainly one side, which dominated the headlines and captured the hearts and minds of the public and stakeholders” (ECIPE 2018b). One would think that this side is the side favouring free trade – given the legion of think tanks, columnists, newspapers, politicians, and private companies that are signed up to their point of view. On closer scrutiny the author in fact argues that it is the opponents of TTIP that dominate, thereby completely failing to recognize or exploit the incredible structural advantage her side possesses – the normative and hegemonic status of free trade.

In this light, the move away from legacy media, as advocated in the ECIPE blogposts, is interesting, to say the least, as the legacy media are where proponents of free trade are most likely to find support (Gheyle 2019). Unlike social media platforms, the traditional and long-established media concerns that support the dominant broadcasters and newspaper firms continue to be embedded in the social structures that rendered free trade hegemonic in the first place. While this move definitely fits a broader pattern that appears throughout the blogposts, one of engaging with and adapting to the contestation instead of appealing to given norms and truths and the established wisdom, the question should be raised if it is the strategy most likely to ensure the enduring hegemony of free trade.

Furthermore, even if it were the case that hegemony was with the opponents rather than the proponents of free trade, there would be a problem with the underlying assumption that the general public is simply drawn to uncritically agree with the definitions of reality that are presented to them in mediated messages. As Macgilchrist and Böhmig (2012) contend, a so-called “second wave of hegemony-theoretical approaches to media” emphasizes a more dynamic, less deterministic understanding of hegemony. They show that hegemony is far more fragile, contingent and provisional, marked by gaps and fissures, with – as Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) work argues – hegemonic articulation constantly being accompanied by counter-articulation in alternative spaces. If the proponents of free trade really wanted to overthrow the (non-existent) hegemony of free trade’s opponents, this effort would have to start with an analysis of this hegemony’s vulnerabilities, and how to target them.

However, such an effort is made impossible by a third and final observation: underlying the blogposts in our dataset is a mechanistic, somewhat simplistic understanding of how social media and political campaigning really work. It reduces communication to the espousing of a populist ‘fake news’ discourse, precisely because, as we have shown in the previous section, such an interpretation is the only way to harmonize the conflicting ontologies that are at the heart of ECIPE’s communicative efforts. Yet the postfoundational account of political communication is far more intricate than this interpretation gives it credit for (Laclau 2005). As such, ECIPE’s theory of political communication does not do justice to the complexity of how the public sphere functions, and a political strategy based on them is unlikely to be successful.

Examples of this are the way in which social media are described as “cool”; for Twitter hashtags, it is presumed that they need to be “catchy”, thus making online communities “vibrant”; while social media posts can be created using a “generator” (ECIPE 2018c). Of course, communicating effectively on social media is far more sophisticated than this blogpost gives it credit for. If the goal is to restabilise society’s foundations through the participation and the engagement of the

public, then cool hashtags and catchy content generation will evidently not suffice. Furthermore, social media are not in such black-and-white contrast with legacy media (Macgilchrist and Böhmig 2012), as both continue to rely on each other with major news corporations now frequently interviewing bloggers and drawing heavily on Twitter and Facebook, and – conversely – social media referring heavily to legacy media. While user-generated content is getting more and more important every day, print and broadcast continue to dominate the news landscape. It is not that journalism 2.0 has not lived up to its promise; it is just that that promise was very different from what some, including the ECIPE bloggers, have made it out to be. They use social media in a way and for a purpose that is bound to fail, precisely because the theory of political communication and the view of the public sphere informing this usage is limited.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have introduced a Brussels-based libertarian think tank, their blog series on communicating trade, and their view of free trade. Using the post-foundational lens that is at the centre of this volume, we have analysed a number of key discursive, pragmatic, and metapragmatic characteristics of the ECIPE blogposts. Singling out four distinct discourse topics, our analysis has revealed how these blogposts constitute a site of tension, where free trade economists turned media experts struggle to negotiate conflicting professional identities, and where the ontologies of economic science and political communication clash. In the fourth and final part of the chapter we have sought to build a political-strategic reflection on the empirical analysis, zooming in on three key points that allow us to think through what the underlying implications of the ontological tension at the heart of our dataset are.

It can be concluded that for economists advocating free trade to morph into media experts embracing the emerging principles of participation, collaboration and engagement, and promoting a totally new communication strategy to convince the general public are no easy things to do. At least the writers of the blogposts that we have investigated in this chapter seem to struggle with the boundaries between their own professional identity as free trade proponents and that of the media experts they strive to be.

That the analysis presented in this chapter does not bode well for those who consider take their marching orders from ECIPE is perhaps best captured in the picture which accompanies at least half a dozen of the think tank’s blogposts on TTIP, including one blogpost in our dataset (see Figure 1). In this blogpost it is argued that “public opinion is, perhaps more than ever before, a matter of participation”



Figure 1.

(ECIPE 2015). Pro-market activists are encouraged to be more visible and less quiet, “to make their voice heard beyond conferences and official hearings” (ECIPE 2015). In other words, the rallying call is to follow in the footsteps of the anti-TTIP demonstrators who are shown in the picture. But just how credible such an appeal can be is clear from a quick look at the main character in that picture: he is a gentleman in a suit that was probably ruined by the police’s water cannon, stretching his left arm in defiance of an invisible opponent. Most of all, it is the man’s facial expression that dominates the picture: he looks very angry, almost out of his mind with a mix of fear and aggression. Surely then, in spite of what is argued in the blogpost, he cannot be a role model for proponents of free trade – who would be driven to participate in a political-economic campaign with the man above as the posterboy? It would undoubtedly be more productive to paint free trade as the reasonable, normal option, and its antagonists as crazed protestors. But if that is the aim of this picture, then why have the angry man look like a Commission official, rather than like an average protestor? It seems that even on a multimodal level, the boundary work attempted in the dataset is somewhat problematic and we are left wondering what it means when, from the think tank’s perspective, the angry man in the picture is presented as the face of a new era of participation, collaboration and engagement.

We would like to end this chapter with a reflection on the concept ‘postfoundationalism’. While postfoundationalism is commonly interpreted as an epistemological paradigm used by social scientists, this chapter – like all the other chapters in this volume – shows that it is not just we as social scientists who deploy a postfoundational lens, but that practitioners also draw on this perspective (see Chapter 1). We hope to have demonstrated that, like social scientists, practitioners must remain

alert to the dangers and complications that this unique perspective can generate if it is not applied in a cogent and coherent fashion. In our case, we have turned to the domain of political economics and, based on a discourse-analytical approach to blogpost data, we have shown that for free traders to embrace the emerging paradigm of participation and engagement takes them on a bumpy road, one on which they are forced to critically reflect on their own professional identity. We would like to suggest that the metapragmatics of such reflection constitute a very rich site for postfoundational study.

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