

Fixing points on a shifting landscape

Truth, lies and politics in two reader comments pages

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This paper focuses on reader comments published in two online UK newspapers (*Mail Online* and *Independent*) in response to articles about one discreditable incident involving a far-right political leader. The concepts of articulation and fixation are used to examine how these readers engage with the politician's actions using ethical categories. While *Independent* readers build theoretical articulations between the politician's actions and a generalised crisis of confidence in politics, readers of the *Mail Online*, regardless of their political sympathies, accept ethical categories as fixed points to anchor the discourse.

Keywords: political discourse, reader comments, political logics, articulation

1. Introduction

In the post-crisis era, one constant thread running through public discourses has been the loss of trust in individual politicians and the undermining of confidence in established political systems and institutions. On this destabilised landscape, new parties and movements have emerged which promise radical change. Generally characterized as “populist”, they seek to unite diverse social groups by attributing blame, fomenting antagonism toward particular people or institutions, and promising a “new” kind of politics in which the interests of “the people” will receive due attention (Mudde 2016; Moffitt 2016). In many countries, one significant theme during this period has been the issue of “telling the truth”. Analysis of “straight talking” on issues such as multiculturalism (Prins 2004) and reactions against political correctness (Wodak 2015) provides evidence that a fundamental battle is being waged behind the scenes. As powerful political movements are being reconfigured and new types of actor are gaining prominence, the issue of “truth” is held up as a yardstick with which to measure the assertions of opposing groups. From Dutch extremist Wilders's claim that he just “tells it as it is”, to

Trump's allegations that unfavourable reports are "fake news", "truth" is one of the themes that recurs with considerable regularity in this struggle.

In February 2017, a minor incident occurred that serves as a litmus test to gauge the way that questions of truth-telling intersect with wider political issues. The UK media spotlight turned to the (then) leader of the right-wing, anti-European United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Paul Nuttall, standing as UKIP candidate at a by-election in Stoke-on-Trent, a traditional Labour stronghold. On his website, he claimed to have lost close friends in the notorious 1989 Hillsborough disaster, where ninety six people were crushed to death at a football match. The first inquest had exonerated the police and cast blame on the fans (mainly Liverpool supporters). Subsequent investigations brought to light the extent to which police mismanagement (and cover-ups) had exacerbated the problem. The huge public outcry eventually led to a second inquest, in April 2016, in which the coroners ruled that the victims were unlawfully killed due to gross negligence by police and ambulance services (see Canning 2018). Nuttall is from Liverpool, and his claim to have known victims probably helped him to build fellow-feeling with voters. However, in February 2017, just one week before the by-election, Nuttall was forced to admit publicly that he had not lost close friends in the disaster. When questioned by the media, he first denied making the claims, but finally made a tearful public apology.

In view of the imminent by-election, where UKIP was perceived to have a chance of unseating Labour, there was considerable newspaper coverage of Nuttall's admission, sparking a large volume of reader comments.

1.1 Online reader forums

Online forums of various kinds are a growing focus of interest for discourse analysts, offering particular relevance to discussions of the rise of political extremism. In the past, a kind of cordon sanitaire seems to have been in operation that effectively excluded extremist politicians from access to a media platform (Downs 2012). The emergence of new media forums seems effectively to have ended this system thanks to the massive increase in routes to public engagement (Littler and Feldman 2017). Some commentators believe that such forums are self-regulating and inhibit the propagation of extreme views (Dahlgren 2005), or at least, tend to crystallise into patterns of resistance and discipline (Kelsey and Bennett 2014). Nevertheless, recent changes on the political landscape suggest that the social consensus might itself be altering as radical views on certain issues hit critical mass (Standing 2016; Freedman 2017). As online debates on social and political issues develop, they often become polarised (Yardi and Boyd 2010), and may push back previous consensual limits, leading to an increasing public use of uncivil political

expressions and behaviours (Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017). These discourses are often characterised by sharpening antagonism and the intensification of radical exclusionary ideologies (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017, 6). In this sense, it is interesting to speculate with Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017, 3) that the perceived undermining of liberal-democratic values in the context of new political movements is no longer a set of political processes “happening especially within either of the polarised loci of ‘politics’ on the one hand, or ‘people’, or its representatives” on the other, but rather can be located in “a continuum of practices which locate between ‘politics’ and the ‘people’”. Newspapers’ online reader forums offer analysts a privileged window onto the ongoing enactment of these processes. Unfortunately, the fragmentary nature of the contributions and the chaotic flow of asynchronous interactions mean that the material they offer is at best frustrating (Arendholtz 2013).¹ Taking some of these aspects into account, I follow Unger et al. (2016) in using a case study approach to research discourse in media forums, taking account of contextual factors and patterns of interaction.

