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# Voice and Speech Review

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## The Unapproved Orator

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### The Unapproved Orator

Perhaps I shouldn't be writing this. Yet here I am, writing an article specifically about the use of voice and speech, including my use of voice and speech, in the Voice and Speech Review, and I'm not a voice or speech trainer. Indeed, I've never been voice or speech trained at all. That's why I'm an *Unapproved Orator*, I'm uncredentialed, at least in the traditional sense. There is of course a spectrum—at one end sits the voice expert, the recipient and deliverer of training, the accomplished specialist—at the other end, there is someone who likes the sound of their own voice. I'll leave you to work out where I am.

Let us start at the beginning: All animals produce sound. Many animals make noise. Some animals use voice. But only one animal can speak. The ability to construct words, put them together into sentences and deliver them verbally to communicate complex, sophisticated and nuanced ideas to an audience—is an attribute entirely unique to the human species (Bickerton 1990). It won't surprise you that this extraordinary ability has not gone unnoticed for the two thousand or so years of human civilization. In fact, in ancient Rome, the ability to speak well was heralded above all other human attributes. So much so that it was believed that if you could speak well, it must be impossible for you to be lying. The Roman orator Quintilian (1856 95 CE) writes of expert speakers speaking words into the open mouths of the dying. Imagine that for a moment, your loved one, laid out on their death bed and a great speaker invited to speak words into their mouth to ease their transition from this life to the next. Imagine the faith in words and speech, imagine that faith in voice.

Now, compare that to how we might regard contemporary political speech making. Audiences understand that our leaders are media trained, often by a community of voice and speech trainers, and a great deal of resource is given over to ensure that our leaders deliver speeches well. We understand that there may be a team of several writers contributing to that individual's speech, there is multiple authorship at play and certainly a challenge to authenticity. But, perhaps most importantly, we know that those individual speakers may not necessarily be held to account for what *they say*, leading to the potential for voice without accountability. All of this leads to distrust of contemporary speech makers. We live in a post-truth era, where fundamental truth in speech, and therefore the fundamental truth of voice, is regarded as extremely unlikely. This is a stark contrast to the ancients, who we might assume had as coherent an understanding of the relationship

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between truth and narrative (or story), as the importance of being able to orally communicate with others. We spoke long before we wrote. It is a significant journey from the inherent moral and vocal confidence of the ancients to the distrust and cynicism of post-truth audiences who don't believe a word they hear.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines post-truth as, "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". At the core of post-truth sits a decentering of fact as the lynchpin of stabilizing thought—echoes of this idea are threaded through post-modern philosophy. The effect of post-truth is that old models of truth no longer carry the intellectual weight they once did. Empirical facts are not sufficient in describing experience and ultimately a significant shift from "*what* I feel" to "*how* I feel" occurs. Post-truth really comes to the fore when deployed to real-world manipulation, often accompanied by the strategic use of voice. The spinning of facts, the playing into confirmation biases and the ridicule of the expert, all play into post-truth in action. It should be noted that the net result of living within a post-truth world is no binary existence. One doesn't simply believe post-truth things or not; indeed, a symptom of contemporary life is an inability to even distinguish between true and untrue information. The net result of post-truth is cynicism, which leads to either distrust of *everything* or apathy—a complete lack of interest in the argument. Post-truth audiences are highly cynical, and cynicism and distrust don't carry an audience through a stirring speech very far at all.

Previously, I've made a performance titled, *The Speechmaker* (Bray 2011). It involves me, in a civic location, delivering a speech for 12 hours nonstop.<sup>1</sup> I work with a collaborator, who feeds texts directly to my autocue. The audience are invited to come and go as they please (you don't have to stay for 12 hours) and are also invited to contribute texts, either their own writing or suggestions of other texts, via social media and e-mail. Whatever is sent through is fed back to me for delivery. There is no censoring or any other kinds of discrimination in what gets fed through, everything gets read. Over the 12 hours of nonstop speech making, I deliver somewhere in the region of 250 separate texts and have delivered speeches by Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Ghandi, Margret Thatcher and Adolf Hitler. I have read the manifestos of the Dadas, the Surrealists, the Futurists and the Stuckists, the mission statements of the Ku Klux Klan, the Black Panthers and Leeds Beckett University. I've read hip hop lyrics, the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe and best man's speeches. The performance is designed to highlight the saturation of speech-making in contemporary culture, nonstop speech over such a lengthy duration is an aural phenomenon better likened to background or incidental music than the expected conventions of live performance work. The audience can't listen to and comprehend every speech, they will inescapably dip in and out, occasionally recognizing, or more simply just hearing the peaks and troughs, the crescendos and diminuendos of the sound. The audience hears the steady decline of my vocal quality over time. The performance is an analog to global saturation by speeches. Indeed, the proliferation of contemporary speeches leads the public to rely on mediators, to edit the speeches, to translate them into digestible headlines, to tell us what the speechmaker means, to become a translator, an interfering signal, a proxy to the original speaker. Speeches in this context become noise.

