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EUROPEAN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics

Populism, Disinformation and
the Public Sphere

Edited by Maximilian Conrad
Guðmundur Hálfðanarson · Asimina Michailidou
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PREFACE

This book is the result of three years of research that has been carried out in the context of the *Jean Monnet Network* on “Post-Truth Politics, Nationalism and the (De-)Legitimation of European Integration”. The work of the network has been funded by the European Union’s Erasmus+ programme and is hosted at the Höfði Peace Centre at the University of Iceland’s Institute of International Affairs. Under the leadership of Maximilian Conrad, the network has brought together researchers from seven countries within Europe and Canada, including the University of Birmingham, the University of Copenhagen, the University of Helsinki, the University of Iceland, the University of Oslo, the University of Victoria, and the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence. When the network commenced its activities in late 2019, its aim of studying the impact of post-truth politics on European integration, specifically as regards processes of legitimating and delegitimizing the European project, was prompted by the recent experience of Brexit and the 2016 US Presidential elections. Developments since then have clearly underlined the continued relevance of post-truth politics and suggest that the challenge of mis- and disinformation may indeed be here to stay as a fundamental challenge to liberal democracy.

Initially, the network’s work programme set out to address the challenge of post-truth politics from the vantage point of four distinct, yet interlinked, themes. These were, namely, the impact of post-truth politics

on (a) the quality of deliberation in the public sphere, (b) the legitimisation and delegitimation of European integration, (c) political systems and democracy at the European and national levels, and (d) the mediatization and politicisation of immigration. The network's emphasis on these themes has also left its mark on the structure of this volume in terms of the areas and issues that are addressed in its three sections and the individual chapters contained within. These highlight the various challenges that post-truth politics and/or mis- and disinformation pose to democracy and democratic deliberation in the public sphere, but they also emphasise the profound impact that such processes have in terms of the delegitimation of European integration and, indeed, the *disintegration* of Europe. However, they also highlight the intimate link between populism and post-truth politics, and the apparent susceptibility to mis- and disinformation that characterises debates on policy areas such as migration.

The network has generated inspiring academic discussions among its participants, but it has also provided a welcome opportunity to create new, as well as develop already existing, research collaborations. With regard to the latter, one of the benefits of this network has certainly been the diversity of its members' research interests and agendas, which have allowed the five members of the editorial team to recruit a highly interesting mix of scholars who have contributed to this volume. Therefore, the chapters in this book have been written, in part, by members of the network's consortium, while also integrating contributions made by scholars that the network members only grew to know during the course of the network's activities and now look forward to working with in the future.

One of the most important ambitions underlying the activities of this network has been to make its findings accessible beyond academic circles, for instance, among policymakers and practitioners, but also among any other interested parties within civil society. The activities of the network were motivated by an overarching recognition of the need for more academic research on post-truth politics, but perhaps more importantly, also by a perception of the need to raise awareness among wider segments of the public for the fundamental challenge that post-truth politics represents for liberal democracy. In this sense, this book is only one step towards achieving the broader goals of our network. In academic terms, the book provides an understanding of the phenomenon of post-truth politics in the European context and draws attention, not only to how we can make sense of the concept, but also provides answers to the question of how and where post-truth politics manifests itself and how we can

study it. As editors of this volume, we look at the chapters in this book as a contribution to the academic debate on post-truth politics, but most importantly as an invitation for broader debates within civil society.

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This volume is published with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. It is part of the Jean Monnet Networks project “Post-Truth Politics, Nationalism and the (De)Legitimation of European Integration”. This financial support is gratefully acknowledged. The editors of this volume would furthermore like to express their sincere gratitude to several people for their respective roles in the making of this volume. As this book is the product of a Jean Monnet Network, we would like to begin by thanking all those that have worked very hard behind the scenes to ensure the success of this network. Pia Hansson, the Director of the Institute of International Affairs at the University of Iceland, had the vision and ambition to go for a second Jean Monnet Networks grant to be hosted at the Institute and made the necessary resources available to embark on the journey of applying for this grant. Auður Örlygsdóttir and Tómas Joensen did an outstanding job in co-ordinating and writing the grant application, thereby laying the foundation for the work of network. Over the last three and a half years, Auður has furthermore done a tremendous job managing the network on behalf of Höfði Peace Centre at the University of Iceland’s Institute of International Affairs.