1.2 Discourse approach

The theoretical background to this paper is informed by the conception of discourses and ideologies as interrelated but separable features of social life: discourse both constructs and is constructed by social practices (Fairclough 2003). Discourse study affords a privileged method for understanding social and ideological phenomena, but two points need to be borne in mind. First, although discourse analysis can provide insights into the workings of ideology, the interaction between ideology, discourse and personal or group identity is not a one-way or mechanistic relationship, but operates on various layers, meaning that discourses may seem contradictory and their manifestations are often fragmentary. Second, the parameters of ideological reproduction, commitment or dissociation may also be contingent, and are constantly negotiated and renegotiated dialogically.

From this general basis, this paper is also informed by Laclauian inspired discourse analysis, which seeks to understand how discourses provide a temporary anchor to hold various social antagonisms in place while operationalising others

1. One confounding factor is that sincere exchanges between interested parties are wilfully disrupted by the appearance of “flamers” and “trolls” intending to disrupt or provoke, respectively (Richet 2013). However, in sensitive areas such as politics, it is almost impossible to distinguish sincerity from provocation. Since provocative comments may be answered sincerely by other readers, or sincere ones provocatively, clear distinctions are impractical. For this reason, the contributions and interactions within each forum are considered as manifestations of different discourses in which readers attempt to fix meaning relationally, that is, by differentiating themselves from others, and by negotiating meanings in a context of plurality.

(Glynos and Howarth 2007, 2008). In one sense, online discussion pages seem to offer a paradigmatic example of the “constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity”, envisaged by Laclau and Mouffe (2001, 113), epitomising a kind of “surplus of meaning”. On the other, they also offer abundant manifestations of the ways individuals and groups endeavour to perform discursive differentiation on both a rational and an emotional level, and to stabilize networks of meaning by fixing particular signifiers. This can be understood through the concept of “articulation”: “the practice of articulation (...) consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 113). Such “points” reflect Lacan’s “points de capiton” (Stavrakakis 1999, 60), a metaphor that draws on the image of quilted fabric to show how meaning is anchored around particular signifiers to create a fixed point that enables temporary stability within discourse. In the words of van Brussel (2018, 383–384), these nodal points “provide the cement for the partial and temporary fixation (...) of meaning”, but the connections that are established can be challenged, so that particular elements can be “claimed by, (re)articulated, and integrated within a discursive structure, sometimes replacing or disarticulating other elements”. These connections are best understood through the concept of “logics of critical explanation” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 137), that is, logics that define the “rules of the practice” and conditions which make it possible (Zienkowski 2014, 286). These involve logics of equivalence, equating various elements with each other, and of difference. Importantly, antagonisms have a crucial function in these processes, in that they both destabilise (by opposing) and reinforce identities and positions (by presenting an “other” that is outside bounds) (Carpentier and de Cleen 2007, 269–270). If the nodal points generated within the interplay of discourses are widely accepted, they can become dominant, linking different identities into a common project (Carpentier and de Cleen 2007, 266), reinforcing particular political logics, and helping to build a hegemonic social imaginaire.

Although the inchoate nature of the discourses produced on online reader forums means that they are unlikely to yield developed theoretical accounts of any social phenomenon, they arguably allow us to glimpse, albeit fleetingly, the way in which such articulations are becoming fixed in the public arena at any given moment. Analysis of these forums may help us to perceive where politically operative articulations are coming together, or breaking up.

1.3 Texts and method

This paper focuses on the reader comments published in two online UK newspapers in response to an article concerning the Nuttall incident: the *Independent*, with 440 comments (around 14,500 words), and the *Mail Online*, with 867 comments

(approximately 22,000 words). These readers comment pages were chosen because they are completely open access, that is, it is not necessary to register with the newspaper in order to read them. The *Independent* is an online-only newspaper, generally regarded as belonging to the centre, while the online version of the *Daily Mail* shares the main characteristics of this right-wing middle-market tabloid (Bingham and Conboy 2015). The article that sparked the comments was critical of Nuttall in the *Independent*, while the *Mail*, generally more sympathetic to UKIP, provided a dramatized account of his confession mixed with an explanation of his party's election promises.

