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COMMENT

Power, epistemic authority, and game theory

Commentary on

Science communication in changing political winds

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Abstract

Authoritarian populism as a political system is on the global rise. In (what was) Bolsonaro's Brazil, Orbán's Hungary, or Trump's U.S., it yielded or yields a communicative ecosystem loosening ties with truthfulness and challenging a common ground that science has epistemic authority. In our paper we argue that the declining role of truth as a compass in public discourse and decision-making notable in what were seen as stable democracies poses challenges for the way we do science communication and how we do it on a very fundamental level. We suggest there is a need to reconsider assumptions about "good science communication", and we suggest that science communication should not ignore the fact that both knowledge and communication are inescapably intertwined with power. Specifically, the power play here is about epistemic authority, sometimes even aspired dominance: who gets to have a say over what is considered knowledge? Importantly, this power play is not, in the current environment, being played collaboratively; it is competitive. "How to communicate science" is not the main issue for communicators anymore, but how to create a communicative environment where people listen at all and might consider a scientifically based argument without, from the onset, dismissing it as "woke", or "unfree". In this paper, we argue that science communicators should factor in the strategic interactions that inherently exist in the communicative ecosystem. As a framework to help communicators to analyze these interactions and develop decision-making options, we draw on game theory, a branch of rational choice theory that studies strategic interactions where outcomes depend on the choices of all actors involved. Following this logic, we argue that science communication as a field and set of practices could be empowered by using game theory, and we spell out what this might mean.

Keywords

History of public communication of science

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There is always power at play in communication. Whose voices are heard, whose voices are silenced and whose voices are believed. How this is enacted or how these dynamics unfold, rest, to some extent, on the participants' commitment to collaboration, co-production, or competition in communication. Literature provides a poignant example of how assuming that there is a common ground of collaboration can fail: in Albert Camus' *The Renegade* [Camus, 1957] the protagonist, a missionary somewhat obsessed with the role and idea of power, finds out that his interactants don't commit at all to his assumption that turning "the other cheek" leads to a better world. When confronted by antagonists with no aspiration to engage according to the same rules and who were comfortable breaking what he takes as norms, he supposedly perishes in a brutal game of broken assumptions.

There is much we can say about how this short story relates to science communication, from the narrator's missionary zeal to convert the non-believers to Camus's own conversion towards the 'other side', through forced resignation. Science communication conceptualised as the intent to convert someone to 'factfulness' will probably fail anyway, as so-called epistemic arrogance can backfire and even yield injustice [e.g. Dawson & Lock, 2025; Liebow & Levit Ades, 2022]. Still, facts need to play a role in science communication.

But we want to focus on another aspect of Camus' story here: even a collaborative, engaged strategy in communication reaches its scope and limits when faced with actors who have no interest in such dialogue, co-construction or engagement, but who thrive on conflict and competition. Dialogue, co-construction and engagement need rules be they explicit or implicit. When these rules are not adhered to, how do we then cope with actors who make their own rules that destroy or undermine the co-constructive game? What does that mean for contemporary, engagement- and participation-based science communication?

In the past ten years, we have witnessed a profound reimagination of the place where information, facts, and knowledge sit within public discourse [McIntyre, 2018]. Up until the last decade, perhaps naively, many in science communication had assumed a near-universal aspiration that the intention to communicate factually when engaging with others and in making decisions was common ground: that while those in communication with others may disagree about some facts, or values, about identities or political positions, at least we agreed that we *should* be considering facts, and that facts *should* matter in decision making [recognising that facts are not the key to decision making, perhaps not even the most important part. See A. H. Toomey, 2023] and we also seemed to assumed that lying may have certain political and social consequences. This assumption now seems often misplaced [see Grant, 2026; as well as Van Oudheusden & Willems, 2026], although it may always have been misplaced: a positivist claim of "facts being facts" can evoke a simplistic view on science and promote the deficit model [see A. Toomey & Elliot, 2026], especially in today's post-normal, multidisciplinary science world [cf. Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993]. But still, communication without factfulness loosens its reference to the world and yields power to those who convince their audience *no matter how factful they speak* [Beaver & Stanley, 2023]. So how do we engage and communicate with actors who do not play by the game of factfulness, who do not share our underlying assumptions about epistemic commitments — and the fundamental value of considering epistemic authority and commitment to be a good thing [e.g. Zagzebski, 2012]?

