The Windschuttle Hoax and the Problem of Truth

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Abstract

In early 2009 Quadrant's Keith Windschuttle was caught out having accepted for publication a fraudulent piece of academic research, a hoax which aimed to reveal the hypocrisy of Windschuttle’s lofty rejections of ‘ideological’ history as fraudulent scholarship. Over ten years after the Sokal affair, the Windschuttle hoax raises in a new way the question of the relationship of social science to the problem of truth. We argue that, through its transgression of the rules and norms of social scientific practice, the hoax can draw our attention to those very rules and norms, affirming our commitment to them. In pursuing this argument, we consider what it means for social science to play its particular ‘language game,’ highlighting the similarities and differences between the hoax’s and social sciences’ efforts to ‘seem true’.

Keywords: Truth, true knowledge, hoax, academic standards

Contesting Truth

In early January 2009, Margaret Simons (2009a; 2009b; 2009c) revealed on the online site Crikey.com that a hoax had been perpetrated against the Australian conservative magazine Quadrant. In its January/February 2009 edition, Quadrant had published an article by Sharon Gould entitled ‘Scare Campaigns and Science Reporting’. Sharon Gould was, however, a pseudonym invented by Katherine Wilson, whose article had been conceived with the intent of fooling Quadrant’s editor Keith Windschuttle. Over the previous decade Windschuttle had performed a prominent role in denouncing left-leaning academics for misrepresenting the truth in Australian research on frontier conflict and race relations. According to Windschuttle, these ‘revisionist’ historians, whom he claimed dominated academia, had fabricated their sources and bent the truth
in order to support their ideologically-driven agenda of darkening the image of British colonial history. In an effort to straighten the historical record, Windschuttle (2002; 2004) published two historical volumes (one on frontier relations in Tasmania and another on the White Australia Policy) as well as a historiographical critique of ‘postmodern’ approaches, entitled The Killing of History (1997). Windschuttle remained in the frontline of the ‘history wars’. He was appointed onto the ABC Board in 2006 and in early 2008 he assumed the editorship of Quadrant.

The Windschuttle hoax was intended to strike out at a ‘cultural warrior’ who had taken an aggressive stance with respect to standards of truth, while at the same time adopting a highly critical position on multiculturalism as the bearer of ideological views of history. For Windschuttle, ‘relativist’, ‘postmodern’, ‘multicultural’ challenges to the doxic conceptions of truth represented an attack on ‘objective’ standards of truth and on proper academic process. Supposedly, then, the laugh was on Windschuttle when he was caught out accepting an article which had clearly breached the standards of the scholarly process he had so noisily upheld. According to Wilson (2009a), it was just this kind of hypocrisy that the hoax was designed to draw attention to, hopefully raising questions about the meaning and status of knowledge legitimated as science. To this end, Wilson submitted an article sufficiently plausible to be published, while containing what she saw as ‘outrageously stupid arguments’, a few ‘bogus “facts”’ and ‘fabricated’, as well as irrelevant, footnotes (Wilson 2009b). Gould presented herself as a ‘biotechnology informatics consultant’ in her social science-style analysis of a biotechnological development.

Katherine Wilson’s hoax bears a strong resemblance to, and in fact explicitly referenced, the 1996 ‘science war’ hoax perpetrated by the US physicist Alan Sokal against the cultural studies journal Social Text. Sokal’s hoax represented a defense of
an objectivist view of truth against assertions of the necessity for a ‘social constructionist critique of knowledge’ (Robbins, 1996: 58). Consciously following Sokal, Wilson’s Australian hoax against Windschuttle was ‘kind of the Sokal hoax in reverse’ (Wilson 2009b), designed to discover whether defenders of objective knowledge and verifiable reality were equally guilty of printing nonsense as long as it supported their own political predispositions. While Sokal’s hoax demanded prose that was consciously nonsensical to the authors yet acceptable to the editors, Wilson’s hoax aimed to test Windschuttle-the-editor’s attention to detail, and particular to his scrutiny of supporting evidence in footnotes, since this had been the focus of his forensic critique of the ‘revisionist’ historians.

Viewed from an ideological perspective, one might conclude that Wilson’s hoax said more about the left’s distaste for Windschuttle than anything else. As many bloggers on the website Crikey asked the schadenfreude-filled left, which editors of academic journals would check the sources in every footnote? On the other hand, Jeff Sparrow (2009), in the left-wing magazine Overland, pointed to the selective use that Windschuttle made of the academic ‘precautionary principle’: ‘If, say, this had been an article documenting Aboriginal massacres, he’d have been all over the references like a rash.’

