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What Post-Truth Politics Does to the Belief-Desire Model

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that if the wildly popular expression ‘post-truth politics’ means anything, it describes a political situation in which political speech elicits support from its audience without the public believing it to be true or not (Section 2). As a result, the phenomenon of post-truth (PT), if there is such a thing at all, forces us to move our account of political action away from the standard belief-desire model (BDM) (Section 3). I offer an alternative where attention replaces belief in Section 4.

1 | Introduction

Many political theorists account for political behaviour with what moral psychologists call the belief-desire model (BDM) (Rorty 1997; Craig 2018). In this view, political action is the result of a set of beliefs combined with a set of desires. Although I discuss the BDM in more detail in Section 3, one can already infer that this has had two crucial implications for both political practice and political theory: firstly, the assumption that politicians produce relevant political actions when and if their discourses are believed. In what follows, I call the bulk of the communication emanating from political agents (politicians, political organisations and propagandists), ‘political discourse’. Secondly, that the way to deal with bad political discourse—the way to prevent it from producing bad political actions—is to refute it. But what if the belief-desire model was wrong? What if there were kinds of discourses that produce political action without being believed? Would it mean that our usual strategies to ensure sound politics would be powerless? And if so, how should we supplement them?

In order to test this hypothesis and ascertain whether the BDM remains valid, I examine the phenomenon of post-truth (PT) politics. This paper operates on the assumption that there is some salient phenomenon about our times that is captured by this expression, and that ‘post-truth politics’ operates differently from ‘normal politics’. Taking the novel aspect of post-truth politics seriously can help understand how and why it was allowed to

take the mainstream world of politics and political theory by surprise and why it remains so difficult to counter. My hypothesis is that this is because our conceptual toolbox is ill-equipped to handle the post-truth phenomenon, mostly because it is too committed to the BDM. In this paper, I argue that the current era of post-truth politics forces us to recognise the limits of the BDM because post-truth discourses are precisely such discourses: They produce political action, yet are invulnerable to refutation because they are not, in the first place, believed.

In Section 2, I begin by arguing that the best way to cash out the expression ‘post-truth politics’ is as a political situation in which political discourses elicit support without the public believing them to be true or not. In Section 3, I explore the most instructive consequence of this view: namely, that the phenomenon of post-truth politics forces us to move our account of political action away from the standard belief-desire model (Section 3). In Section 4, I offer an alternative model in which action results not from belief and desire but from saturated attention. I argue that post-truth politics operates on the level of attention not of belief: post-truth discourses saturate our attention, and in so doing, they induce relevant political actions in their audience without the public having to believe such discourses to be true. I conclude that defending open societies against post-truth politics involves adjusting to the discovery that political power can be achieved without necessitating belief and reforming the many democratic practices that took the BDM for granted.

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2 | If 'Post-Truth Politics' Means Anything...

In this section, I propose a working definition of post-truth politics as a political situation in which some discourses produce required effects without being believed. I begin by exploring the requirements that any working definition of post-truth politics should fulfil and confronting these requirements to the existing working definitions of post-truth. I continue by proposing my own working definition. I end by discussing some well-known events and pointing out how they are best understood under my proposed definition.

2.1 | Problems of Definition

This section seeks to formulate the intuition that is expressed in the neologism 'post-truth politics' (as well as in other aspects of the linguistic practices that surround it) and to grasp the reasons of its wild success over the last 15 years. In short, I assume that there is an idea that did not find any appropriate expression until the neologism 'post-truth politics' was coined and that this idea has become intuitively salient and broadly meaningful to a wide linguistic community. This is, admittedly, a fairly speculative strategy, for three reasons. Firstly, neologisms are notoriously tricky. For one thing, their introduction into our linguistic practices needs only to respond to a *perceived* linguistic lack, not to a *real* one. For another, we must be wary of what linguists call 'hypostatisation', the tendency to assume that words track things and by extension, that *new* words track *new* things (Leisi 1975; Lipka 1977; Schmid 2008, 8–9). Secondly, in recent years, Michael Hannon (2023) has argued that the expression 'post-truth' does not express a real phenomenon as much as it constitutes a power move, a way of delegitimising opponents. Mostly, Hannon argues, this is because it is implausible to argue that people do not care about the truth. In the rest of this paper, I argue that it is far from implausible—in fact, normal—for agents to be motivated by discourses without any corresponding concern for truth and that this is most visibly the case in several instances of post-truth politics. Thirdly, I do assume that there is a point in taking seriously the omnipresent use of the phrase 'post-truth politics' *even if one holds that there is no such thing*. We should at least explore why the linguistic practice of referring to post-truth politics is useful and around, and whether there is a conceptualisation of it that makes it a plausible notion, with the proviso that although it almost certainly does not capture a new fact, it almost certainly captures a new insight.