Analysing the problem: rules, basic assumptions, and power games in authoritarian populism. In the so-called post-truth era [McIntyre, 2018; for the notion of

"defactualisation", see Arendt, 1972], two ways of communicating have become successful forms of public communication, because they appeal to a considerable number of people: one is lying, the other is bullshitting, as defined in Frankfurt [2005]. Lying, in this context, means "not telling the truth and, by hiding the truth, accepting its existence". Bullshitting goes beyond lying as it means to ignore and neglect truth as a factor in communication altogether. Objective truthfulness is not the relevant scale in bullshitting styles of communication, but rather, communication is based on what resonates with values, especially values or attitudes that interlocutors share with their respective in-groups or communities: "true" is what *feels* true, or what *feels* right, for them; not what *is* true or right.

Authoritarian populism [coined by Juan-Torres González, 2024] as the most prominent way of post-truth leadership these days shows without much camouflaging what lying and bullshitting mean for science, and for science communication. Lying and bullshitting has entered the political sphere, notably in the Trump I and II administrations, but beyond that too [Fischer, 2022]. It thus may affect science and science communication in a country that is still the second largest worldwide in terms of publication rate and whose scientific status and vigour had, for many decades, been attracting scientific talents from all over the world: put simply, what is happening in the U.S. affects the global scientific system. The Trump administration now overtly pursues pseudoscience and attacks scientific institutions and scientists both verbally and by cutting funding and grants, and shrinking or deleting budgets[1] — hence, lying and bullshitting yield political effect. All these actions might cause crucial scientific topics to both vanish from the research agenda and also from the public agenda, i.e. by shutting down websites or forbidding communication about certain topics [Ladyzhets, 2025]. The Trump administration thus endangers academic freedom, as the Union of Concerned Scientists stated in April 2025 [Finucane, 2025]. That includes the free choice of research topics, and free speech — both taken to be fundamental values for many professionals in science communication. Hence, lying, bullshitting and pseudoscience changed the communication game: being factful and sticking to scientific consensus can not only get publicly communicating scientists to get laughed at, but to maybe even lose their jobs [Reardon et al., 2025].

Authoritarian populism attacks many assumptions on the relationship between science, society and politics that were, for a long time, at least in principle, taken for granted (or aspired to). It is the (often silently assumed) social contract that gives science a role in society and politics. This social contract includes suppositions like: yes, science can be heavily fought about, but its epistemic authority is not fundamentally questioned. And yes, seeking knowledge via scientific methods alone can be a matter of debate, but the act of scientific knowledge seeking by itself will not be questioned. And yes, universities and research institutions need to engage with and respond to challenges about their knowledge-making in a world beset by, e.g., colonial history. But their right to produce and enhance science capital [Archer et al., 2012] freely, without political bodies shaping what that science capital looks like, is unquestioned. This social contract, which has informed the basic rules for doing science and the suppositions on how we talk about science, in a democratic society up until now, is fundamentally challenged. Authoritarian populists also challenge, and change, the rules of the communication interactions: they do not care if they are caught lying, or if scientists prove that they are bullshitting. Scheufele's [2014] diagnosis of science

1. *Science* is publishing continuously a list of science-related decisions by the Trump administration: https://www.science.org/topic/tags/trump-administration

communication as political communication assigned communicators the task of taking the political sphere into account when designing formats for engaging, interactive, co-creating science communication. But how to take into account a political sphere that is so fundamentally anti-science?

These challenges force communicators to negotiate a totally different value system, one that does not play by science communicators' most basic rules. The poster child for authoritarian populism, Trumpism, interprets notions like "freedom", "free science", "free speech", and even "truth" in different ways. "Truth" means "my personal truth and the one that impresses my community". "Free speech" means "as a powerful person, I can say everything, as condescending, racist, sexist, or simply wrong it may be, and there will be no social reaction, no jurisdictional sanction to it". And "free science" in this system means abolishing gender and climate research, because they aren't truthful and scientific in authoritarian populism ways of understanding.

Authoritarian populism's main rationality as a "competitive authoritarian system" [Levitsky, 2025] is 'win the power game'. This mode dismisses institutions that pursue scientific evidence and thus makes use of even extortionate power (i.e., blackmailing scientific institutions like Columbia University and Harvard) to "win the deal" by all means [e.g. Lukianoff, 2025]. Authoritarian populists dismiss thorough argumentation because they don't care about factfulness. They just want to win, be the champion of a communicative event, gather more followers, money, and votes. While the United States is a very important player in the academic field, the "Trump factor" is something scientists all over the world are rightfully concerned about as similar examples from other countries are adding up; e.g. right-wing parties challenging academic freedom in the Netherlands [Dixon, 2025] or Hungary [Halmai & Ryder, 2025].