The social economist Jacques Attali, borrowing himself from information theory, defines noise as "a signal that interferes with the reception of a message by a receiver, even if the interfering signal may have a different meaning for that receiver" (Attali 1985,

27). Interfering signals are the inundation of rhetorical mechanism, directed media focus, even a lack of information (a commonly missed truth in all this—the fact is people have no idea what they’re missing because everyone’s convinced that we exist in an information age). Attali’s pertinent observation that the interfering signal can carry its own meaning is easily correlated with a news agency with a particular political agenda, for example. Indeed, noise can have meaning, but Attali works on the assumption that meaning, or truth, exists in some constant and fixed form before the interference occurs. Perhaps noise causes us to be a bit lost, or *removed*, or at least to generalize voice through a lower resolution listening, without precision and nuance. Or perhaps it can decompose speech to the bare bones of the rhetoric, to the nuts and bolts of the oratory, to Quintilian’s ingredients. Maybe it does away with such scaffold to leave us with what would be described by French literary scholars as *la langue originelle* (the original language) a hypothetical original language from which all other languages are born—the purest kind of human voice (Consenstein 2002, 24). The quest for *la langue originelle* asserts that language is not baseless, as post-structural scholarship might suggest. Saussure’s primary declaration of the interconnectivity of language (Saussure 2005), means its vastness is nonetheless fully attainable, conquerable even, by working toward a finite and exhaustible original language and, ultimately, truth. Ultimately, God. Of course, all of this means that noise must be dripping with the residual meaning of *la langue originelle*, the interconnected complexity of rhetorical structure, perhaps even as the intended disruptor, the *alt*-ernate message.

But how might we access the unmanageable messiness of noise? We have known for some time, as described by the politically moderate middle conservatives *and* the progressive left wing ideologues that the destabilizing of truth as a concept has problematized the notion of universal truth (which, by the way, always ends with God). This has left the critical implications of postmodernism open for practical co-option. Consequently, the ideological becomes the actionable, and real-world pragmatics always lead to difficult appropriations in practice. The conservatives blame the progressives for not understanding the danger of this move. The progressives blame the morally corrupt right for this appropriation. This means that the noise of contemporary voice is used to facilitate the political mobilization of post-truth. With the possibility of fundamental truth—original language—fighting to be surfaced.

Back to the saturation of speech-making in contemporary culture: 24 hr news streams and replay-ability means that the political speech in particular has taken an almost daily role in our media consumption. Compared to the various infamous speeches of history, few of which are recorded to listen to again, speeches now don’t hold the cultural position of an unusual event of pertinence per se, although this is sometimes still the case. The volume and availability of speeches doesn’t tend toward a need for them to be particularly scrutinized, analyzed, and deconstructed. This is most likely because they don’t mean what they used to, they don’t signal change in the same way. Our politicians make near daily addresses that broadcast to an audience of potentially billions. This changes, as volume/quantity always does, the construction of speeches. It would be nice to imagine that because speeches are so infinitely viewable, so completely available to scrutiny—and in the public domain so readily and forever—that the attention paid to them would correlate, but this is regrettably not the case. Indeed, the result of this speech-glut is that speeches have become more vanilla, homogenized to near nothing of substance, lacking

in depth and most of all, absent of risk. What remains is the abundance of rhetoric and the flavor of depth—the ancient institutes of oratory, Quintillian’s strategies, made performative to the degree that they are normalized political utterances and associations. Shortcuts to perceived meaning, morality, sincerity, and earnestness. Speeches to the masses used to represent an unusual opportunity to inspire change and to shift thinking, to define one’s character and one’s dreams, to unlock the hearts of others and provoke change. Now, the contemporary political speech is a zombie; decomposed, vaguely perceivable as meaningful, never dying but lacking depth, sophistication and nuance. But, however you like to slice up your political leanings, a truly objective analysis of Donald Trump’s rise to presidency, for example, illustrates a highly successful methodology that mobilizes post-modern ideology to great effect. Crudely, the method deployed is as follows:

- (1) Present the notion of fake-news, not entirely synonymous with post-truth, but a stablemate nonetheless,
- (2) Consider the idea of lived experience as the highest quality truth there is,
- (3) Locate a substantial and disenfranchised demographic and state their lived struggle succinctly

Then follows the politics; and without diving into policy, ethics, and moral positioning too far here (and to swing our focus back to performance and voice a little), objectively, one cannot deny the quality of Trump’s performance as the perfect example of this methodology. It may not be particularly fashionable to state it, but Trump is a highly competent performer, a master of sincerity and humor. Trump possesses an excellent instinctual, embodied knowledge of pace and timing in delivery. Trump’s immediate behavior following the attempt on his life during a rally in Pennsylvania on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2024, is a clear demonstration of his intuitive bent toward pleasing his audience. Following the gun shot, Trump stands up, appearing to disregard his own safety and raises his fist to punch the air while repeating the word “fight” over and over as he is escorted offstage.