We would like to thank all of the chapter authors for their respective contributions to this volume. It goes without saying that without their time and effort, this volume would not have come to fruition. We would also like to thank all other participants of our Jean Monnet Network who have in one way or another contributed to the network and thereby

shaped the outcome of its research. Due to the Covid pandemic, the discussions in our network have needed to be held almost exclusively online and many of us have still never met in person. Still, our discussions have contributed significantly to sharpening many of the arguments made in this volume.

The editorial team would like to thank Magdalena Falter for her excellent work in formatting the manuscript and Paul J. Cottier for his outstanding work in copy-editing the chapters in this volume under considerable time pressure. A special thanks also goes to Karoliina Heikkinen for recreating the image of a social media post that was needed to highlight the argument in Gwen Bauvois' and Niko Pyrhönen's chapter. Finally, the editorial team would like to thank the team at Springer and Palgrave for their help on all aspects connected to the preparation and submission of the manuscript.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics	1
	Maximilian Conrad and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson	
	Part I Post-Truth Politics, Democracy and the Public Sphere	
2	Post-Truth, Postmodernism and the Public Sphere	13
	Saul Newman	
3	The Context of Fake News, Disinformation, and Manipulation	31
	John Erik Fossum	
4	Journalism, Truth and the Restoration of Trust in Democracy: Tracing the EU ‘Fake News’ Strategy	53
	Asimina Michailidou, Elisabeth Eike, and Hans-Jörg Trenz	
	Part II Post-Truth Populism and the Disintegration of Europe	
5	From Denouncing to Defunding: The Post-Truth Populist Challenge to Public-Service Media	79
	Maximilian Conrad	

6	Post-Truth Politics, Brexit, and European Disintegration	103
	Vittorio Orlando	
7	“Europe is Christian, or It Is Not Europe”: Post-Truth Politics and Religion in Matteo Salvini’s Tweets	129
	Giulia Evolvi	
Part III Mediatisation and Politicisation of Immigration		
8	Claiming Authority Over ‘Truths’ and ‘Facts’: Information Risk Campaigns to Prevent Irregular Migration	151
	Verena K. Brändle	
9	Facts, Narratives and Migration: Tackling Disinformation at the European and UN Level of Governance	177
	Anna Björk	
10	Shedding Light on People’s Social Media Concerns Through Political Party Preference, Media Trust, and Immigration Attitudes	199
	Sanna Malinen, Aki Koivula, Teo Keipi, and Arttu Saarinen	
11	In Search for Unexpected Allies? Radical Right Remediation of ‘the 2015 Refugee Crisis’ on Social Media	223
	Gwenaëlle Bauvois and Niko Pyrhönen	
Part IV Conclusion		
12	Concluding Reflections on Europe in the Age of Post-truth Politics	247
	Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Maximilian Conrad	
	Index	255

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 10.1	Social media concerns according to party preference	211
Fig. 11.1	Weekly posting frequency	229
Fig. 11.2	URL frequency by media type, whole dataset	231
Fig. 11.3	An illustration of the poll published by MTV3, remediated on the FF Facebook page with their motto: “Finland First: We will not surrender, we will not give up!” and the commentary: “The people knows! CLOSE THE BORDERS!” (excerpt 12:1)	235

LIST OF TABLES

Table 6.1	Actors and arenas analysed	110
Table 6.2	Misinformation by articles (total number of articles in parentheses)	111
Table 6.3	Misinformation by arenas (total number of articles in parentheses)	111
Table 7.1	Religious themes in Salvini's tweets	136
Table 10.1	The descriptive information of dependent variables	208
Table 10.2	The descriptive statistics for independent variables	209
Table 10.3	Predicting social media concerns by political party preference, trust in traditional news media and immigration attitudes using average marginal effects from the multinomial logistic regression models	212
Table 10.4	The decomposition of relationships between political party preference and social media concerns according to trust in traditional news media and immigration attitudes	214