For science communication, it will not be enough to blame authoritarian populism for not acknowledging and respecting scientific knowledge. The field of science communication and communicators will also need to admit that there is a strategic power interaction going on — what game theorists would define as a game — and that they have been allocated a role to play in that game, whether they like it or not. Importantly, we also need to recognise that powerful actors are setting new rules for the game.

Find possible answers elsewhere. In communicative environments where audiences might not have commitments to epistemic, rationalist or dialogic norms, the assumption that communicators ought to pursue collaborative practices (consider all the work on 'finding common ground' etc. in science communication) likely needs to be revisited. One way to make better sense of this is to draw on game theory.

Game theory is arguably the leading and most influential framework for analysing strategic decisions and interactions in the social sciences [Samuelson, 2016]. It is a branch of rational choice theory that studies strategic interactions where outcomes depend on the choices of all players. It provides a framework to analyse competition and cooperation in situations ranging from economics to politics to health decisions [Chang et al., 2020; Niou, 2015; Samuelson, 2016]. Game theory is concerned with the decisions an agent (be it an individual, an organisation, or a state) makes in situations where the decisions will be based on reacting to and/or in reference to the decisions of other agents. From choosing a military strategy to selecting an investment option to writing an impactful science piece for a magazine, the outcome of our decisions often depends not just on what *we* do, but equally on what *others*

choose to do. Planning a strong defensive barrier militarily is not enough to ensure military success. The latter also depends on the competing forces' strategies and plans (The Maginot Line provides a good historical example). Likewise, though less violent, writing a science piece for a magazine is not enough to ensure it has impact, even a really well written and targeted piece. Recognising the time constraints of audiences, any likely impact also depends on how well written and how well targeted *other* competing pieces are. Fundamentally, game theory provides an analytic framework for understanding and strategising decision making when "the outcome of one's action depends upon the actions of other people and everyone is trying to guess what the others will do?" [Bicchieri, 2004].

We suggest that much can be learned from game theory, both as an analytic lens to make sense of the present situation, and as a tool to help us think through how to strategize possible responses.

While some work in science communication has focussed on decision science [Fischhoff, 2013; Kahan, 2014], surprisingly less attention has been given to the more formal frameworks such rational choice theory generally or game theory specifically. Game theory can be thought of as a multi-actor decision theory that extends standard decision theory, because standard decision theory focuses on situations where only one actor makes a decision [Resnik, 1987]. Yet rational choice theory is not a completely new complement to thinking about science communication more strategically. Rational choice theory, such as expected utility theory, has been put forward as a formal analysis tool that helps bridge scientific knowledge and decision-making [von Winterfeldt, 2013]. Specifically in relation to game theory, Borchelt [2001] suggested nearly 25 years ago that "[g]ame theory may provide a useful way to study the changing dynamics in science communication because it provides a way to predict how decision-makers will respond to changing reward-cost structures in their environments." [Borchelt, 2001, p. 199] Since Borchelt's call, game theory has not received much attention from science communication scholars, but we suggest that the changing geopolitical winds make being attentive to the strategic interactions more relevant than ever.

The difference between when Borchelt and Von Winterfeldt wrote and now is that the structure and elements of the strategic decision-making, *the game* to use the technical term, have changed. Specifically, what we are playing for and who we take to be the other participants in this game have been modified. While the authors mentioned above were primarily discussing science communicators' strategies in response to funding pressures and the ensuing competing aims, we suggest that a different aspect of the 'game' has become pertinent: strategies that respond to communication from other communicators in the ecosystem — communicators that play a totally different game.

This significantly changes the way the game is played. Thinking in a simplified Shannon-Weaver model style interaction between sender and receiver, previously much of the strategic focus of science communicators centred on the interaction between communicators and their audiences, on how to strategise the interactions between senders and receivers (think here of the many studies on framing, the persuasive nature of narratives, etc.). What we suggest is that in the current ecosystem a game-theoretic angle makes explicit that strategically, we should be much more attentive to the interactions between the different senders vying for the attention of receivers (where science communicators are only one of many *competing* set of senders). Put simply, we need to be much more cognisant of and strategic in our interaction between authoritarian populists' communication and the

science community's communication, as well as more responsive to the impact of their communication *relative to one another*. This has implications for the kind of communication that is undertaken, but also for what knowledge communicators need to do their jobs.