There are several additional reasons why we should wish to take the phrase seriously. Firstly, one should never let a good anomaly go to waste; it is from them that progress comes. New phenomena are rare and if they ever succeed in making themselves heard, it is to be expected that it will be in such things as changing linguistic practices. There are also some factors specific to the case of 'post-truth politics' that make me optimistic about our abilities to avoid the hypostatic fallacy. For example, linguists tell us that in the case of the prefix 'post', 'institutionalisation' (that is to say, the mainstreaming of a neologism) is more closely dependent on the (perceived) existence of a new phenomenon than in other cases of neologisms. In the specific case of 'post-truth', linguist Ewelina Prazmo argues that 'the changing political landscape called for novel ways of linguistic

representation and created the need for "post-truth".' (2019, 393). I shall therefore assume that there is a newly salient phenomenon (not necessarily a new phenomenon) called 'post-truth politics' and a need to discuss it.

I now return to the initial question: What intuition does the institutionalisation of the neologism 'post-truth politics' express? Taking a neologism seriously means looking for what it captures that was not captured before. One must therefore steer clear of accounts of post-truth that explain it away in terms of more familiar concepts (such as 'lies', 'fake news' or 'errors' for example), for these are deflationary strategies calculated to deny the novelty targeted by the neologism. If they turn out to be correct, this should be because competing interpretations have failed, not because one commits to deflationism from the outset. So far, these accounts are unfortunately the only ones available. Almost every piece that addresses post-truth opens with a working definition of the term. The history of those attempts at definition has two phases. Between 1992—when the term was first coined to discuss the Balkan wars—and 2016—when it was named 'word of the year' by the Oxford dictionaries—we saw a range of more or less provisional definitions (Keyes 2004; The Economist 2016; d'Ancona 2017). In the second phase (2016 to the present day), we observe a narrowing of the scope covered by these working definitions, with new definitions more heavily reliant on the one offered by the Oxford Dictionaries:

"Post-truth is an adjective defined as relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

(<https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>)

The Oxford definition, although very influential, is unhelpful for at least two reasons: First, because it seems to imply that there indeed is a way for 'objective facts to shape public opinion' without being mediated by 'belief' or 'emotion' (where emotion remains assumed, in the Oxford definition, as the cause for our false beliefs). Secondly, and relatedly, because the Oxford definition (as well as the general consensus) uncritically cashes out 'truth' in the expression 'post-truth politics' in terms of correctness. In this reading, post-truth politics is a politics where people no longer have correct beliefs in which false beliefs are more widespread than before and perhaps even more widespread than true beliefs, either because post-truth practitioners are themselves mistaken or because they are liars. The upshot, either way, is that those who listen to post-truth politicians believe their mistakes or lies and thereby aim at the truth, but fail. Crucially, this view does not entertain the possibility that in post-truth politics, one no longer *aims* at truth at all. This leaves the followers of the Oxford definition before a problem: There is a sense of 'truth' which their account of post-truth can accommodate, but it does so at the cost of suppressing the thrust that informed the institutionalisation of the neologism and overlooking the fact that competent speakers ostensibly aim at something new when they use the prefix 'post-'.

This kind of deflationism should worry not just the philosopher but the linguist too: It empties the prefix 'post-' of its substance

in ways that violate the intention of competent speakers and linguistic communities. What's so 'post-' about a situation so described? We cannot seriously be suggesting that there was a significant enough stretch of time where we were not prone to mistakes, false beliefs and the influence of emotions. Are we therefore merely tracing an incremental increase in falsehoods and miscasting it as a discrete jump? But the use of the prefix 'post' is not warranted by just any old incremental change. To earn it, any incremental account would have to do two things: it would have to account for the incremental change itself (usually, this is done by pointing to the influence of social media), and secondly, it would have to give an account of the misperception of this incremental change as a *break*, expressed in the use of the prefix 'post-'. There is an additional problem in the case of the expression 'post-truth politics', to do with the fact that politics, however we construe it, is something that inevitably involves debates and disagreement: It is baked into the nature of politics that some people hold false belief or utter falsehoods, this is what all the debating is about. If post-truth politics is a time of political falsehoods, we might as well call it politics.

The same goes for those who explain PT in terms of 'lies' (The Economist 2016; McIntyre 2018), 'bullshit' (Cassam 2021), 'fake news', 'propaganda' or 'self-deception' (Sleat 2022, 694). All of those rely on belief, or if upon further analysis they don't (like it has been claimed in the cases of bullshit and self-deception), their aiming at something else is precisely what needs explaining. This shows how deflationary the Oxford definition and its epigones remain: All they do is say that in an era of post-truth politics, there are a lot of false claims and mistaken beliefs around. This is hardly taking the neologism seriously.

But maybe the incremental hypothesis should be treated more generously. Maybe, what it aims at is the fact that in post-truth politics, politicians lie not only more often but more boldly too: Political lies have become barefaced lies. But, you will note, this amounts to granting my point, because if lies are barefaced, it is because the liars are not afraid of being found out as liars. And this raises the crucial question: how do barefaced liars obtain support even from those who recognize them as liars? I argue below that post-truth politicians do not bother to cover their lies because they trust that their discourses can get them what they want (power or political support) not by being believed (the way lies do) but *regardless of whether they are being believed*.

