Responsibility of Intellectuals

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The responsibility of intellectuals in the era of bounded rationality and *Democracy for Realists*

**Nicholas Allott**

In his famous essay, Chomsky wrote: ‘It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies. This, at least, may seem enough of a truism to pass over without comment.’ One might ask what the source of this responsibility (henceforth RI) is. Chomsky notes that in western democracies, where there is ‘political liberty, … access to information and freedom of expression’ a ‘privileged minority’ (whom he refers to as ‘intellectuals’) also have

the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us.

They therefore have responsibilities that go beyond those of others.

Agreeing with this, one might note that RI seems to presuppose that exposing political truths has a certain kind of instrumental value, namely that it will tend to make the world a better place by changing people’s political views. In fact, Chomsky’s position on this question is more nuanced. In an interview he said ‘I don’t have faith that the truth will prevail if it becomes known, but we have no alternative to proceeding on that assumption’, and he has often endorsed Gramsci’s ‘optimism of the will’ as a necessary corollary to pessimism of the intellect.

I suggest that intellectuals and other privileged individuals have the responsibility not only to tell the truth and expose lies but to do so in ways that – in their best judgement – are most likely to be understood and to be effective. This is a fairly direct consequence of another claim that Chomsky has made many times: that people are responsible for the
foreseeable consequences of their actions. He calls this a truism, too, with some justification.

But why does the issue of effectiveness even arise? Isn’t it enough simply to get the truth out in some form or other? Perhaps no one has ever held such a naive view; in any case, recent findings in psychology and political science make the challenges it faces more obvious and specific. They suggest that the truth does not necessarily influence political behaviour even when it is available, and that exposure to the truth may entrench rather than overthrow erroneous opinions.

There is strong evidence that voting is not driven primarily by evaluation of the policies on offer. Recently, the political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels have argued that voting is not well explained as selection of a party with policies that match the voter’s preferences, nor as rewarding or punishing incumbents for their actions. Evidence includes the startling fact that votes are strongly affected by natural events. If Achen and Bartels are right, then there is a significant disconnection between widely available information and one of the central ways that citizens exert political power, and it is natural to suppose that the story is similar for other political behaviour besides voting. The challenge to RI from this research is that telling the truth and exposing lies may not make much difference.

A second problem is indicated by research on motivated reasoning and the ‘backfire effect’. Facts that contradict political beliefs or discredit voters’ preferred electoral candidates tend to reinforce rather than dispel those beliefs and allegiances. We have a strong tendency to treat such facts with suspicion, while uncritically welcoming evidence that confirms our current views. Clearly, the challenge to RI posed by this work is that telling the truth may be counterproductive and damaging.

In what follows, I first set out these research findings in a bit more detail, then consider how troubling these results – if real and robust – are for RI. In my discussion, I briefly show that Achen and Bartels’ results are highly congruent with Chomsky’s views on the functioning of education systems, the mass media and representative democracy in the US and other modern democracies. It is plausible that deepening democracy so that it more closely matches the popular ideal will require considerable changes to education, the media and the democratic system itself.

If the backfire effect is dominant then RI will often be overridden by a responsibility to avoid harm. But the findings about the backfire effect need to be weighed up against other evidence that telling the truth can change opinions in positive ways.
The problematic findings

Democracy for Realists

In their recent book, Achen and Bartels claim that there is a dominant folk theory or popular ideal of democracy, which can be summarised in this way:

Ordinary people have preferences about what their government should do. They choose leaders who will do those things, or they enact their preferences directly in referendums. In either case, what the majority wants becomes government policy.

Summarising a great deal of evidence, they argue that this theory is wrong:

The populist ideal of electoral democracy, for all its elegance and attractiveness, is largely irrelevant in practice, leaving elected officials mostly free to pursue their own notions of the public good or to respond to party and interest group pressures.

A wealth of evidence suggests that votes are not cast on the basis of voters’ policy preferences, and unsurprisingly, therefore, there is often a poor match between those preferences and the policies of the parties voted for.