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics

Maximilian Conrad and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson

BACKGROUND

When the citizens of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in June 2016, their decision marked much more than the first time in the history of European integration that an entire member state chose to leave the union. Due to the extent of the mis- and disinformation that had been disseminated in the wake of the Leave campaign (see Marshall & Drieschova, 2018; Orlando, 2022), the Brexit referendum was interpreted not only as the possible beginning of the disintegration of the European project (see Leruth et al., 2019; Rosamond, 2016; Vollaard, 2018), but moreover, as a sign of the emergence of what would come to be referred to as ‘post-truth politics’ (Farkas & Schou, 2020;

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Lo Schiavo, 2019; McIntyre, 2018). The impression of the dawn of a new era of ‘postfactual politics’ (MacMullen, 2020), alternatively referred to also as ‘information disorder’ (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and/or ‘truth decay’ (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018), was reinforced shortly afterwards in the wake of Donald Trump’s successful bid to become the President of the United States. On the surface, to a significant extent this impression clearly resulted from the apparent indifference to the facts that Donald Trump showed throughout his campaign, but perhaps more strikingly by a corresponding indifference on the part of his supporters and, famously, also by references to *alternative facts* regarding the crowd size at the inauguration ceremony (cf. Monsees, 2021; Vogelmann, 2018). But notably, the Brexit referendum process and the 2016 US Presidential elections also gained notoriety in the context of post-truth politics because of the scope of disinformation spread by external actors for manipulative purposes, oftentimes referred to as ‘Russian meddling’ (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Llewellyn et al., 2019).

From the spring of 2020 onwards, the poor handling of the COVID pandemic in countries led by right-wing populist governments caused some to predict—somewhat optimistically—the imminent demise of populism. And while there may have been some hope that this would result also in a turn away from post-truth politics, recent events have suggested otherwise. Although the early phases of the pandemic underlined a renewed interest in reliable factual information and a demand for scientific expertise, the kinds of conspiracy narratives underlying much of the opposition towards social distancing measures, the obligatory use of masks and, subsequently, also vaccination campaigns can be understood as a clear reminder that the post-truth era may very well be here to stay. At the time of writing, the most striking case in point is, however, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, most of all, the atrocious war crimes committed under the guise of a ‘special military operation’ that is allegedly carried out for the sake of ‘de-Nazifying’ the country.

It is against this backdrop that this volume sets out to study the impact of post-truth politics on Europe. Here, Europe is understood in a fairly wide sense and is not limited to the European Union, although our interest is in large part connected to the legitimization and delegitimation of European integration. In this introduction, a few words are in order on what the contributions that make up this volume have in common when they address the issue of post-truth politics. Admittedly,

the term post-truth politics can be perceived as fairly *broad* and potentially also somewhat *misleading*. It is *broad* in the sense that it is used as an umbrella term that covers a whole range of interlinked phenomena that are often conflated and collectively constitute the broader phenomenon of post-truth politics. In order to provide a basis for a more nuanced understanding of post-truth politics, it is evidently necessary to disentangle such phenomena, at least for analytical purposes. The concept of post-truth politics is furthermore somewhat *misleading* in that it suggests that the relevance of the truth in politics may be fading. This claim is certainly plausible with regard to the way in which some of the clearest cases of post-truth populists—most notably Donald Trump—tend to ‘play fast and loose with the truth’. The fact that there are regularly no consequences when political figures are found *not* to have spoken the truth may very well indicate that the truth is losing its ‘symbolic authority’ (Newman, 2019). However, such assertions also draw attention to the immensely contested nature of the truth. Claims to the truth—and indeed also allegations of lies and deceit—are also strikingly frequent among the supporters of post-truth populists, and both post-truth populists and their supporters are quick to assert that their freedom of thought and expression is curtailed by an overly politically correct political culture. Similarly, distrust in journalism is constituted to a significant extent by the idea—which is *promoted* and at the same time *exploited* by post-truth populists—that mainstream media are part of a corrupt liberal elite that presents only a highly stylised account of the truth and thus fails to tell the people the whole truth. With this in mind, it may indeed be more adequate, as some authors have done, to speak of *postfactual* politics to suggest that it is indeed the factual basis of truth claims that is becoming increasingly contentious, not the idea of the truth itself (cf. MacMullen, 2020).