2.2 | A Proposal

The current definitions of post-truth politics are therefore deflationary, conservative and philosophically uninteresting. All of this, it seems, because they entertain too narrow an understanding of the kind of 'truth' that has allegedly been relegated to the past, that has been made 'post-'. In this view, 'truth' in the expression 'post-truth' means 'correctness'. It is a property that some beliefs have and some don't, and its opposite is error so that a politics of error can suffice to qualify as a 'post-truth politics'. In order to escape this kind of deflationism, we must revise the idea that we must cash out 'truth' in the expression 'post-truth politics' as correctness.

As I mentioned above, doing justice to the neologism involves recognising a significant shift, perhaps a break, between earlier

times and ours. Let us consider these earlier times. They certainly did not distinguish themselves by their avoidance of lies. What is more plausible is that in such 'pre-post-truth' politics (if there ever was such a thing), political speakers agreed (or pretended to agree) to subject themselves to the standard of truth: they played 'the game of truth'. In the language I used above, their political utterances 'aimed' at truth. In this hypothesis, post-truth politics is different from these earlier times because it is the politics that doesn't subject itself to the standard of truth, an era in which we no longer bother to aim at the truth. This gives us a second requirement for any valid account of post-truth politics: It will have to cash out 'truth' as a *standard* of discourse, not as correctness. Post-truth politics is a politics in which the standard of value for discourse is not truth.

One way to think of how discourses are effective even without being believed is to think not of what they say but of what they do. 'Post-truth' characterises a certain kind of political speech. The basic function of political speech is to produce political support. I mean this in the most uncontroversial way: Politicians produce political speech in a bid to achieve 'something'. I think we can conventionally call this 'something' 'support', but the point is indifferent to how 'support' is to be cashed out (as legitimization, persuasion, intimidation, obedience, etc.). The point, rather, is that political speech is functional or perlocutionary: it is used to affect the listener's actions. In this context, it is pretty uncontroversial to assume that post-truth political speech aims at achieving the goals that political speech in general means to achieve. Combine this with the idea that we should cash out 'truth' in the expression 'post-truth' as 'the standard of truth' and not as 'correctness', and this yields the following account of post-truth politics: 'post-truth politics is a political situation in which speech elicits support from its audience regardless of their taking it to be true or false'. I will be holding on to this account for the remainder of this paper.

2.3 | Some Empirical Evidence in Favour of This Proposal

This is admittedly a controversial idea: How can discourses produce effects without being (Our resistance to admit this, of course, is an expression of our commitment to the BDM). But there is also empirical support for this account of post-truth. Let me turn to a few illustrations.

2.3.1 | Trump Versus Dominion

The first has to do with how practitioners of post-truth politics present themselves. Here is one example among many. In the context of the wider conspiracy theories surrounding the US presidential election of 2020, Sidney Powell, one of Donald Trump's lawyers, had declared that Dominion voting machines had contributed to falsifying the results of the election in favour of Joe Biden. Powell claimed that 'upon instructions' from Hugo Chávez, Dominion had created a falsifying program which had subsequently been used by Chávez in Venezuela and Biden in 2020. She additionally alleged that Dominion maintained close links with the Clinton Foundation and the George Soros organisation (two darlings of far-right conspiracists). As the reader might recall, Dominion's response has been very robust and they filed a libel complaint against Powell and others for the sum of

\$1.3 billion (many of the cases are still pending, although one of them, against the Fox News Corporation, already resulted in a \$787,000 settlement). The line of defence chosen by Powell and her team deserves our attention. It appealed to the very distinction I have just outlined between truth as correctness and truth as a standard to suggest that post-truth speech is not subject to the rules of libel because it is not subject to the standard of truth at all. Trump's legal team argued boldly that 'even assuming, *arguendo*, that each of the statements alleged in the Complaint could be proved true or false, no reasonable person [can] conclude that the statements were truly statements of fact'. (https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/AG/election/118_Defs_WhitmerBensons_mtn_for_lv_for_supp_briefing.pdf?rev=04ecec34820475fa521b11483bf82a3; US Dominion Inc. et al. 2023). The deposition further referred to a legal precedent which stated that 'potentially defamatory statements in the guise of statements of fact uttered during a bitter political debate are particularly likely to be understood as rhetorical opinion' (Sack 1999: § 4:3:1[A], [B]). In other words, Powell's legal position is that these were claims that were not subjected to the standard of truth. It is worth noting that this is a trope that has been omnipresent in Putin's Russia as well: Observers have long insisted that it is not false beliefs that support Putin's rule but the carefully engineered disinterest for the truth (Yaffa 2021, 65 and 229; Pomerantsev 2017, ix).

Powell's legal case is obviously faulty on many counts, but the distinction to which it appeals is philosophically valid and must be taken seriously. The practitioners of post-truth politics (like Powell and Trump) consider themselves to be uttering 'rhetorical opinions' (Trump has long spoken of 'truthful hyperbole' (1987)) which, unlike lies or fake news proper, are not subjected to the standard of truth. In other words, a 'rhetorical opinion' is a declaration one makes in order to produce a specific perlocutionary effect, and one expects this effect to follow whether this declaration is believed or not. I opened this paper by raising concerns about the ability of open societies to counteract the rise of post-truth politics. We have here the core of the unaccountability that seems to underlie the power base of many post-truth practitioners: Epistemic norms don't apply there; they enjoy unfettered epistemic freedom and unaccountability.