Achen and Bartels also argue that electoral choices do not support the retrospective voting hypothesis: that voters assess the performance of elected representatives and officials and punish or reward them accordingly at subsequent elections. They identify two reasons. First, voters are not good at distinguishing the effects caused by government policies from other effects. Achen and Bartels demonstrate this by showing that voters punish politicians for outcomes that are clearly not under their control, including natural events such as shark attacks, droughts and floods. Second, voters are not very good at keeping track of changes, even those that impact upon their own welfare. Achen and Bartels show that while voters do vote on the basis of income growth, there is a recency bias: we tend to focus on income growth in the months immediately prior to the election, neglecting the overall record of the government.

They also argue that so-called ‘direct democracy’, where voters vote on issues rather than for representatives, does not brighten the picture, because there is evidence that the results of such referendums
and ballot initiatives reflect campaign spending by the wealthy more than the preferences of voters. In practice, Achen and Bartels argue – agreeing with work by David Broder – that the result of increased use of direct votes on issues, in the US at least, has largely been to empower the wealthy and well-organised ‘millionaires and interest groups that use their wealth to achieve their own policy goals’.

The true picture, Achen and Bartels argue, is that most voters pay little attention to politics, and at elections their choices depend largely on recent developments in the economy and on political group loyalties that are typically held from childhood.

**The backfire effect**

A number of studies have found that evidence against a political or social belief may serve to strengthen that belief, and that negative information about a political candidate may increase the support she receives from those who already support her. Although these findings are striking, they should perhaps not be very surprising, given that there is a wealth of evidence from work over several decades in psychology and economics that human reasoning is prone to a wide variety of biases. We are very far from dispassionate, logical reasoners: our reasoning is often *motivated*, that is, slanted by our preconceptions and towards conclusions that we would prefer to be true, and much of it is performed by efficient but flawed heuristics rather than processes that respect laws of logic and statistical inference. What is more, we are not very reliable reporters of the way we reason. Introspection – that is, thinking about how one thinks – is not in general an accurate source of information. The work discussed in this section extends this picture to political science.

Psychologists Kari Edwards and Edward Smith have shown a disconfirmation bias in reasoning about political and social issues: people examine arguments for longer on average if they clash with a belief that they hold, and a consequence of this longer examination is that such arguments are judged weaker on average than those that are compatible with prior beliefs. They also showed that this bias is greater when the belief that clashes with the argument is held with emotional conviction. In a series of papers, political scientists Milton Lodge and Charles Taber find similar effects in our processing of information relating to issues such as gun control and affirmative action. The typical reaction to an argument against a prior belief or commitment is to generate
counterarguments, whereas arguments that support prior beliefs are accepted uncritically.\textsuperscript{15}

This tendency to generate counterarguments has a strikingly counterintuitive result: negative information can lead to a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of the initial belief.\textsuperscript{16} This is the ‘backfire effect’, a term coined by Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler.\textsuperscript{17} In their study, corrections of erroneous beliefs (e.g. that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction immediately before the US–UK invasion of 2003) led to reinforcement of the false belief.

Similar results emerge from work on (simulated) choice of political candidates. A study conducted by David Redlawsk found that voters took longer to process information that showed in a bad light a candidate whom the voter had already evaluated positively and information that showed in a good light a candidate already evaluated negatively, compared with information that fitted their expectations.\textsuperscript{18} The backfire effect exists here too: negative information about a positively evaluated candidate tended to make that candidate more positively evaluated, not less.

In a later paper, Redlawsk and his co-authors Andrew Civettini and Karen Emmerson suggest an explanation:

voters committed to a candidate may be motivated to discount incongruent information; they may mentally argue against it, bolstering their existing evaluation by recalling all the good things about a liked candidate even in the face of something negative.\textsuperscript{19}

Taken together, this research suggests that we are very far from ideally rational, disinterested observers of the scene, updating our beliefs as warranted by new evidence. Under certain circumstances, we employ reasoning as a defence mechanism to bolster our prior convictions and choices against inconvenient truths.\textsuperscript{20}

Discussion

How worried should a supporter of the responsibility of intellectuals be?