Previous studies on reader comments have taken a central ideological theme as an entry point for analysing discourses in large forums (e.g. gender in Kelsey 2015, or (in)tolerance in Thomassen 2017). In the present paper, the analysis is organized around the theme of lying, which seemed to be central to interactions on these forums. For this reason, this paper does not undertake a full discussion of aspects such as identities and subject positions, but rather focuses on the notion of articulation and points of fixation. Starting from recursive reading of the comments in order of their appearance, bearing in mind social context and genre constraints, I recorded recurrent patterns in which “lying” appeared in relation to other notions (Fairclough 1995; Kelsey 2015), with a view to developing an “informed understanding” (Bell 2011). This process afforded insights into the way discourses are linked to each other across multiple interactions (Wodak 2008), and how points of fixation are established and dissolved (van Brussel 2018). My analysis centres mainly on the level of discourses/arguments, and from there to the attributions and identities implicated (Reisigl and Wodak 2009, 95). In what follows, since these two newspapers are directed towards different types of readership, I deal with the two forums separately, looking first at the major conceptual patterns concerning truth, lies and their articulations with the political/social sphere in the *Independent*, and then exploring the configurations appearing in the *Mail Online*. The discussion brings together the main issues arising from each analysis, sketches out some emergent themes relating to political logics, and suggests how they may contribute to the ongoing “populist turn” in politics.

2. Lies and politics in the *Independent*

The readers of the *Independent* engage intensively with the issue of lying politicians, delivering a variety of analyses and verdicts which allow us to glimpse a number of ideological stances, some of which are expressed with coherence while others bob up on the surface as fragments.

2.1 Lying politicians

Beginning with the most obviously polarised readings of the Nuttall incident, we see that a wide range of articulations with other features of recent politics are available for UKIP's detractors. Since the affair clearly associates a UKIP politician with lying, readers develop this theme by extension to other members of this group to delegitimise UKIP and right-wing politics in general. A network of associations stretching from Trump's "alternative facts" to the Brexit campaign is proposed, as in the following Example (1) which articulates an offensive assertion (UKIP supporters are all liars) to the notion that they are out of touch with reality, and then to far-right white supremacists (alt-right), and Trump (alt-fact).

- (1) And the kipper band keeps playing that old hackeyed tune 'And we'll all lie together, cos then no one will get caught.' Only works in your own warped little world (...). Alt-right, alt-fact, all-lies, all-con.

However, given the rather obvious nature of these articulations, it is striking that the readers' comments in the *Independent* rarely voice a simple condemnation of Nuttall's lies as such, without complicating them by involving other aspects of the political context in which these lies arose. Many *Independent* readers express some identification with the view that politicians should not tell lies, but these incipient associations are rarely straightforward, as readers adopt a distance stance suggestive of a "critical observer" rather than a committed participant. Most typically, the discussion of Nuttall's lie is framed within the context of other lies in public life. Crucially, the main argument in the *Independent* forum centres not on the morality of lying itself, but on the relative importance of specific lies in particular contexts. This is evident in (2), which draws the Nuttall case into the context of the highly controversial Brexit campaign slogan "£ 350m for the NHS", to affirm that the so-called "lies" on the UKIP-Brexit side are negligible in comparison to the lies (e.g. about Iraq, or the benefits of the EU) uttered by their adversaries:

- (2) After 45 years of treachery, lies and deception... all the sheeple [sic] complain about is someone omitting to write 'gross' after the figure of '£ 350m' on the side of a bus.

The tentative articulations between lies and particular politicians or parties are thus routinely countered on a facile level with the view that since all politicians and newspapers tell lies, specific lies are unimportant. This equivalence, curiously, serves to dissolve "lying" as a fixed moral category, generating arguments that delegitimise the political system as a whole and are ultimately reductionist and unproductive.

- (3) Are you trying to tell me we couldn't find similar cases of wrongdoings in the legacy parties?
- (4) Why can't the indy [sic] do an article on how those men in calais [sic] lied about their age.

It is interesting to note that these two examples (3) and (4) are associated with rather different patterns of association, both of which recur in the comments either together or separately. The first (3) lumps together the “alternative” to UKIP, here labelled the “legacy parties”, and pits the more radical party against the ‘system’ or ‘establishment’, engaging a salient feature of the populist turn in political discourse (Wodak 2015; Moffitt 2016). The second (4) ropes in the key issue of migration, engaging an allusively xenophobic discourse which is an undercurrent – albeit a significant one – running through many comments in the *Independent*.