We can develop what we mean by post-truth politics in relation to the considerable body of academic literature on post-truth politics that has emerged since the adjective ‘post-truth’ earned the title of ‘word of the year’ in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016. Thanks to this growing literature, significantly more is known today about the kinds of phenomena that constitute post-truth (or postfactual) politics, information disorder, or truth decay than when work on this volume began. In particular, this literature has moved beyond initial questions regarding the novelty of the phenomenon, specifically, whether politics has not always been *post-truth*, at least to some extent, and has started to address and

unpack the multifaceted character of the phenomenon. One overarching theme in this literature, that also drives several of the Chapters in this volume, is evidently the question of whether these various phenomena collectively amount to any profound transformation of political culture. That is to say, whether the substitution of fact by other considerations (e.g. emotion) and the apparent willingness to accept lies and deceit on the part of leading political figures indicates the coming of an era in which the truth *has indeed* lost its symbolic authority. If this is the case, then we clearly need to ask questions about what has brought this about and study empirically how it affects European politics.

A changing information environment is obviously one of these elements of post-truth politics. The structural transformation of the public sphere brought about by developments in information technology and, specifically, the rise of social media (Lo Schiavo, 2019, p. 219)—accompanied by a decline of (trust in) quality journalism—has contributed to what authors such as Peter Dahlgren have referred to as an ‘epistemic crisis of democracy’ (cf. Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Dahlgren, 2018; Sunstein, 2017). The rise of social media and the parallel decline of quality journalism is consequently often highlighted as one of the contributing factors in the emergence of a post-truth style of communication—and by extension for the rise of post-truth politics (Waisbord, 2018). This draws attention to an aspect that the Chapters in this volume focus on, namely the idea that post-truth politics has to be analysed by taking into account two central dimensions, specifically what is referred to in this volume as the *actor* and the *arena* dimension of post-truth politics. Post-truth politics, as it is understood in this volume, is characterised by a specific post-truth mode of communication, where a certain type of populist actor uses the infrastructure provided by social and other digital media to infuse the public sphere with mis- and disinformation.¹

¹ In a recent discussion on populism as the discursive construction of discontent, Vivien Schmidt has drawn a similar distinction between the ‘messenger’ and the ‘medium’, which broadly corresponds to our distinction between actors and arenas. Drawing on her discursive institutionalist framework, Schmidt furthermore lists the ‘message’ itself as well as the ‘milieu’ in which this discursive construction takes place as the four features of populism (Schmidt, 2022).

AIM OF THE BOOK

The aim of this book is to contribute to the literature on post-truth politics by providing theoretical reflections on post-truth politics as well as empirical evidence that highlights the intimate link and dynamic interplay between the *actor* and *arena* dimensions of post-truth politics. The title and subtitle of this book underline this dynamic interplay: the book analyses the impact of post-truth politics on Europe by highlighting the role of a specific type of actor (i.e. populist politicians) who utilise a specific kind of *arena* (i.e. social and other digital media) for the dissemination of mis- and disinformation in the public sphere—with all the consequences that this entails for the quality of public deliberation and democracy more broadly. The overarching narrative of the book is therefore that post-truth politics in Europe presents itself as the interplay of a specific post-truth mode of communication in the public sphere, where populist politicians play the key role with regard to the actor dimension, while social and other digital media play the key role with regard to the arena dimension. Against this backdrop, the book addresses the following themes and research questions:

- If post-truth politics constitutes a transformation of political culture, then what are the defining features of this emerging political culture?
- If post-truth politics is a symptom of a deeper crisis of political communication, the public sphere, or democracy more broadly, then what has brought this crisis about? What is this deeper crisis that finds expression in the emergence of a specific kind of populism that is articulated in a specific post-truth mode of communication?
- What can our empirical case studies tell us about this hypothesised link between the actor and the arena dimensions of post-truth politics?

ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

The volume is divided into three sections and arranged in such a way as to reflect the Chapters' differing emphases on theoretical and empirical aspects of post-truth politics in Europe. The three Chapters in Section One focus on the relationship between post-truth politics, democracy, and the public sphere from a predominantly theoretical perspective. In

Chapter 2, Saul Newman sets the tone for the book from a theoretical point of view and explores the epistemic and political challenge of post-truth discourse to the idea of the liberal democratic public sphere in times of right-wing populism and COVID-19. For Newman, this challenge provides a welcome opportunity to rethink the notion of the public sphere, pointing to the ways in which emancipatory social movements disrupt the institutions of the liberal democratic state. In this context, the Chapter examines the controversy around the relationship between post-truth and ‘postmodernism’, arguing that poststructuralist theory may indeed serve as an antidote to post-truth. John Erik Fossum’s Chapter 3 dovetails with this argument and contemplates the causes of the current era of post-truth politics. By exploring the context in which fake news, disinformation, and manipulation occur, Fossum proposes that the kind of post-truth politics that populist actors engage in should be seen primarily as a bellwether for the health of democracies. The emergence of post-truth populist actors can be attributed to changing politics-policy configurations, as for instance in the case of the European Economic Area agreement. Fossum supports this argument by developing a two-dimensional ‘constitutional democracy pathology scale’ that focuses on the existence of pathological features such as post-truth politics, but also proposes potential corrective mechanisms. In Chapter 4, Asimina Michailidou, Hans-Jörg Trenz, and Elisabeth Eike address the issue of distrust in journalism in Europe and discuss counterstrategies for the (re-) building of trust from a top-down European Union (EU) policy perspective. The Chapter assesses the EU’s response to the authoritarian and fake news challenge and discusses the limits of a voluntary (self-) regulatory approach in light of public sphere standards.

The Chapters in Section Two move onto questions connected to post-truth populism and the disintegration of Europe. In Chapter 5, Maximilian Conrad draws on Silvio Waisbord’s notion of an ‘elective affinity’ between populism and post-truth politics to discuss populist challenges to public-service media and critical journalism more broadly. Conrad argues that ‘fake news’ allegations and similar efforts to denounce critical journalists need to be understood as part of a post-truth populist strategy to undermine the legitimacy of mainstream media so as to justify demands for a defunding of public-service media. Based on an analysis of the Alternative for Germany’s ‘Grundfunk’ initiative to radically reduce the funding system for German public-service media, Conrad argues that such efforts may only be a stepping stone into a fully fledged post-truth

world where citizens' access to reliable information would be severely curtailed. Vittorio Orlando's Chapter 6 looks at the impact of post-truth politics on the Brexit process. Specifically, the Chapter analyses the role that misinformation disseminated by the Leave campaign played in the debate leading up to the Brexit referendum and discusses the significance of these findings in the broader context of European disintegration. In Chapter 7, Giulia Evolvi highlights the connection between populism and post-truth politics by presenting an empirical analysis of the tweets of the Italian far-right politician Matteo Salvini. The Chapter underlines the importance of social media as an *arena* for post-truth communication, emphasising both the connection between religion and disinformation, and the relevance of antagonistic politics and emotional narratives within the public sphere.