Yet, were the Windschuttle hoax merely a moment in the ideological war between left and right, it would be difficult to point to anything enduring that it might offer to the social sciences. What is more lasting and worthwhile exploring are the epistemological questions raised by the hoax and subsequent debates. Much of the discourse associated with, and arising from, the Windschuttle hoax is structured around a polarisation of perspectives on truth. On the one hand lie the more objectivist views of truth and, on the other, the more constructionist perspectives. While this
divergence of perspectives may be instructive, it is hardly new, and were our analysis to remain at the level of this explicit polarisation then the Windschuttle hoax would seem a poor, and rather belated, cousin of the Sokal hoax. But the differences between the two hoaxes are significant. The Windschuttle hoax provides a particularly useful window onto the issue of truth in the social sciences, precisely because its misdemeanors were relatively mild. Where the Sokal hoax was almost completely nonsensical, the difference between Wilson’s article and a work of social science is much less significant. This proximity between the hoax article and a work of social science is instructive. Our claim is that this hoax, through its close mimicking of what is considered ‘true knowledge’, can tell us something more general about the hoax as a form. More importantly, it can underscore what is peculiar about the social sciences, their conditions of possibility and their normative commitments.

In taking our analysis beyond the terms of an ideological battle, we ask a question that is at once epistemological and historical: what does the hoax, as a form, tell us about our relationship as social scientists to the problem of truth, above and beyond the debate about ideological wars? In drawing a connection between the hoax and the social sciences, our claim is certainly not that they produce equivalent claims to truth. But our argument is that they do share an orientation to the norm of verisimilitude, though the author of the hoax is much less troubled by this norm and its demands than we would expect the social scientist to be.

**Seeming True**

If the phenomenon of the academic hoax is to be seen as more than a move in an ideological battle, it is important to pay attention to the precise ways in which the hoax works. Firstly, the *intention* of the hoaxer is a key feature of this kind of hoax.
Apart from humiliating the victim, the hoaxer seeks to provoke a response in the audience – in this case, drawing their attention to ‘the hypocrisy of knowledge claims’ and prompting them to think about ‘standards of truth when anything is claimed in the name of “science”’ (Wilson 2009a). It is intention that distinguishes a hoax from fraud, and Windschuttle’s dismissal of the article as merely fraudulent sought, no doubt, to obscure this distinction and so shift the shame from himself to the perpetrator of the hoax (Windschuttle 2009b). Yet, there is a theatrical element to the whole phenomenon of the hoax, which makes Windschuttle’s gesture an essentially futile one; the revelation of the deception performed by the hoax is a second important feature of the hoax as a form. The drama of the revelation ensures that the humiliation is felt most keenly by the victim. Wilson’s anonymity in the early stages of the hoax and the later revelation of her identity played an important role in this regard.

There is a third crucial feature to an academic hoax such as Wilson’s. Wilson (2009b) was well aware that in order for the deception to work her article needed to conform with the ‘reactionary ideology’ she identified as familiar to readers of Quadrant. More importantly for us, Wilson’s deception also depended on the imitation of the conventions of science, which lend legitimacy to academic scholarship. The deception – catching Windschuttle out – relied on the fact that the article seems true.

Our key interest in this paper lies in this attempt to seem true, for our claim is that this is also a key element of what it is to do social science. This is not the cynical claim that it may at first appear to be, nor is it a radical relativisation of the social scientific enterprise. In arguing that the hoax and the social sciences share a preoccupation with seeming true, we find Agnes Heller’s (1989) deliberations on the character of the social sciences instructive. Heller characterizes the social sciences as ‘language
games’ and suggests that their guiding normative orientation is toward ‘verisimilitude’, translated literally as ‘appearing to be true or real’ (OED; our emphasis). Our claim is that the hoax, through its mimicking of what is considered ‘true knowledge’, can underscore what is peculiar about the social sciences and their normative commitment to seeming true.

The peculiarity of the social sciences, as distinct from natural sciences, lies in their sensitivity to their own historicity. As ‘language games’, the social sciences represent varying responses to the constitutive epistemological paradox faced by modern knowledge (Heller 1989). On the one hand, the modern era is uniquely characterized by a will to know, with all the transcendental and universalizing impulses that this seems to entail. In modernity, nothing is sacred as we embark on a progressive ‘disenchantment’ of the world (Weber 1958). Yet, on the other hand, modernity is also inseparable from an historical consciousness, which effectively relativises knowledge claims: in understanding modernity as ‘a product of world-historical progression’ we are faced with the problem of the historical (and thus non-universal) character of all knowledge (Heller 1989: 291). As modern knowers, we invariably seek an Archimedean viewpoint (a vantage point outside the present), knowing all the while that escaping our own present is precisely what we cannot do. The social sciences, Heller suggests, are defined, structured and motivated by this tension.