The issue here is that many comments draw on an underlying view of extreme cynicism that would undermine public debate, indeed, political life as a whole, if it were applied systematically. The main pattern seems to be that since everyone tells lies, truth is relegated to a position of relative unimportance. Since we cannot select political representatives for reasons of integrity or reliability, we have the perfect right to select them for other reasons, such as sharing their desire to expel immigrants. The logical consequence of this disaffection offered in the comments seems to amount to a parody of decisionism (Macintyre 1981): we know all candidates/parties to be extremely flawed, and therefore we randomly select one to support. The random nature of this process of choice levels the ground between fringe parties and the others. Complete disaffection also leads people to opt for the type of “protest vote” recommended in (5), which suggests that voting for candidates from parties such as UKIP represents a way of expressing disaffection with politics in general:

- (5) So, all that is left is Nuttall. You might just as well vote for him. It'll be a two finger job to the establishment. No real difference but just a little bit satisfying.

This is not the end of the story, however. The logic that, since all politicians are liars, it is legitimate to support extremist parties, generates a problem that does not pass unnoticed. In fact, it is taken up by several other readers, who point to the obvious flaw in this type of argumentation (6):

- (6) Yeah, yeah, same old deflection. As long as someone else in the history of the planet has done something awful it's ok for your hero to do something bad.

This circular logic (‘your politician has lied’ – legitimisation ‘all politicians lie’ – delegitimation ‘claiming that all politicians lie does not provide a sufficient reason for voting for an extremist party’) occurs several times within the comments pages

of the *Independent*, and evidently reflects two topoi in everyday ‘commonsense’ discourses on politics within the social ambience of this newspaper’s readers. The absence of a clear, articulation in which lies are (a) condemned, and (b) localised on one side in the argument, leaves these debates circular and inoperative.

2.2 Distance and disaffection

Interestingly, the issue of disaffection also appears as a wider theme in posts that take a more distanced view of the situation, constructing articulations on a theoretical level. One strand is that widespread disillusionment with politics is the driving force behind UKIP’s relative success, and behind the Brexit victory. Sometimes this is offered in highly context-bound but fatalistic terms, as in (7) which effectively voices the view that the crisis of legitimacy has made people so anxious for change that they are willing to believe UKIP’s empty promises:

- (7) Any fool can see that Nuttall is a lying con-man, but sadly ‘the people’ who have been hoodwinked into voting for brexit and the kipper dream are so desperate for change that they will believe anything the tweed weasels tells them. At some point it will dawn that immigration is a fact of life that will continue unabated and the NHS will continue to be underfunded by successive governments.

Yet the issue of disaffection is often situated within broader discourses of crisis that go beyond the political sphere. These may be generic and sweeping, as in (7), which presumably should be read as an allusion to public life in general, against the immediate background of February 2017 (principally Brexit negotiations and Trump’s presidency):

- (8) satire just seems irrelevant in the world of today and the situation is now so grim that it’s not funny any more

Significantly, the crisis in politics is also tentatively articulated with other ‘crises’, such as that of the political system in its entirety (as distinct from particular parties) (9), an ongoing crisis in state education (seen as particularly affecting the working class) (10), or a supposed crisis of ‘British values’ (11):

- (9) If he should win the byelection then we know something is seriously wrong with our system. Oh I forgot, he’s already an MEP and leader of a party.
- (10) A wholly intentional lack of investment in education, while we’re at it.... proles don’t need to think, just to do and believe what they’re told, usually via the laughable, mental-age-of nine pages of the Stun.
- (11) It’s a tragic story of the degradation of British politics and moral values.

But within this perceived crisis of confidence, allegations of media bias surface frequently, serving to dissolve potential points of fixation by blurring any certainties and shifting what we might term the locus of responsibility for lies. Example (12) targets an individual journalist who “attacks” Nuttall, but use of the negatively-connoted term “likes” reveals this to be a complaint against the media in general. This commentator also places reporting on Nuttall within the context of reports about Trump, and the supposed “attacks” on him in the US and world media, thus building an association between UKIP and Trump, on the one hand, and the bi-ased media, on the other.

- (12) As with Trump the likes of Steel [journalist] have wasted no time in jumping up screaming LIAR! while pointing the finger of blame without waiting for all the facts to come out.