2.3.2 | *Seriously, Not Literally*

Another illustration has to do with the way the public debate acknowledges that political discourse can achieve its perlocutionary goals without being believed. I have in mind one trope among many others, namely the idea that we must take post-truth discourses 'seriously but not literally'. Famously, political journalist Salena Zito declared: 'the press takes [Trump] literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally' (Zito 2016). Her point is that the impact of Trump's statements on his base is not dependent on their perceived truth-value. Relatedly, one could point to the old adage that there is no bad publicity (often reiterated by Trump in his social media posts) and the way it has become the point of focus for an entire discussion on the role of the media and fact-checking organisations for distributing the message of post-truth politicians; it has become widely acknowledged that believing a statement to be false doesn't amount to nullifying its effect (Nyhan and Reifler 2010), rather, it might even be that (in some

cases at least) the net effect of pointing out the falsehood of a statement is to increase the impact of said statement (Rutenberg 2016). The point here is not so much to do with the empirical question concerning the conditions under which fact-checking backfires, but rather that the concept of a 'backfiring effect' in fact-checking (Ecker et al. 2020) is a tacit endorsement of the crucial distinction that my account of post-truth politics rests on: the distinction between perlocutionary political effectiveness and belief. A fact believed to be false may still have political force.

3 | Post-Truth Politics Challenges the Belief-Desire Model

If my proposed definition of post-truth politics is correct, it requires that we revise the BDM. This section establishes in what terms the phenomenon of post-truth politics challenges the BDM before considering some possible strategies one might use to defend the BDM against these challenges. This will allow me to extract a set of requirements for how best to correct the BDM, which I will outline in Section 4.

3.1 | BDM Versus PT

I have argued that we should see post-truth as connected to a kind of speech that motivates action without relying on belief. This problematises the use of the belief-desire model of action (BDM) for politics. Although the formulation of the BDM is fairly recent, it was always only meant to make explicit a relatively widespread folk-assumption. It is therefore not meant as a philosophical innovation. Rather, most of the philosophers and political scientists who discuss it endorse it as a matter of intuition. As Stephen Turner argues:

"The belief-desire model of human action and its variant, the belief-desire-reason model (which is usually understood to be implied by the belief-desire model itself), are basic to a large number of fields, notably cognitive science, where it appears as folk psychology, economics, rational-choice sociology, and political science, and also appears everywhere decision theory and game theory are employed, as well as the field of philosophy of action. In a sense, nothing could be more secure than this theory, or more fundamental."

(Turner 2018, 290–291)

As Turner points out, the model is, most importantly, meant to formulate the common-sense account of action and motivation (B. Williams 1973; Smith 1995; Davidson 2001). It is important for our purposes that it is a model quasi-universally used by philosophers, sociologists and political theorists to explain both individual and collective action. As Davis and colleagues argue, 'the belief-desire model is also perhaps the most common folk-psychology of human behaviour' (Davis et al. 2019, 64, for authors who also identify the BDM as the common view across laymen and academics, see Buechler 1993; R. Williams 1995; Oliver and Johnston 2005; Mercier 2020).¹

The BDM suggests that, taken together, any two items in the triad belief, desire and action are sufficient and necessary to yield the third (Davidson 2001). In the context of political behaviour, the BDM is used both implicitly (especially in public discourse, punditry, etc.) and explicitly (in academic political science, see Elster 2016, 2017; Davis et al. 2019; Hortal 2025). Its uses are usually of two kinds. The first is to *predict* future political behaviour. There, belief and desire are taken as given and used together to predict action (e.g., Klein 2018; Turner 2018; Bittner 2001; Barnfield 2025). For example, a desire for social justice combined with a belief that candidate A will successfully enact policies that effectively promote social justice should yield a vote for A (all things being equal otherwise). The second is *explicative*. There, it is the action and either the desire or the belief, that are given, and we *explain* the action by deducing the third (e.g., Brennan and Hamlin 2008). Take a recent example, and its accompanying and widespread, analysis: In April 2026, the Hungarian electorate voted Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party out of office (action) because (so goes the commentary) they desired an end of corruption (desire). One deduces that the electorate believed that Fidesz was corrupt (belief).

Let me note that although the BDM is merely a 'model'—which implies that it recognises that nonideal contingencies might make experience deviate from it—it still needs to interact in satisfactory ways with experience. That is to say, it must deliver explanations and predictions that are falsifiable by practice. I shall argue that PT delivers such falsification and that this cannot be explained away by appeal to the difference between a model and the empirical order.

Post-truth politics, just like other kinds of political discourses, is about action too: It motivates things such as protesting, further speech, voting, donating, turning up at rallies etc. Yet, in the definition that I provided above, it violates the BDM. We must confront the following dilemma therefore: either we satisfy the intuition in favour of the BDM or the one in favour of a strong account of PT.

3.2 | Some Attempts at Reconciling PT With the BDM

I will argue below that this conflict cannot be resolved and that we shall have to give up the BDM but let me briefly consider some possible attempts at reconciling them first.