Science communicators not only need to know what their audiences know, believe, want, and are interested in [Scheufele, 2014], but also, what possible course of communicative and strategic actions other participants in the communication ecosystem are likely to take: what possible counter-strategies will communicators face, and who will or will not play by rules — and what exactly are the rules of the game? For example, when journalists interview a science denialist live and she or he will not answer questions but feed their convictions as sound bites to their social media bubbles. The science denialist simply does not commit to the rules for "interviewing" that were assumed by the journalist and plays a different game. If the journalist assumes a cooperative interaction (at least to the extent of cooperating on what an interview is about), they risk being manipulated. Similarly with producing science content for social media which is then recycled and used against the content producer to undermine their credibility or to harass them personally. Acknowledging the dynamics of such a communicative ecosystem allows communicators to better strategise their communication.

From a game-theoretic point of view, it would mean reconceptualising about we strategies our communication. While much of science communication strategy is currently audience focused (who hasn't said "know your audience"), a game theoretic approach would require we focus as much on other actors in the communicative space (perhaps "know your communicative competition"). What does this mean from a practical perspective for science communicators? We argue that taking the lessons of game theory as a framework for analysing the communicative ecosystem allows for better prepared communication which is also better able to respond to its environment. Specifically, the recognition of the underlying rules (formal and informal) and an awareness of strategic interactions between what a science communicator might do, and what other actors in that communicative ecosystem might do are key. This means:

- Making sure communicators understand the basic structure of the game (the rules of the interactions). Who are the other players, what are their incentives (what counts as payoff for them), what will they respond to and how will they likely respond.
- Understanding if people or institutions that communicators intend to interact with will play along (be cooperative) or be competitive.
- Depending on the setting, assessing if it is possible to formally set the game rules beforehand, and if everyone will commit to them.
- Assessing which role factfulness and epistemic authority play in the game.
- Pre-emptively strategising how to react if someone changes the rules along the way and being rhetorically prepared to communicate adequately.

How the communicative 'game' is then played depends on the norms and structures of the communication ecosystem, which communicators have to understand well [Westhoff et al., 2012]. Importantly, it depends on whether science communication is viewed as a collaborative endeavour or as a competition and whether the communication ecosystem is structured to incentivise competition or collaboration. Classically, science communication has been treated as a collaborative space; communication efforts are more successful if

communicators and possibly their audiences work together, and communicators could (by and large) rely on others to communicate in a supportive manner [Massarani & Merzagora, 2014]. And here, we return to Camus' *The Renegade* and the lesson that we need to rethink our strategies when facing actors who have no interest in collaborating, cooperating or engaging, but who thrive on conflict and competition — and disrupting the game by setting their own game rules.

Where to from here? Renunciation of facts is part of the game to weaken a knowledge society, because it goes hand in hand with the renunciation of its basic assumption: that facts in general play a role in supporting valid democratic decisions, and for responsible and accountable politics [Beaver & Stanley, 2023]. Authoritarian populism challenges the value-driven conviction that scientific and fact-based knowledge can make the world a better one. This view of knowledge as a force for good has been a pillar of science communication. Now, science communication is challenged by political denialist forces that publicly challenge the epistemic authority of science. This is not to say that the epistemic dominance of science is challenged at a popular level, but it is rhetorically challenged at a political level. It forces science communicators to not only communicate science, but also to communicate on the value assumption that scientific knowledge is a good thing, and why. An important challenge consists of the language and tone used by science communicators. Argumentative, informative language will not be the only relevant rhetorical means in many hot and political debates. As Beaver and Stanley [2023] argue, discourse is politicized — including discourse on scientific issues, cf. climate change, vaccines, gender research. Hence, science communicators will need rhetorical strategies for politicized discourse, too.

Most importantly, the post-truth era's challenge to science communication is "alternative facts"… and alternative values. It's about power games. The main authoritarian-populist power game is not to align with the expectations of interlocutors; this gives him or her power, similar to the power that the renegade experiences in Camus's short story. Skipping the rules means that many basic assumptions science communicators have relied on for exchanging ideas and for collaborating — on what free science, speech and communication are about, on epistemic authority of science and the relevance of it for society — are replaced by an alternative aspiration. The only aim of this perspective is to win the communicative power game. These challenges cannot be answered by claiming that collaboration is a better way to communicate, because it needs two to collaborate. Neither can it be answered by simply pointing out the facts, because in the power game, facts don't count; only winners do. We need to learn the rules of this new game and perhaps game theory should become a staple of science communication to better strategize science communication.

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