The theme of migration takes centre-stage in the contributions of Section Three, which addresses the significance of post-truth politics in the mediatisation and politicisation of migration. In Chapter 8, Verena Brändle discusses the role of governments' information campaigns for irregular migrants within the current post-truth context. The Chapter argues that with such campaigns, governments claim authority over the 'truths' and 'facts' of irregular migration. While the campaign messages are presented as reliable information, information from other actors is construed as misinformation. Chapter 9 contains Anna Björk's discussion on the role of facts and narratives in ongoing efforts—at the global as well as at the European level—to tackle migration as a political issue through the recognition of the importance of framing, facts, accurate information, data, and communication tools. The Chapter's argument is illustrated by reference to recent initiatives such as the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and the UN Global Compact for Safe and Orderly Migration. Within Chapter 10, Sanna Malinen, Aki Koivula, Arttu Saarinen, and Teo Keipi use Finland as an empirical case to analyse the role of counter media sites in the rise of the anti-immigration movement. With the help of a nationally representative survey, they point to the connection between people's social media-related concerns and the extent to which such concerns can be explained by party-political preferences, media trust and immigration attitudes. In the final Chapter of this section, Gwen Bauvois and Niko Pyrhönen analyse the remediation of the mainstream news cycle on the 'refugee crisis' to the social media audiences of two

Finnish anti-immigration groups, namely ‘Close the Borders!’ and ‘Finland First’. By showing the post-truth tropes that these groups employ in order to subvert information originally sourced to epistemic authorities, the Chapter demonstrates that by harnessing careful and context-sensitive remediation practices, the radical right is effectively able to hijack the news cycle with the alleged support from ‘unlikely allies’ among epistemic authorities. The volume ends with concluding reflections by Guðmundur Hálfðánarsson and Maximilian Conrad.

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PART I

Post-Truth Politics, Democracy
and the Public Sphere



CHAPTER 2

Post-Truth, Postmodernism and the Public Sphere

Saul Newman

POST-TRUTH AND THE PANDEMIC

2016 was the year that post-truth seemed finally to have triumphed. It was even the OED word of the year, defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. Post-truth is the name of a new political and epistemological paradigm characterised by “fake news”, “alternative facts”, conspiracy theories and the deliberate propagation of misinformation. Truth is either cynically manipulated or completely bypassed by politicians and elected officials. Scientific knowledge and expertise are openly disparaged by populist demagogues. As Trump’s legal counsel, Rudy Giuliani, put it, “truth isn’t truth”. And, as the Conservative Minister, Michael Gove, a key Vote Leave campaigner, proclaimed during the Brexit referendum in

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the UK, in reaction to dire economic warnings from many economists and financial institutions, “the people have had enough of experts”.

While lying in politics is nothing new, post-truth seems to evoke a new condition in which the line between truth and falsehood becomes blurred and indistinct, and where truth itself has lost its symbolic value. Whereas once the political lie, in its transgression of the truth, at the same time confirmed truth’s moral authority—truth was honoured more in the breach than in the observance—now it no longer seems to matter whether politicians are caught lying. They do so openly and blatantly, without repercussion or scandal. What is striking is the complete shamelessness of these lies and manipulations, as if power today makes a show of its own mendacity, perhaps as a demonstration of its indifference to any ethical norms of political discourse, and even to any external standard of veracity, coherence or integrity. The ultimate gesture of power is to make truth its plaything. Hannah Arendt (1967) once observed that truth, despite its fragility, nevertheless had a certain stubborn obstinacy that posed a threat to power. In the contemporary post-truth era, this no longer seems to be the case. It seems difficult today to “speak truth to power”.¹ Power has absorbed the threat posed by truth, not by repressing or censoring it—as in the old totalitarian regimes—but by *relativising* it, transforming it into mere opinion, drowning it out in a cacophony of competing perspectives and narratives. Today it is the superabundance of information—made possible through the Internet—that coincides with the erosion of the value of truth.

Is this still the case in 2021, in the age of the pandemic? Some commentators have suggested that the global public health crisis presented by COVID-19 spells the end of the post-truth era (Bobba & Hubé, 2021). It would seem plausible to think that, when their lives are on the line, people turn once again to scientific authority and expertise and that they are more likely to believe medical officers and epidemiologists than populist politicians and leaders who try to spin the crisis to their advantage. The incompetence with which many populist governments have handled the pandemic has severely damaged their credibility.