3.2.1 | The Defences From Vagueness

One might argue that the vagueness of the BDM could make room for some sort of reconciliation. For example, there is flexibility in the notion of belief if one detaches belief from truth. My account so far presupposes that belief aims at truth, or, as Bernard Williams says: 'to believe that p is to believe that p is true. To believe that so and so is one and the same as to believe that thing is true'. (B. Williams 1973, 137) This is, according to Williams, the folk-psychological view, and Williams and others (e.g., Velleman 2009) only took themselves to be formulating it (as well as endorsing it). One could conceivably save the BDM from my objections by denying that belief does indeed aim at truth. In his discussion of the BDM, David Velleman points out that much hangs on what is meant by belief,

and in particular, on whether belief aims at truth and in what sense (2009, 244 ff.). If belief does not aim at truth, then it is not committed to the standard of truth in the first place and so the BDM need not conflict with PT. But this strategy has unpalatable consequences. It would involve weakening the notion of belief so much as to disable the BDM anyway by making belief unable to play its role in explaining action at all: If belief doesn't aim at truth, desire on its own should be enough to explain action (Zalabardo 2019).

Alternately, one may admit that belief as it figures in the BDM does aim at truth, but that truth is not to be cashed out as correspondence, but in more pragmatic terms: To believe A is to believe that assuming A will not lead us into problems. But this is circular. Indeed, those authors who embrace a pragmatic definition of truth do so by presupposing the BDM: to be true is to be actionable. Such authors argue that one should define truth as whatever it is that, in conjunction with desire, explains action. This is fine, but it explains truth, not action.

There is a third area of vagueness surrounding the BDM, where vagueness is not about 'belief' but about 'action'. The BDM is a model meant to account for 'action', but 'action' could mean many things. As I argued above, it seems to me that post-truth political discourses motivate action in the sense relevant to the BDM (i.e.: action as political support), but one might object that this is not the case. One might say instead that the BDM explains not action in general but 'rational action' (see Wooldrige 2003) and that actions that do not conform to the BDM should simply be dismissed as irrational. This would mean that there are not one but two requirements for an action in the full sense. The first, which PT satisfies, is that one undertakes an act (with 'act' taken here in the broadest sense). The second is that this act be agential in a robust sense ('rational'). With a bit of engineering, one might claim that this is not the case in the case of post-truth as I define it because in such cases, one acts irrationally, and the BDM was never meant to account for irrational acts. But this defence too suffers from circularity, for it is hard to see why one would assume that acting without belief is irrational unless the BDM is already presupposed in one's definition of rationality (I develop this objection at further length in Section 4). Doing so would reduce the BDM to a mere postulation, without any explanatory power.

3.2.2 | Defence From Degrees of Belief

An alternative possible defence would refer to degrees of beliefs. One could conceivably argue that what really is happening in post-truth politics, or what we refer to when we talk about post-truth, is the fact that actions are the result of a desire or a set of desires and (at least) a belief *of some degree*. In this context, beliefs would come in degrees (often called 'credence'), and belief in post-truth discourses is a weak degree of belief. This would explain how post-truth is believed even if its mendaciousness weakens this belief. There are several reasons why this doesn't look appealing. First, it seems that accepting that beliefs come in degrees will remove much of the explanatory power that is attributed to beliefs in the standard version of the BDM: The lesser the degree of the belief(s) involved in motivating an action, the more about the action is left unexplained by the BDM, or—which amounts to the same thing—the more of the action is explained by

desire alone. For, no matter how much ‘moral or pragmatic encroachment’—the fact that our ability to access certain knowledge tends to contribute to how relevant we find that knowledge (Kvanvig 2011; Greco 2020)—one adds to the mix, and even if beliefs came in degrees, actions do not (Andersson and Green Werkmäster 2021, 535).² This means that something will have to fill the gap between a full-fledged action and a weak degree of belief. This could be a third thing (thereby undermining the BDM anyway, by conceding that on its own, it doesn’t explain action), or this could be desire itself, but this amounts to assuming that desire can be sufficient to be the sole *explanans* for action. The belief-desire model explains nothing if any degree of belief, no matter how small, qualifies.

3.2.3 | The Reactivation Defence

Finally, let me propose what I think would be the most promising strategy for reconciling PT and the BDM. One might wish to say that even in PT discourses construed the way I have, the BDM remains: After all, perhaps those discourses create *desires*, not beliefs, and perhaps their doxastic impact is merely to activate pre-existing or latent beliefs in the listener (on a similar idea in the context of dog-whistles, see Khoo 2017). Once those beliefs are reactivated and once those desires are fired up, the BDM will do the rest and action will result. For example, one might imagine a post-truth politician appealing to repressed or implicit racist prejudices latent or buried in their audiences. This would not count as creating beliefs, but it would still lead to action by way of beliefs in the ways the BDM can explain (the beliefs would be the prejudices one already harboured, not those introduced by the politician). There is much appeal to such a view, and it is impossible for me to fully refute it here (I provide an extended argument against it in Chouraqui 2025). For now, I would point out two reasons why one should be wary of embracing it: First, such an account, although more sophisticated than the deflationary accounts of PT that I rejected in Section 2, is also suspiciously deflationary because it minimises the novel character of the post-truth phenomenon: discourses that produce emotions or desires and reactivate implicit beliefs are nothing new. Secondly, such an account would have to explain in detail what ‘reactivating’ a pre-existing belief means. And there, it confronts a double bind. Such an account must *both* maintain a distinction between ‘activating’ and ‘constituting’ belief (the account only works if what *constitutes* the belief is a latent prejudice) *and* construe activation as causally relevant to the action. The BDM would be idle if the implicit biases were enough to produce the action and yet the alternative would fail if it involved that by becoming explicit, biases became beliefs. This can perhaps be done, but as I argued elsewhere (Chouraqui 2025), doing so adequately will almost inevitably appeal to the notion of attention in ways that make this account look very much like my final proposal: a reactivated belief is a belief that is present to our attention. If so, it is not (or not only) the belief, but the attention, that does the causal work, and this suggests that the reactivation strategy may, after all, violate the BDM too.