To suggest that the social sciences are language games, playing with the thorny dilemma of modern truth, is not to imply that they are fraudulent. Our investment as social scientists in the value of truth is far more profound than that, which is why these academic hoaxes can produce such vociferous reactions. Through the kind of intentional departure from the rules of truth that Wilson undertakes, our very real commitment to the value of truth is affirmed. In the history of the social sciences, the
relationship to truth has, no doubt, taken extreme forms. The social sciences have had their champions of the more absolute forms of objectivism. In their ambition to really be true – to correspond with the reality of the world – much social science has pursued a search for general laws. In supposing that there is a single world ‘out there’ for knowledge to mirror, many have sought to universalize human reality – and thus effectively to overcome the problem of historical context and contingency.

Criticism of such objectivism has often been seen as a threat to the very possibility of scientific knowledge. Windschuttle’s anxieties about the epistemological consequences of multiculturalism are exemplary here. For Windschuttle (1997: 311), postcolonial calls for an ‘epistemological liberation’ represent an ‘illegitimate’ extension of liberal egalitarian principles: ‘the liberal democratic notion that all people are equal means equal in a legal and political sense … It has never meant that all people have equality of knowledge, ability or understanding’. Similarly, Sokal (1997: 1) warns that the new left has been seduced by ‘ultimately empty intellectual fashions’ to give up on the values of ‘truth, reason and objectivity’. According to Bailey (2001: 159), the loss of ‘the foundations upon which traditional inquiry was based’ has given rise to a generalized ‘veriphobia’.

Heller’s analysis of the social sciences presents a corrective to absolute forms of objectivism. She shows that the foundations of the social scientific endeavor were much more complex than such nostalgic representations would allow. From the beginning, by virtue of their place as modern forms of knowledge, the social sciences have borne a ‘dual paradox’ – a quest for certitude combined with recognition of their own historicity. Once we attempt to ‘live with’ this paradox and to ‘bear it proudly’ we can recognize that the norm of objectivity can only ever be met in a limited and
relative way, though it will play no less central a role in the social scientific

Yet while Heller makes the case for a limited or relative objectivism as the most
viable ambition for an age that recognizes itself as historical, she is also aware that
extreme relativism is the ‘death wish’ of the social sciences: ‘one simply cannot
participate in the language game of social science and simultaneously subscribe to
total relativism’ (Heller 1989: 315-6). From the stance of total relativism, we would
have to say that the hoax and the social sciences could lay equal claim to truth: no
matter that the evidence Wilson produces for her claims are deliberate
misrepresentations, since all claims to truth would be seen as having equal validity.

It is difficult to measure the actual prevalence of absolute relativism in the social
sciences, given the hysteria to which the mere hint of it tends to give rise. Academic
hoaxes effectively dramatize this contestation over the status of truth. There have also
been times in which the social sciences have provided a sort of parody of themselves,
through their arrogant claims to certitude or their equally conceited pronouncements
of the death of truth. How else might we negotiate our relationship to truth in the
social sciences?

**Beyond merely seeming true**

We have suggested that the more absolutist versions of objectivism deny our
historical context and the contingency of our knowledge, while extreme relativism
denies our commitment to truth. In arguing that the ‘norm of verisimilitude... must be
observed or else social science no longer exists’, Heller (1989: 294) offers a path
through these poles – of *really being* true or *merely seeming* true. Yet the idea of
verisimilitude would, at first glance, seem to offer little to an attempt to differentiate
social science and the hoax, since it suggests that which is similar to truth. Arguing that the social sciences are oriented to the norm of verisimilitude would appear, at heart, to be a relativist gesture. Social scientists cannot help but shirk at the idea that they concern themselves with seeming true, given that they are the inheritors of a metaphysical distribution of truth in which appearances are deemed mere chimera with respect to deep truth.

Importantly, however, Heller stresses that there is nothing mere about seeming true; merely seeming true does not compromise the capacity of the social sciences to say something meaningful. Before despairing that the social sciences can only ever play second fiddle to the natural sciences – which alone would access, rather than mimic, truth – it is worth clarifying the meaning and significance of this idea of the norm of verisimilitude. For the social scientist, observing the norm of verisimilitude involves a particular kind of commitment to the interpretation and reconstruction of the materials at hand. If their task is to give meaning to that which has meaning for social beings, the social sciences must do so in a plausible way (Heller 1989). Appearing true requires a commitment to the language games, the rules and norms, by which authenticity and believability are established. So, for example, Heller stresses that social science is normatively oriented to objectivity, though this does not imply a correspondence view of truth, nor value free research. Rather, objectivity is about giving all witnesses and aspects of an issue a ‘fair hearing’. Social science also seeks to be translatable. While perfect translatability can never be achieved, plausible knowledge is oriented to clarity of explication and understanding. Another of these norms ‘can be formulated as follows: social science should not use the addressee as a means to achieve certain goals of the social scientist’ (Heller 1989: 297).
When Windschuttle is hoaxed by an article which flouts this commitment to plausibility, he loses credibility. We may not expect the same of Wilson, for without the hoaxer’s transgression of the rules, there would be no hoax. So, for example, the hoax must use the addressee as a means to achieve certain goals, as Wilson knew well when she appealed to Windschuttle’s ideological predispositions. From the point of view of the author of the hoax, seeming true is a question of mere trickery. It is not, we have suggested, that the hoax has no commitment to the value of truth. It may have the effect, and even the intention, of affirming that commitment. This is one of the reasons that the moment of revelation is so important: the potentially unethical nature of the deception is countered in the uncovering of its moral intention (Secor and Walsh 2004)). Nonetheless, the hoax does seek to pull off the appearance of truth (to seem true) without regard for the process that lends weight to that appearance.