In general, then, the *Independent*'s readers understand this politician's lies as broadly symptomatic of a wider crisis: a crisis in trust, in public life, in government, in the economy, linked to a crisis in values and in culture. For some, this has led to the emergence of “extreme” solutions which, though not equivalent to the crisis itself, nonetheless coexist with it in a morbid symbiosis. The stance adopted is characterised by critical distance, and these articulations are relegated to the theoretical plane. Claims of media bias also show how each side tries to destabilise the other's position and dissolve articulations. On this shifting landscape, the different lies in question seem to loom larger or smaller according to the reader's political perspective, and articulations are often transient, dissolved by allegations of political corruption or media bias.

2.3 Closing down the discussion

One theme that comes to the fore sporadically here is the discussion around what might be termed the “strong moral line”. Some *Independent* readers do indeed hold up the importance of truthfulness in public life as an absolute value, in a bolder attempt to establish a fixed point. However, these arguments generally occur in a particular sequence, in which writers make strong claims about the need for truth, but these are immediately contested by others, who point to the political use/misuse of truth claims. One typical example is (13), in which one reader attacks UKIP's legitimacy, asserting “honesty and truth” as positive values that can guide political choices.

- (13) UKIP's leader is proving every day that his party don't require facts, because apparently honesty and the truth are alien concepts to him.

A second commentator immediately takes issue with this, raising the idea that the concepts of “truth” and “fact” are just weapons used by the establishment (14):

- (14) The whole concept of “truth” and “fact” is a libtard [sic] EU invention aimed at keeping the common man out of work while scroungers swan around on the dole.

However, a third reader takes up this idea and reduces it to absurdity. This receives no further response:

- (15) I take it you believe someone insisting that there is an important difference between truth and falsehood is obviously an idealistic lefty. And probably an elitist to boot.

This retort has the effect of closing down the debate about truth. Since there is no shared acceptance of “truth” as a fixed point, the exchange ends in deadlock.

In other typical sequences, the discussion dissolves rapidly from reason to emotion. For example, one prolific commentator (“UK Mortician”) writes a long list of discreditable facts about UKIP, beginning as set out below (16), but ending with a direct insult addressed to the previous writer:

- (16) It’s a fact that Nuttall lied about Hillsboro’, about playing for Tranmere, about having a PhD (...). You deluded moron!

This is countered by “English Heart”, who ignores the “facts” but responds to the “abuse” in an equally insulting manner:

- (17) I like the way you banter abuse around like a five year old bully boy. Nice!

The exchange is then closed down by “Kropotkin”, who simply dismisses “English Heart” as unworthy of attention:

- (18) What the hell are you blathering about?

In the various sequences found on this board, it is noticeable that the sequences point to two main ways of shutting down a discussion of “truth” and “facts”: by asserting that “truth” and “facts” are something that elites use to exploit others (as in (13)–(15)); and by using insults, thereby reducing a (fairly) rational argument to a slanging match (as in (16)–(18)). In fact, a large number of insults, ranging from the subtle to the obscene, are directed at Nuttall, other politicians, other readers, and at the public in general, in the course of the *Independent’s* entries. Among these, “liar” is a common epithet, but the fact that it is usually combined with other unpleasant categorizations goes some way to lessen its potency. It is often grouped with straightforward insults (“twerps”, “scum”), and negative characteristics (in particular, allegations of racism or ignorance) as well as derogatory collectives (bag

of, bunch of). Finally, a considerable number of the comments echoing Nuttall's claims peppered through these readers' pages is humorous in tone, and since the overall tone is generally light rather than vitriolic, they tend rather to defuse political antagonism than to heighten it, and to dissolve fixed articulations.

On balance, it is evident that as far as wider articulations are concerned, critical voices link the theme of UKIP politicians as liars both to the "alternative fact" theme (evoking a network of delegitimation) and to general issues of media bias and social disaffection with politics (suggesting social critique rather than an operative political logic). Despite the powerful undercurrent of discourses articulating lying with politicians in general, the tendency to adopt a distanced stance and complicate the issue of truth/lies makes it harder to perceive where any firm political lines can be drawn. In other words, pervasive articulations between "lies" and a generalised "crisis of confidence" discourse complicate the search for fixed points of reference.

3. Truth and lies in the *Mail Online*

Readers of the middle-market *Mail Online* indulge in vociferous altercations on the subject at hand, producing discourses which blend either commitment or disaffection with class and regional identity issues. These readers show more inclination than *Independent* readers to respond to the story on a personal level. Importantly for the present paper, they build their reformulations of the issues in terms of absolutes, enshrining truth and lies uncritically as points of absolute reference to structure their discourses.