The \textit{Democracy for Realists} findings are disturbing, but perhaps not as surprising for those on the left as they have been for some liberals and political scientists, since left-wingers of various persuasions have long argued that many people vote against their own interests (back at least to Engels’ invocation of ‘false consciousness’).\textsuperscript{21} In addition, Achen and
Bartels do not fully specify the mechanisms behind the effects they have discovered, leaving scope for supporters of RI to argue that part of the problem is that important truths are insufficiently well known and that lies go unchallenged. In that case, truth-telling by intellectuals could make a difference to how people vote. What is more, political change does not come about only, or even mainly, through choices at elections, and supporters of RI can argue that the responsibility to tell the truth is partly due to the effect a better-informed public may have in other ways, such as by improving the political culture.

The clash between the backfire effect and RI is harder to set aside. Revealing the truth about an issue, political party or candidate may have the opposite result to the one intended, entrenching opinions rather than changing them. To the extent that RI is motivated or justified by the expectation that exposing political truths will cause positive change, this is a fundamental challenge to the view. Happily, although the backfire effect is robust, there is convergent evidence that information can affect political views in non- perverse ways.

Bounded rationality

Both sets of findings have been connected with the fact that human rationality is bounded in various ways: by time, attention span, processing power and the competing demands of life. We are finite beings, with only limited time and resources, and many other things to do besides keeping abreast of the activities of our governments; so, as Achen and Bartels write,

> In the welter of political claims and counterclaims, most people simply lack the time and relevant experience to sort out difficult truths from appealing dreams. That is no less true for Ivy League and Oxbridge dons than it is for average citizens.

Given that Achen and Bartels' work does not specify in great detail the mechanisms that are responsible for their results, a proponent of RI could argue that part of the problem is that those who could speak out do not do so, and this increases the amounts of time and attention required to get at the truth by sifting through the lies and evasions of politicians, columnists and the like. As Chomsky noted in his essay:

> The facts [about the US assault on Vietnam] are known to all who care to know. The press, foreign and domestic, has presented
documentation to refute each falsehood as it appears. But the power of the government’s propaganda apparatus is such that the citizen who does not undertake a research project on the subject can hardly hope to confront government pronouncements with fact.

This is work that those with research skills and free time can usefully do, thus lowering the barriers somewhat for those who do not, although they are left, unavoidably, with the second-order research projects of deciding what to read and whether to believe it. Finding out about and critically reading the work of (e.g.) Patrick Cockburn and Tanya Reinhart on western Asia or Dean Baker and Ha-Joon Chang on economics takes considerable time and effort, but doing the work for oneself would take several lifetimes.\(^{25}\)

The role of the media

Most adults get most of their information about politics and current affairs through the mass media. Obviously relevant, therefore, is Chomsky’s work with Edward Herman on the ways that, in the formally free mass media in democratic societies, inconvenient facts are downplayed and debate is bounded by certain presuppositions that are neither questioned nor stated.\(^{26}\) This work is highly congruent with Achen and Bartels’ work; indeed it can be seen as suggesting mechanisms that help to cause the results they see:

By manufacturing consent, you can overcome the fact that formally a lot of people have the right to vote. We can make it irrelevant because we can manufacture consent and make sure that their choices and attitudes will be structured in such a way that they will always do what we tell them, even if they have a formal way to participate.\(^{27}\)

Assuming this is correct, the impact on RI is not obvious. Knowing that certain truths are off limits for the mass media arguably makes it more imperative for those who can to speak out. But this responsibility comes with a heavy dose of realism about getting views that are outside of the mainstream heard and understood.

The role of a good education

There are a number of other similarities between the views of Chomsky and Achen and Bartels. Chomsky has frequently made the claim that
among the most thoroughly indoctrinated in modern democracies are the ‘well-educated’, that is, those who have spent longer than average in formal education, especially those who have attended elite institutions:

If you’ve gone to the best schools … you just have instilled into you the understanding that there are certain things that [it] wouldn’t do to say [a]nd, it wouldn’t even do to think. 28

In a similar vein, Achen and Bartels write that:

Well-informed citizens[‘] … well-organized ‘ideological’ thinking often turns out to be just a rather mechanical reflection of what their favorite group and party leaders have instructed them to think. 29

Obviously the picture is complicated by the fact that elite education is also conducive to the possession of skills that are needed for independent research and to the leisure required to put them to use, as Chomsky pointed out in ‘The Responsibility of Intellectuals’.