Perhaps curiously, performance parallels can be drawn between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky. It is now over three years since Russian forces invaded Ukraine to start the current conflict and the hitherto relatively unknown, to many in the UK at least, Zelensky was catapulted into the public spotlight. Both Trump and Zelensky are political heavyweights who had careers that started in popular cultural performances. Zelensky was famous for playing the president before actually being the president. There is precedent in performers becoming leaders; Reagan in the US, Joseph Estrada of the Philippines and, perhaps less grandly but more locally to the UK, our first Mayor of West Yorkshire was an actor in *Coronation Street*, *Eastenders* and *Emmerdale*. For readers outside the UK, one can’t overstate the significance of these soap opera credits in the local cultural consciousness. Analysis of performance skills and strategies can feel odd in the context of figures who hold life and death decisions in their hands and wield the power to shift and manipulate our personal narratives. Essentially, we are at war with truth in a post-truth world and in our navigation of the digital age. The conflict in Ukraine is of course a propaganda war in addition to being a military one and the performance skills of Zelensky have not gone unnoticed. Writing in *The Conversation*, Stephen Langston notes,

The *core skills* required in actors are remarkably similar to diplomatic skills: *a range of strengths and abilities* that enable professionals to manage professional relationships. Memorization, creativity, reading, speaking and teamwork highlight a few aptitudes. However, the ability to change one's personality to communicate a message in a controlled and meaningful manner is proving to be a key skill for Zelensky. (Langston 2022)

One is left to consider, to what level does skill in performance qualify any individual, any one person—one man—to wield such power? I'm reminded of the ancients again, the implausibility of deceit in the competent performer. And it is of course naïve not to recognize the use of voice as a seminal influence on the course of history. The answer to the question of qualification—who gets to do it—is not particularly grand at all. It's really about being in the right place at the right time, a parallel to trying to “make it” as a performer in the first place. Imagine if heading up the resistance to a global military conflict was your big break. Or, the counter-perspective to serendipity, which is that when the chips are down, you use the tools you have. You use your voice and body. Once again, however, the competent deployment of performance skills does not lead, as our ancient friends may wish it did, to the unquestionable truth. Indeed, noise returns. Zelensky's persona (and voice) has, at least in the West, come to signify courage and valor and by extension those same traits in our perceptions of the Ukrainian peoples, artificially of course presented as a completely homogenized community, which by any logic they probably aren't.

This is a carefully constructed media representation of truth, which may or may not be the actual truth, that we may or may not believe exists anyway. The presentation of valor, for example, in the Russia/Ukraine conflict could be a necessary generality to prevent the noise of deep context making the binaries of right and wrong problematical. This would distract from a higher resolution analysis, an analysis that is ultimately more difficult to process and, critically, to summarize. After all, the news media need to be able to say more than, “wow, this is some complicated, socially and historically difficult noisy mess, and we don't know what to tell you to think”. The palatable heroism of the Ukrainian people is infinitely preferable to a noisier truth that might dwell under the surface. Only as an example, the very real truth that martial law and conscription means men cannot leave Ukraine. Or the evidencable truth that there are indeed real neo-Nazi associations with the Azov Brigade of the Ukrainian national guard. The latter pulls a, however thin, thread of connection to Putin's alleged mission of de-Nazification. I say this only to describe the position of context, deployed in one way or another, there are many further examples that can add a certain dressing of credence to any one position. Such examples serve as a further illustration of noise, and are also the starting position for my performance of *Ursonate Post-Truth* (2018). This performance work is about the descent of truth to noise, or the substitution of the same, for the purposes of distraction or even as a call-to-action in finding truth through voicing noise. Perlocutionary speech, one of JL Austin's Speech Acts (Austin 1962), is that which mobilizes action and is deeply embedded into the notions of rhetoric more generally (back to the ancients). Post-truth speechmaking is perlocutionary, even if it is absent of truth—it is, after all, partly how Trump got (re) elected.

*Ursonate Post-truth* is a reimagining of the seminal sound poem *Die Ursonate* (2002 [1922-1932]) by Kurt Schwitter's, a 20th century absurdist German artist, thinker and poet. If you were to look at the *Ursonate* written down, you would see what appears to be

words on the pages, but they represent no known language. Written down, the Ursonate is set out rather like a conventional sonata or symphony in four parts and looks rather like a music score in this regard. Schwitter's *Die Ursonate* or "sonate in urlauten" means "primordial sonata" or "sonata in primordial sounds", and plays with assumed notions of language, sound and speech. I've come to believe that the Ursonate is inherently more truthful, more real, and more honest than the words of our leaders. The words of the Ursonate resonate profoundly, honestly, and powerfully for me and perhaps this resonance is the best we can hope for in the post-truth world.