3.1 Humanising the political

The original news article in the *Mail* dwells on the human interest of the scene in which Nuttall sobs as he admits lying about losing friends in the Hillsborough disaster, and the readers are strongly inclined to react to the emotional aspect of this story. This ties in with the notion of politics as a form of entertainment centring on personalities, or even celebrities, evident in today's highly mediated political culture (Wheeler 2013). Nuttall's tears are the subject of comments that express sympathy, but also scorn, frustration and disgust. For some, Nuttall's tears reveal genuine human qualities, suggesting a positive association (compunction – truth – honesty) (19).

- (19) The first politician I've ever seen apologise when found out for a mistruth. I'd prefer this sort of politician to the regular lie, lie, lie even when confronted with irrefutable evidence.

But for others, the interest in this emotional/behavioural aspect is underpinned by issues of masculinity, rather than ethical issues around telling lies. A huge number of comments link Nuttall's confession with weakness, either expressing irritation bordering on aggression (20), contempt (21), or sarcasm in the form of mock sympathy.

- (20) What is it with everyone welling up. It drives me nuts. A quivering bottom lip after you have made a complete and utter + + + of yourself does nothing for me, other than make me want to kick them in the shins.
- (21) Can you imagine this weeping wimp facing up to Putin if his pathetic little party ever came to power?

In a sense, the tears stand out as a landmark in the discussion here, serving as a kind of strong distraction, an embodied reality that shuts down debate on the moral question of truth. It is interesting that one reader who asserts "To be honest, this member of the electorate finds the crying less of a problem than the lying" fails to provoke a response on the comments board, where the argument about the tears proves more generative. For most *Mail* readers, then the question of male tears operates as a fixed point from which a candidate's masculinity (and value as a politician) can be judged: personality takes precedence over an ethical issue, and visible embodied acts hold a peculiar fixating force.

3.2 Simplifying the terms of debate

Perhaps logically, given this "personal turn" in political representation, *Mail* readers also project a major concern with the issue of personal integrity, which they frequently express in terms of "decency" and "honesty". This is more noticeable here than in the *Independent*, perhaps, again, because of the primacy given in middle-market newspapers to human interest, and the correspondingly sharper focus on the personality of individual politicians. The positions adopted here have a strong emotional underpinning. Thus we read, on the positive side, that "Nuttall is a decent man who cares about working people", and "there is only one party that represents decent hard working loyal people and that's UKIP", while a detractor tells us that responses to the Hillsborough disaster are about "decency and respect for those who died, not political gain". One commentator writes "honesty and integrity is the key if you want to win the next election". These terms are neither defined nor problematized in any way, but rather held up as fixed categories

against which other phenomena are to be measured. Associations are proposed with dishonesty linked to newsworthiness and, by association, to media bias (22):

- (22) The real problem is that honesty and integrity does not make TV news or newspaper column inches. Who will be the UK champion for honesty and integrity in all walks of life?

Such comments, which propose straightforward dichotomies between honest people and politicians, and chains of association between dishonest politicians and the media, are typical of the *Mail* comments pages, and suggest the emergence of a kind of conventionalised system of articulation that can operate to structure the way people understand political phenomena, leading to the polarisation of social conflicts.

The role of the media here enters the discourse to generate partial equivalences with the different sides of the question. The pro-UKIP side of the debate (vociferous here) show a strong tendency to lump “the media” together with other institutions as left-wing, dishonest, and therefore part of “the problem” (23):

- (23) I see the way the media is pursuing Mr Nuttall is rather similar to what is happening to Donald Trump in the US. It is the lefty liberal media who are to blame here.

Nuttall’s critics, on the other hand, pick up on such allegations of media bias against UKIP, often using sarcasm combined with insult to distance themselves from the UKIP position (24). Such contributions are rarer here than in the *Independent*, and tend to be vitriolic rather than simply amusing, serving to fix an equivalent rather than dissolve it:

- (24) Oh, naughty globalist media, how COULD they actually tell the truth and expose this fantasist’s lies.