I conclude that PT conflicts with at least *some aspect or other* of the BDM and that some readjustment of our concepts is in order, and the BDM will at least need to be revised, probably beyond recognition.

4 | An Alternative: The Attention-Saturation Model

In this final section, I propose that this revision can be achieved by replacing belief with ‘saturated attention’. I argue, with support from enactivist arguments, that when our attention field is saturated, action follows, and that this need not be mediated by belief. I then observe the attention model in action and observe that it does fit PT behaviours as well as other traditionally puzzling cases, such as the emotional response to fiction, dancing and playing. I conclude that it is a model fit for purpose and a serious competitor to the BDM.

4.1 | Why Attention?

There are good initial reasons to think of PT in terms of attention. For one thing, it is widely accepted that PT discourses aim at the monopolisation of public attention. By and large, PT politicians are attention grabbers. It also appears that in a PT context, discourses are distributed because of their ability to ‘go viral’ rather than their truth value. Maria Ressa, a journalist and Nobel Peace-Prize laureate, argues that in the case of the Philippines, the strategy of the dictatorship of Rodrigo Duterte was a matter of ‘suffocation of our minds by junk, a loss of clarity of thought and a lack of concentration’ (Ressa 2022, 138, see also 173). Similarly, Steve Bannon, whom we must recognise as one of the *de facto* theorists of post-truth politics, famously described his strategy in the following terms: ‘the real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit’. (see Ulusöy et al. 2021). The ‘zone’ left unspecified by Bannon is the attentional field. What Bannon calls zone-flooding is what I will call attention-saturation. The reason zone-flooding is Bannon’s response to journalism is that it disables the journalistic insistence on truth not by replacing some true beliefs with false beliefs (Bannon’s post-truth politics does not function the way lies do) but by making the concern for truth impractical or impracticable. The result is double: first, a sense of universal distraction: The sheer amount of ‘shit’ makes it hard for journalists and the public to fact-check everything. But it is worth noting that this only helps if we assume that a statement unchecked is by default effective. So the most important point is that in a saturated environment, critical faculties are numbed: Zone-flooding can achieve the genuine post-truth moment in which statements themselves, because their saturative quality, distract us from even judging them in terms of their truth-value. What Bannon intuitively is a fairly complex hermeneutic phenomenology based on three premises:

- First, that our attention field is limited.
- Second, that engaging with any statements means dividing our attention between the semantic content of the statement (we try to concentrate on what it says) and its truth-value (we try to critically assess whether it is true).
- Third, that the critical moment follows from the semantic moment, so that if the semantic moment occupies our entire attentional field, there will be no attention left for the critical one.

The more attention the semantic content demands, the less attention is left for the truth-value question. This is what has recently been referred to as a ‘premium on the crazy’: Outrageous statements are more likely to be politically

rewarded because they are less likely to be critically assessed. This does not mean that they are believed; simply that they are not tested for truth (Chourauqui 2025).

You will note that this makes attention a central part of the PT mechanism. My argument from now on will be that such content can, on its own and without being believed, trigger action.

4.2 | Attention Saturation Is Threshold-Like

This should motivate us to investigate the attention hypothesis further, but if it is to get off the ground, it will have to confront the threshold requirement. As I mentioned in Section 3, actions do not come in degrees. One of the assumptions of the BDM is that belief should be similar: either we believe X or we don't. How could a 99% credence lead into an action which after all will be carried out 100% or not at all? This is the reason why those epistemologists that contest the threshold-like structure of belief (those who embrace degrees of belief for example) either tend to contest the BDM (if beliefs are a matter of more or less, then it is hard to see how they can amount to the threshold-like shift from inaction to action, see Jackson 2020 and above, Section 3.2.2) or maintain the threshold-like structure of belief in other ways (e.g., Mandelbaum 2014).

Here is our problem therefore: By removing belief from the account of motivation, we have also lost the threshold-likeness that made belief so suitable to explaining action in the first place. Whatever will replace belief should be able to account for the passing of a threshold that occurs when an action is undertaken. The usual alternatives (such as 'wishes', 'hopes', etc., explored by Velleman 2009, 245) all seem to remain too 'fine-grained' and incremental to provide the threshold-like structure we need. If we must replace belief in the account of action, we must replace it with something that is threshold-like in the right way. I suggest that the notion of attention contains the resources needed to meet the threshold requirement.