The role of the democratic system

We’ve seen that Chomsky suggests that the media and the education system structure our attitudes. This could explain some part of Achen and Bartels’ results. But, as discussed above, those results also show that people vote against their own preferences. Their explanation is that voting behaviour is better explained by the social group or groups to which a voter belongs. 30

Another mechanism that very plausibly explains some of the mismatches between voter preferences and policy choices is the role of campaign finance. Thomas Ferguson’s investment theory of party competition, often cited by Chomsky, postulates that the need to raise campaign finance (‘the campaign cost condition’) reduces party politics to ‘competition between blocs of major investors’. 31 This means that voters are offered a choice between organisations that represent and will implement the preferred policies of certain areas of business, none of which is likely to match closely the preferences of ordinary voters. As Chomsky has pointed out, for a long time universal healthcare was the preference of the majority of voters in the US, but neither major party offered it.
It would seem that if one takes democracy seriously, one should work towards a system that is resilient against such distortions. Chomsky’s vision here is of a bottom-up, citizen-led democracy:

In a democratic system, what would happen [in the New Hampshire primary] is that the people in New Hampshire would get together in whatever organizations they have: town meetings, churches, unions, and work out what they want policy to be. Then, if some candidate wants to appeal to them, he could ask to be invited, and they would invite him to New Hampshire and tell him what they want. And, if they could get a commitment from him that they could believe in, they might decide to vote for him. That would be a democratic society.32

Assuming that Achen and Bartels are right, even if important truths become widely known in currently existing democracies, it is entirely possible that there will be little effect on how people vote. That is certainly chastening for supporters of RI, but in itself it is not enough to remove the responsibility, since it does not prove that telling the truth will not have an impact within the present system, and it shows little or nothing about whether it will aid in moving towards a more democratic society.

The backfire effect redux

If the backfire effect were always operative and dominant, then a key motivation for telling the truth and exposing lies would disappear, since telling the truth would generally be counterproductive.33 But a moment’s thought establishes that this cannot be right. People do change their minds, and at least some of the time when they do so it is because they have been persuaded by evidence against their prior belief.

In experimental work investigating the backfire effect, Redlawsk, Civettini and Emmerson found that there is a ‘tipping point’ beyond which further negative evidence has a negative effect rather than a reinforcing one.34 As they say, this indicates that ‘voters are not immune to disconfirming information after all, even when initially acting as motivated reasoners’.35

Other research shows that exposure to modest amounts of information can shift opinions considerably and that it has some effect on policy preferences. One strand of this research has focused on attitudes to immigration. In western countries, most people significantly overestimate the number of immigrants in their country, hold other inaccurate
opinions about immigrants and would like immigration reduced. A large study carried out across 13 countries found that telling participants the correct percentage of immigrants in their country made it less likely that they would say that there are too many. In two studies in which participants were told five pieces of information about immigrants, this improved their attitudes toward immigrants. This information did not significantly change policy preferences on average, but it did make self-identified right-wingers and Republicans more likely to support pro-immigration policies, the opposite to what one might expect if the backfire effect were operative. Similarly, a recent study carried out by Giovanni Facchini, Yotam Margalit and Hiroyuki Nakata in Japan – a country with very few immigrants and broad political opposition to immigration – found that hostility to increased immigration was considerably decreased by the presentation of information about potential social and economic benefits.

It is clear, therefore, that it can be effective to expose people to information that tends to undermine their beliefs. Obviously, it would be useful to know more about when telling the truth is effective and when it is counterproductive. It is very plausible that the way that information is presented matters, in ways that we still know too little about. The research mentioned above on heuristics and biases is obviously relevant. It may also matter whether information is openly stated, implied or somehow presupposed. Such questions are the province of pragmatics, the area of linguistics that studies how we communicate with each other in context. There is also a growing literature on the role of the salience of social group membership in receptiveness to information and argumentation. As Alana Conner puts it: ‘One of the things we know from social psychology is when people feel threatened, they can’t change, they can’t listen.’ In any case, the responsibility to tell the truth and expose lies remains, and is accompanied by a responsibility to do so effectively, which implies a further responsibility to keep abreast of research of the type discussed here as it develops.

Notes

3 Of course, telling the truth may be the right thing for intellectuals and others to do for other reasons, for example a Kantian or Christian prohibition on lies, or various possible instrumental roles of truth-telling other than informing people’s first-order political behaviour
(e.g. it might promote trust in experts, and that might be a good). I proceed on the assumption that for Chomsky the effect of truth-telling on people’s political views and therefore behaviour is a central reason for RI.