3.3 Firm points of reference

While the readers of the *Independent* elaborate on interrelations between lies, trust and politics, as we have seen above, building complex associative networks, the readers of the *Mail* access more straightforward meanings. For them, the protagonist is “a despicable liar”, “Billy Liar”, a “liar extraordinaire”, and “his nose should be about four yards long by now”. The word “liar” occurs 34 times, and “lying” 22 times in this forum. In fact, both are often used provocatively as an insult, sometimes in combinations such as “lying reptile” and “despicable liar”. The issue of the widespread support for Nuttall despite his lies is not problematized, nor is the problem of achieving an objective assessment of the situation. Rather than

elaborating on the variegated nature of the lies told by members of different political parties, as in the *Independent*, the readers here take “lies” for granted: they offer a hegemonic “common sense” category that everyone is assumed to share. They can thus be used to build a solid platform from which insults can be slung at rival political parties. For this transient online community, at least on one level “truth” and “lies” are presented as fixed categories which can be used to qualify or disqualify other actors. Very often, this leads to rapid exchanges in which the accusations of lying escalate (25).

- (25) As usual – more lies from Nuttall.
As usual – more lies from (previous reader).
And even bigger whoppers from B’Liar [sic].

“B’Liar” (“Blair”) and other instances of wordplay are used to draw associations between Labour and lies (26):

- (26) UKIP stands for everything that Liebour [sic] USED TO, the British working man.

One of the longest and most coherent contributions in the entire *Mail* comments page centres again on the Labour party, alleging that lying has become part of their habitual way of operating. Again, although this contribution is coherent and clearly expressed, the category of “lie” is taken for granted and used principally to discredit the “liar” (27).

- (27) Labour’s lies are a continual stream, ranging from the minor to the really serious. I’ve even had Labour tell me lies about the road I live in, where all I had to do was walk out of my front door and along the road to check they were lying. In the last few years habitual lying has become a way of life for them.

If we consider the statements in (27) carefully, it is almost certain that these “lies” were of many different kinds, but for this reader “lies” constitute a general category, a label used in the assumption that it is a fixed signifier, which can be slung around without needing to be questioned or defined.

One notable difference between the *Mail* and the *Independent* is the special prominence of the Labour party in the *Mail* comments (110 mentions, compared with 32 in the *Independent*). For *Mail* readers, the affair is not simply about Nuttall’s conduct, but about the ideological battle between UKIP and Labour for the working class vote (FT View 2016). Class solidarity and identity issues also surface here to fix articulations, as the discourse revolves around which party truly represents “the working class” or “the British working man” [sic] – a competition generally set up as a dispute between Labour and UKIP. UKIP supporters distance

Labour as “Middle Class Toff Champagne Socialist Labour”, and as “having no fight”. Labour supporters assert their northern or Liverpool identity, or their bonds with Stoke-on-Trent, claiming entitlement through local or class affiliation. Again, accusations of “lying” play a role in the crossfire that ensues between the supporters of the two main parties: “lies” are a category that is not problematized, because it is necessary as a stable point from which readers can problematize something else, namely particular politicians, parties and institutions. Only occasionally are Nuttall’s “lies” relativized, and even this is done bluntly, without elaboration, almost as though mendaciousness could be measured on a simple scale (28):

- (28) I’d prefer this sort of politician to the regular lie, lie, lie even when confronted with irrefutable evidence. We all know every politician lies, and this is a pretty innocuous lie if there is such a thing.

In view of the repeated evidence found here, it is clear that for most *Mail* readers, the category of liar and lying is clear and unproblematic, to the extent that it functions simultaneously as an insult, as a moral condemnation, and as a means of discrediting a political candidate. Although a small amount of gradability appears to exist in the readers’ minds, this is not the subject of further enquiry, but is actually closed down because the nature of the ongoing discussion is such that lying generally has to function as a firm category. What matters here is not the analytical degree of blame, but the attaching of the label to the rival candidate in order to sharpen antagonism. In fact, whether because of the reader profile, or the commitment to the ongoing by-election, UKIP supporters are much more vocal in the *Mail* than in the *Independent*, while at the same time a clearer antagonism to UKIP also emerges, often coalescing around the Labour party or the “left”. Politically motivated insults push the readers into polarised subject positions which take on higher definition as the exchanges develop, and the issue of “truth” and “lies” serves as a reference point to anchor the discourse.

4. Discussion

By examining discourses around one theme, this analysis brings out some of the ways in which the struggle to construct and maintain meaning is conducted on online forums. The combination of discourse theory and discourse analysis in this context has proved productive (Carpentier and de Cleen 2007), and in particular, the concepts of articulation and fixation have offered a way of approaching the seemingly chaotic data from reader comments forums, allowing us to observe how articulations are established or broken, and how the quest for shared or sharable signifiers occurs in discourse (Rear and Jones 2013).