Although it is likely the case that attention also comes in degrees, there is a consensus among psychologists and philosophers to say that it is also, for each individual one of us, a limited resource (Shapiro 2001, this is also a premise I attribute to Bannon, as premise 1 above). We are endowed, as the phrase goes, with an 'attention field', something which has boundaries (however fuzzy). It is because of these boundaries, for example, that the practice of paying attention involves *distributing* attention, selecting and prioritising, or that attention is said to be 'selective' (Tipper et al. 1992).

Now, here is what matters for our purposes: to be bounded means to afford saturation. Psychologists talk of 'absorption' or 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 2014) to refer to this sense of fullness of our attention field, and, as I discuss below, they very much connect it to action. For my part, in order to insist on its negative implications (the fact that it is selective and exclusionary because it is scarce), I will talk about attention 'saturation': Attention is saturated when it no longer has any room for new input. The bounded structure of attention makes it a valuable resource because it is quite unique in being both 'fine-grained' (we can pay more or less attention to a given object)

and threshold-like (there is a distinct shift between distributed and saturated attention) (Jackson 2020).

Let me now attempt to show that once our attention field is saturated, the threshold past which action is motivated is also reached. As I mentioned above with reference to Bannon's zone-flooding tactics, there are reasons to look at PT discourses this way: they are usually strident and extreme and this seems to favour saturation—extreme thoughts and images mobilise more attentional resources—and everything takes place as if in their presence our critical abilities are numbed: We no longer can pay attention to reflexive questions such as 'hang on, is this true?' In general, and almost by definition, such 'hang on' questions require attentional resources that are not available if the whole of our attention field is occupied otherwise, with outrageous imagery, for example. In this sense, the introduction of attention in the account of motivation allows us to say more about the indifference to truth that we have identified as part of the definition of PT: when our bias for truth is out-competed by the saturative impact of the PT discourses, it is no longer replaced by a false belief (pace Mandelbaum and Quilty-Dunn 2015), but merely by a *lack of attention* for the question of truth.

4.3 | Saturated Attention Can Trigger Action

This serves to explain an indifference to truth and falsity. Let us now turn to the question of how the saturation threshold can serve as a *causal* threshold for action too: How a certain state of our attentional field, which I've called 'saturated', can trigger action. Following the enactivist line of thinking, the idea is that subjects are actors by default. Philosophers and psychologists of attention take an 'activity-approach to attention' (Harmon-Jones and Gable 2009) according to which 'attention is necessarily tied to agency' (Wu 2011, 97). What is generally meant by this is that the way we use our attention—what appears 'salient' to us—is dependent on our goals (Dormashev 2010; Hommel 2010). But there are also empirical suggestions that things work the other way around too: Marketing studies have shown that designing a customer's attention (for instance, with store display techniques, lighting, sound design and ceiling height) can lead to a desired action (i.e., purchase) (Meyers-Levy and Zhu 2007). Therefore, the connection between the state of our attention field and action motivation is real and it is bidirectional.

What we need to ask is whether this connection is causal in the right way, that is, whether saturated attention *causes* action without resorting to either the notions of reflex or belief? The psychological literature seems undecided on this issue. It regards attention-design as an influence on 'responses' in general, where 'responses' equally refer to emotions (including, importantly for us, desires) and 'thoughts' and 'ideas' (Crowe and Higgins 1997). Philosophers like Johannes Roessler (2011) and John McDowell (2009) admit that attention motivates action, but for them it does so via belief. However, the modern philosophy of attention began with William James' more radical idea that not only attention is connected to action but that when saturated, it is directly motivating (James 1950, 427–434, d'Angelo 2022). In James' account, the kind of motricity at work is neither reflex nor doxastic. It is not reflex because it is mediated by meaning: The focus of attention results from a hermeneutic relationship to the environment and it is because the significance of the objects

surrounding us is distributed in a certain way at moment t for individual i that the state of i 's perceptual field motivates their action. It is not doxastic either, however, because engaging with such meaningful objects in this way doesn't require engaging with beliefs. As Wittgenstein (1969) later argued, in agreement with James:

'Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc.—they learn to fetch books and to sit on armchairs, etc. etc. Later questions about the existence of things do of course arise, "is there such a thing as a unicorn?" and so on. But such a question is possible only because as a rule no corresponding question presents itself.'

(Wittgenstein 1969, §476)

In such Wittgensteinian scenarios, the books and armchairs do 'turn up' in the children's perceptual fields, but this is not accompanied by any belief. The children do not doubt that the books they are fetching are there, but they do not believe it either. The point is that nondoxastic representations can trigger action directly.