7 As they discuss, there is a good deal of evidence that this folk theory co-exists with a realistic assessment of how things stand. In US polling a majority consistently agrees that ‘the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.’ Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 8. See American National Election Studies Guide to Public Opinion, ‘Is the government run for the benefit of all 1964–2012: Response “few big interests”’, http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/graphs/g5a_2_1.htm (accessed February 2018).

8 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 1.


10 Achen and Bartels, ‘Democracy for realists,’ 270.


12 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 1. I do not attempt to evaluate Achen and Bartels’ research here. My concern is with the consequences of their thesis, on the assumption that it is broadly correct, for RI. One scholarly response is that the findings are less surprising than Achen and Bartels suggest (‘not news’) and that their major contribution is ‘interesting new data’: Gerald Wright, ‘A discussion of Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels’ *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*,’ *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 1 (2017), 161–2. For more positive assessments of its originality and impact see arguments by Neil Roberts, Andrew Sabl, Isabela Mares and Antje Schwennicke cited in ‘A discussion of Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels’ *Democracy for Realists*,’ *Perspectives on Politics*, 148–61.

13 Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, ‘On the psychology of prediction,’ *Psychological Review* 80, no. 4 (1973), is a classic early study on human irrationality; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011) is a recent popular overview of the field. A classic study on the unreliability of introspection is Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson, ‘Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes,’ *Psychological Review* 84, no. 3 (1977), 231. For a more optimistic take on heuristics in human reasoning and decision-making, see Gerd Gigerenzer, ‘Why heuristics work,’ *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 1 (2008), 20–9.


16 Lodge and Taber, ‘Three steps toward a theory of motivated political reasoning,’ 183–213.

Redlawsk, ‘Hot cognition or cool consideration?’ The Journal of Politics: 1021–44.


These findings are congruent with (although logically independent from) Mercier and Sperber’s claim that the evolutionary function of the ability to reason is not to improve knowledge and make better decisions, but to help us to persuade others and to protect us against persuasion. However, to the extent that the results are problematic for RI, that is so regardless of any evolutionary backstory. The issue is what people do when presented with the truth, not why they do it. Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, ‘Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory,’ Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 34, no. 2 (2011), 57–74.

Note, though, that Achen and Bartels make the distinct and more counterintuitive claim that people vote against their own preferences.

Lodge and Taber, ‘Three steps toward a theory of motivated political reasoning,’ 183–213.


The second half of their book sets out their ‘group theory’ of voting, but as it is developed there it does not offer detailed explanations for many of the negative findings about the folk theory which are set out in the first half of the book. Isabela Mares, ‘A discussion of Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels’ Democracy for Realists,’ Perspectives on Politics, 159–60.

One useful heuristic is to read authors whom Chomsky cites. That would lead to the four mentioned in the text (among hundreds of others).


Achen and Bartels, Democracy for Realists, 12.

Chomsky may agree with this. Certainly, he has often stressed that getting things done requires organised groups, e.g.: ‘Being alone, you can’t do anything – But if you join with other people you can make changes’. Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian, Secrets, Lies, and Democracy (Tucson, AZ: Odonian Press, 1994), 105–6.


Other motivations/justifications for RoI would survive – see note 3 above.

Redlawsk, Civettini and Emmerson, ‘The affective tipping point: Do motivated reasoners ever “get it”? Political Psychology, 563–93. It is tempting to hope that as this essay is being written in late 2017 we are seeing that tipping point being reached vis-à-vis the Trump presidency by various prominent Republicans.


See for example Brenda Major, Alison Blodorn and Gregory Major Blascovich, ‘The threat of increasing diversity: Why many White Americans support Trump in the 2016 presidential election,’ Group Processes & Intergroup Relations 21, no. 6 (2016). For overviews see Sheri Berman, ‘Why identity politics benefits the right more than the left,’ The Guardian, 14 July 2018; German Lopez, ‘Research says there are ways to reduce racial bias. Calling people racist isn’t one of them,’ Vox, 14 August 2017.

Quoted in Lopez, ‘Research says there are ways to reduce racial bias.’