The two forums studied here present a fruitful contrast in this respect. The more theoretical articulations of “lying” with notions of a generalized crisis of confidence, found in the *Independent* forum, offer a degree of sophistication in their diagnosis, but are politically inconclusive. Here, the theme of “lies” merges into pessimistic disaffection with political life. It is a paradox that the ubiquity of lying” leads to the problematisation of “lies” as a category, leaving a shifting landscape on which fixed points are rapidly dissolved. The (mainly moderate and reflexive) *Independent* readers’ contributions float on the level of intellectual critique: a multiplicity of competing discourses is articulated, but the web of meanings is convoluted and unclear. Many readers adopt a distanced stance to the case at hand, and notably, deploy an abundance of strategies for closing down debate. The majority view could be summed up as a logic of disaffection: “both sides are liars, and so are the media” – a view which underpins disillusionment rather than political commitment.

This distancing is very different from the rage expressed by *Mail Online* readers. In the *Mail*, identities become locked into certain categories (i.e. ordinary people, Northerners) and are partially articulated through antagonistic relationships with the “other” (i.e. elites, Southerners) (Carpentier and de Cleen 2007, 287). From these entrenched subject positions, there is a discursive struggle over the meaning of the reference point “lying”, which is sometimes vocalized in terms of quantity/quality (one set of lies is larger or worse than another), and sometimes simply set up in polarity with positive values such as “decency”. Although these participants struggle with the meaning of “lying”, they do not seem to question its fundamental delegitimatory relevance. Just as “crying” takes on a role as a strong signifier, indexing weakness or hypocrisy in an embodied (therefore powerful) way, “lying” is held up as a negative signifier that automatically delegitimizes the actors to which it attaches. In this community, “lying”, like “crying”, carries both meaning and affect into the political sphere. The polarity between “decency” (for example) and “lies” provides a kind of temporary stability from which politicians’ actions can be judged: signs take on meanings in relationship to each other (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), and this more vigorous sign-making establishes firmer dichotomies for political use. In Laclauian terms, “truth” and “lying” are perhaps not in themselves a true nodal point, since they do not bind together an entire system of meanings (Rear and Jones 2013), but rather serve as relatively stable points of reference onto which other signifiers can be fixed to become politically generative. They are discursive “anchors” engaged from another sphere (i.e. an underlying consensual value system that is not problematized by *Mail* readers), which enable forum participants to orientate themselves on a changing landscape. Regarding logics, there is more sign in the *Mail* of a “fantasmatic logic” in operation, in which “the radical contingency of social reality (...) remains in the background” (Glynos

and Howarth 2007, 147–148), and inconvenient facts (such as lies told by one's own side) are suppressed, or at least minimalised.

The meaning of “lies” thus brings a discursive struggle to light (Fairclough 2003). For the *Mail's* Labour supporters, “lying” stands as a fixed point of meaning, a negative signifier associated with UKIP, Trump, the “alt-right”, and the establishment/media. “Lies” associated with establishment politicians and the media mesh with the social imaginary of the establishment conspiracy (Laclau 1990, 2005), in a logic of right-wing anti-elitist populism that is probably bound up with other logics of social homogenisation (Zienkowski 2014) and nostalgic nationalism (Bingham and Conboy 2015). For the *Mail's* Ukippers, too, “lying” is a fixed point, but for them it holds a loose network of articulation with the EU, mainstream politicians, the media and the Labour party. In particular, Nuttall's loyal supporters, faced with a moment of dislocation, are compelled to work up a new discursive representation in order to maintain and defend their pre-existing network of understandings: they generally resort to the simplistic but incontrovertible argument of “bigger lies elsewhere”. “Lying” thus provides a temporary anchor for both sides. The question of which lies are important, or how many lies can be tolerated, “belongs to the ongoing struggle between different discourses to fix the meaning of signs” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 28). Interestingly, the rejection of mainstream politicians/establishment/media by both sides here has some points of overlap, and we can speculate that a stable articulation – a true “point de capiton” – equating the political establishment/system with dishonesty could become more or less hegemonic depending on the extent to which it wins acceptance. In view of contemporary populist movements elsewhere, which coalesce around dissatisfaction with governing elites and a shared sense of crisis (Mudde 2016; Moffitt 2016), this possibility is not just hypothetical.

To conclude, the exchanges on online forums have an ambivalent role in the process of articulation, serving sometimes to destabilise or dissolve fixity, sometimes to reinforce it. Further research is needed to discover more about the effect over time of participation in such forums, about how individuals establish and enact their personal and group identities in relation to the fixing of shared signifiers, and how underlying value systems interact with political allegiances.

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