This intuition, expressed by James and Wittgenstein, has been taken up and systematised in the so-called enactivist approaches to perception and in its anticipations in Merleau-Ponty (1945) and Gibson's ecological accounts (1979/2014). According to this line of thinking, there is a direct circuit between the organism and the world such that perception and action are phenomenologically indistinguishable and that it is their pre-existing operative unity that results in the subsequent conceptual constitution of the world as a collection of objects of belief. These are views that necessarily attribute a structural role to attention: It is attention that 'activates' the affordances of the world in such a way that 'the world' becomes 'my environment'. Gibson, in his development of the ecological view of perception comes closest to making this explicit: 'what an object affords us is what we normally pay attention to' (Gibson 1979/1986, 134). It is worth noting that this (as the textual context makes plain) is a constitutive analysis about what affordances *are*; affordances are defined in terms of their coincidence with our attention so that attention and affordances must be defined with reference to each other. It is not, for example, the case that affordances are laid out before us and then picked out by our attention (Gibson 1979/1986, 135). The ecological view is therefore entirely reliant on the idea that attention, perception and action all coincide within one singular living circuit. The environment is the collection of the items and facts activated by this circuit. You will note that this seems to do the job of explaining action quite well: Attention constitutes affordances which in turn 'invite' action (for empirical evidence of the 'invitation' effect and how it is mediated by the understanding but not by belief, see Withagen et al. 2012, 250–258). And this view is not restricted to the ecological approach either; the more empirically informed and recent psychological theory of 'flow' makes the same point (Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

This all suggests that attention gives us just not just the threshold-likeness we need but also the kind of causation that

we were after. I conclude that saturated attention can replace belief in such a way that the 'attention-model' may be a worthy substitute for the BDM in problematic cases such as post-truth politics.

5 | Conclusion

Let me conclude by pointing out that post-truth, so defined, is not an aberration. Some everyday cases can easily serve as illustrations. The experience of engrossment in fiction, for example, has long been a thorn in the side of the BDM (Radford 1975). Similarly, engrossment in play seems to bypass the BDM too, or to at least point to alternative doxastic states, such as 'half-beliefs' (Huizinga 2016). At a more simple level, it seems that dancing to music, for example, when the music takes over your motions, cannot conform to the BDM either. Our movements are a response to a saturative experience (the intense experience of being immersed in the music), not to any beliefs, and yet they are *bona fide* actions that are irreducible to reflexes (Dewey 1896; Merleau-Ponty 1942) and sensitive to the content of the music: we dance differently depending on what is playing.

Now, let us zoom out to consider the political scene: My suggestion is that the relationship between the post-truth politician and their followers is a variety of such dancing. It is not that the speech elicits belief that induces action but rather that the post-truth politician elicits an experience of saturated attention that establishes a configuration of affordances to which our actions respond. The American novelist George Saunders, without any concern for such abstract epistemological problems, spontaneously alighted on to a similar view, from sheer observation of the rallies of Trump's 2016 campaign which he covered for *The New Yorker*:

"Increasingly, his wild veering seems to occur against his will, as if he were not the great, sly strategist we have taken him for but, rather, someone compelled by an inner music that sometimes produces good dancing and sometimes causes him to bring a bookshelf crashing down on an old Mexican lady. *Get more*, that inner music seems to be telling him. *Get, finally, enough.*"

(Saunders 2016)

This is what Zito's dictum about 'taking Trump seriously but not literally' means: When dancing to a tune might involve turns, jumps and arms swings, dancing to post-truth discourses involves voting, marching, sharing online, donating etc. It involves producing political support.

The attention model also has the added benefits of explaining the oft-expressed intuition that PT discourses rob their audience of a certain sense of agency (whether this amounts to exonerating them is a significantly different issue, I do not think it does). Unlike deliberative or demonstrative discourse, which appeals to consent, PT discourses are authoritarian: their effect on us is not mediated by our consent (the fact that they have different effects on different people simply means that different

people have different attention practices and skills and therefore different relations to some attention contents). This fits very well with the attention model: After all, attention is something that can be grabbed against our wishes. Our own attention escapes our sovereignty. I conclude that the attention model of action meets the necessary requirements to explain action without appeal to either belief or reflex and that it should be given a fair hearing as an alternative to the BDM in cases, such as post-truth politics, that require it.

On a final note, let me point out that the problem we are dealing with here is not merely theoretical. For misdiagnosing PT politics also means becoming unable to respond to it and, in some cases, making things worse: Insisting on fitting such phenomena as post-truth politics within our familiar BDM risks making us unable to address them properly and effectively, because it will divert our resources towards fact-checking and critical engagement in ways that routinely yield extremely poor results (Record and Miller 2022; Chouraqui 2025). It also risks leading us into backfiring effects, for example, when the media report outrageous statements and behaviour because they believe they disqualify themselves, instead of realising they are amplifying them instead. Rather, this should be replaced by an ethics and an education of attention focused on practicing conscious attention allocation. Any appropriate defence of open societies in the face of rising post-truth politics will have to move the fight from the question of truth to the question of public attention.

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Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ Hugo Mercier (2020, 151 ff.) uses the BDM in reverse: According to him, the fact that conspiracists do not always act on their advertised beliefs means that they in fact do not hold these beliefs. I do agree with him that individuals are not reliable sources about their own beliefs, and I also agree that conspiracists do not always have conspiracist beliefs. I disagree with Mercier in assuming that the proof for this is that they do not act on them.

² Although in some normative sense which is not our concern here, some things may be actions—that is, agential or ‘moral’ in the right sense—to some degrees only (Korsgaard 1996, 25, 163).

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