The point is that the social scientist, unlike ‘Sharon Gould’, must observe the procedural rules which bestow the right to be taken seriously. The Windschuttle hoax was at least partly motivated by the attempt to raise questions about the processes and standards by which some claims are attributed legitimacy. Following Heller, we stress that producing knowledge capable of claiming scientific legitimacy involves certain obligations and rights on the part of the researcher. It is a question of playing the game of science, observing, and being seen to observe, its procedural rules and committing to its norms. Once these obligations are fulfilled, the social scientist can lay claim to the rights of procedural or formal, though not substantive, consensus: he/she deserves to be listened to because he/she has played the game.

Wilson’s stunt attracted public attention, yet it has neither the legitimacy, nor the durability, of what are consider the great works of the social sciences, the ‘treasure troves’ that are visited and revisited. The claims to truth that the so-called great works
make have passed the test of time because they seek to be more than fiction, yet something other than merely factual. As works of social science, they are open to interpretation and reinterpretation, and even the most consensual claims made about empirical reality are liable to falsification (Heller 1989). Plausibility, we have argued, is never a mere correspondence to the facts. It involves recognition of the contingency of truth claims, which is not the same as their illegitimacy.

**Conclusion**
While we may need to give up the hope of a direct correspondence between the being of the human world and the being of knowledge, we do not thereby need to deem the social sciences mere tricks. The social sciences need not be dismissed as merely the products of a particular culture, though they are certainly that. Modern social sciences, like all cultural products, are expressions of desires and anxieties, yet this does not necessarily make them illusions or delusions. Contrary to Weber’s (1958) interdiction against using science as a way to values, the products of the social sciences can play a role in helping us understand what it means to live as modern beings, with all the aspirations and limits we inherit as part of that condition. As Heller puts it, true knowledge (knowledge that meets the social sciences’ criteria of plausibility) can give rise to Truth. The capitalization of Truth here is not meant to imply that the social sciences should make claims that are transcendental or universal, as Windschuttle would have it. Heller means Truth to be understood much the way it is in everyday usage, as something that is ‘truth-for-me’ and which concerns my existence as a whole. Social science may produce knowledge that speaks truth to us in a profound, absolute way precisely when it observes the rules and norms specific to its language game.
Understood in this way, the social sciences need not remain bound to the polarized views of truth which recent academic hoaxes often bring to the fore. Heller points to the possibility of repositioning the poles and the values attached to them. It is not objectivity that is absolute, since objectivity can only ever be relative for a science that recognizes itself as historical. Yet we have also argued that the totally relativist path (announcing all claims to be *nothing more than* the claims of particular cultures and subjectivities) abandons the whole project of truth. In either case, we deny the paradoxical condition that structures the social scientific enterprise: a love of truth combined with a recognition of history.

We have argued that an academic hoax such as Wilson’s has a merely imitative relationship to the language games of the social sciences, without the same commitment to the production of plausible knowledge. In the social sciences, observing the norm of verisimilitude is more than a cynical exercise in plausibility. Nonetheless, we have suggested that, above and beyond the validity of the social critique intended by the gesture, the hoax can offer something to the self-understanding of the social sciences. As a kind of ‘social breaching experiment’ (Garfinkel 1967), the Windschuttle hoax gives us an occasion to examine how we feel about the violation of norms, which we might otherwise have unquestionably accepted (as Windschuttle and other objectivists do) or dismissed as antiquated (as the relativist does). It reminds us that social science need not itself be a parody, torn between extreme positions and liable to caricature.
Notes

1. To suggest that the hoax raises issues about the polarisation of truth between these divergent versions is not to say that there is a neat mapping of political positions onto the poles. It is not the case that those on the right of the political spectrum are necessarily defenders of an objectivist view of truth, nor that those on the left are rabid constructivists. In the ‘science wars’, for example, Sokal (1998, 249) defines himself as an ‘unabashed Old Leftist’ and the Australian left-wing historian Henry Reynolds has strong reservations about constructionism. It is their divergent perspectives on truth that may be more precise markers of difference than the ideological or political positions of left and right.

References


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