My version of the Ursonate interlaces examples of contemporary political oratory directly into the text. The result is that quotations and impressions of our political leaders are integrated into the Ursonate's primordial noise. I'm really interested in putting these things together. My hope is, that by putting the absurd, the noisy primordial Ursonate next to the confident, earnest and vacuous delivery of our political speakers, something might happen. Perhaps the performance might offer an insight into *la langue originelle*. The performance could serve to illuminate the interconnected complexity of rhetorical structure. Or, it may offer a clarification of noise as the intended disruptor, either as yet another dirty version of something, or as God herself. You can watch and listen to a version of *Ursonate Post-truth* here.<sup>2</sup> Every version of *Ursonate Post-truth* is different, with the political voices changing with the ebbs and flows of political and cultural discourse. Donald Trump has remained constant in all versions of the performance between 2019 and now. Not only does he remain culturally relevant, there is also something particular about his rambling voice and his digressive and appealing style. His approach is markedly perceived as authentic because it's less polished and resonates well with a target demographic. It finds utility in the post-truth methodology I spoke to previously, it's perceived as refreshing and people believe in it. But this may not be the desired site to resurrect the meaningful public speaker.

I'm interested in rediscovering the power of public oratory and the enduring truth of stories told through voice. I have been on something of a mini crusade to rebuild confidence in speaking, confidence in story, and confidence in truth of voice. My latest work toward this aim was undertaken during the Christmas period of December 2023. I stood in Leeds City square to read a story to the city as part of our Leeds 2023 cultural celebrations.<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" has been an enduring Christmas favorite for more than 180 years after its first publication. It is a story of social justice, forgiveness and redemption. A story of transformation, magic, family, and love. It is a site for universal truth and it is, I believe, a good choice. Dickens sold many books in his lifetime but made more money (and perhaps gathered more support) through his own public readings of his works. Beginning in 1853, with a reading of "A Christmas Carol", he was the first great author to perform his works in public. He engaged in reading tours every year until his death in 1870. His last public performance was of "A Christmas Carol". Dicken's used to read an abridged version of the story, I read the complete work, unabridged, from start to finish. It took me three and half hours. Around 1,000 people stopped to listen, many more walked passed and heard a snippet or a whisper of the story. A few families picnicked at the performance, workers of the city took their lunch breaks and came to listen, some of the homeless community of the city stayed for a couple of hours,



their daily landscape altered a little. A video of the performance is available to view online and links have been sent to Leeds schools, where “A Christmas Carol” is a set text for GCSE English.<sup>4</sup> I loved doing it and the experience confirms for me our appetite to be told good stories that mean something, in the real world, using our voices. I believe this will always be the case, however difficult it becomes for us to discern the real truth. We must continue to pick stories worth telling, and tell them, fully and unapologetically.

While we may never fully recover the implicit trust of the public the ancients had through our competent vocal activities, we can and must strive to do our best with the tools we have, the tools of our voice, our most unique quality. Indeed, we must continue to look people in the eye and use our voice to tell them the truth.



Oliver Bray reading a Christmas carol, City Square Leeds, 2023. © Leeds Beckett university.

## Notes

1. An extract of the *Speech Maker* is viewable here, <https://youtu.be/tsnw865494E>; (2011).
2. A full performance of *Ursonate Post-truth* is viewable here, <https://youtu.be/FDbHwsoxxV8n>; (2018).
3. In 2015, Leeds was busy positioning itself to be the European capital of culture and when Brexit put an end to that, the bid team decided not to panic, and instead put the kettle on, and had a think. After some discussion, the team decided that despite not being eligible for the European capital of culture, that didn't really matter, so they decided "let's do it anyway!" (<https://culturenext.eu/city/leeds/>) This captures the Yorkshire creative character beautifully.
4. The full performance of *A Christmas Carol* is viewable here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6csTVw7mbl>, (2023)

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor



**Oliver Bray** is the Dean of Leeds School of Arts at Leeds Beckett University. Oliver's research interests stem from his professional practice in contemporary performance and live art but are inherently interdisciplinary in nature. As a theatre maker and practice-led researcher, his interests include durational public reading, speech-making, the art of rhetoric and the performance potential of political post-truth in the 21st century. Oliver's well-respected performance and live art practice has toured nationally and internationally to venues and festivals including the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, Romania; In between Time, Bristol; and the National Review of Live Art, Glasgow.

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