¹ All the fact-checking in the world seems to be completely powerless in the face of post-truth discourse. According to the *Washington Post*, Trump made over 30,000 false or misleading claims over a four year period (Kessler et al., 2021), and yet this seemed to have had little impact on his popularity.

So, has the coronavirus pandemic finally seen off the challenge of post-truth; has it ensured the triumph of the discourse of the University over the discourse of the Master, as Lacan (2008) would put it? Certainly, there is *some* evidence to support this. European election results in 2020 suggested a clear swing away from populist political parties and towards centrist ones, to the extent that the latter represent a more responsible “evidence-based” approach to the pandemic. Trump lost the election partly due to his mishandling of the pandemic. Bolsonaro of Brazil, whose approval ratings are at an all-time low, now faces criminal charges for presiding over the second highest COVID death toll in the world.

However, the overall picture is more complex. Post-truth discourse and the populist currents that fuel it and are fuelled by it have become deeply embedded in “culture wars” which have seen, for instance, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests around the world, often endorsed by political leaders and populist parties. There is a growing convergence between right-wing populism and conspiracy theories and movements. Here, we see a curious re-signification of the idea of “freedom”: the assertion of the freedom to not be compelled to wear masks or not to be vaccinated; the claim that economic freedom is more important than protecting public health, and so on. Moreover, populist leaders are already now finding ways to leverage the crisis to their advantage, blaming the contagion on immigrants and demanding stronger border controls. It is by no means certain that, as a result of the current crisis, truth will prevail over post-truth or that societies will be inoculated against the right-wing populist virus, post-truth’s main political vector. If anything, the culture wars, which have proven such fertile ground for post-truth discourse, only look set to continue and deepen.

The Future of the Public Sphere

All this does not augur well for the survival of the public sphere, the shared space of rational dialogue and debate upon which democratic institutions and practices rest. Not only is this space increasingly fractured and divided, polarised along ideological lines, but, as Arendt (1967) recognised long ago, political life depends upon a certain shared consensus around basic facts, something that she saw being eroded by lies and political spin and something that is even more under threat today. The idea of public reason deployed by thinkers like Rawls (2005) and Habermas

(1991)—based on universal norms of understanding and acceptability—seems virtually unthinkable in the current post-truth climate. The model of rational deliberation between free and equal participants in the public sphere² has been replaced by the Freudian image of the unthinking group, emotionally bound to its leader, which “demands illusions and cannot do without them” (1922, p. 17). The assertion of a group identity—whether cultural, national and religious—becomes the dominant mode of political expression, rather than the willingness to engage in rational dialogue and to tolerate a diversity of opinions and positions. Central to the politics of identity is “confirmation bias”, whereby the “truth” chosen is the one that affirms one’s prejudices and supports a pre-existing identity, thus providing a convenient cognitive mapping of the world. In today’s world of information overload, truth operates in a competitive market, and the narrative that can grab our attention or confirms our biases, or simply provides the most pleasure (Kalpokas, 2019), is the one we are most likely to believe. We are a long way from the deliberative ideal, where it is believed we can leave our preconceptions at the door and be swayed only by the “force of the better argument”.

Perhaps we need to revisit our idea of the public sphere. This is not to suggest we should abandon it; nor does it mean that we should simply accept the relativisation of truth that comes with the post-truth condition—far from it. However, it does mean that the terms of the public sphere need to be expanded beyond their current parameters in liberal theory. Chantal Mouffe (2000) has argued, for instance, that the liberal technocratic consensus model of politics that has been dominant for decades—but which is now disintegrating—has been responsible for the explosion of aggressive forms of right-wing populism that attack the public space. While I am sceptical of her proposed solution of a renewal of the left populist project (Mouffe, 2018), and while I have some reservations about her Schmittian-inspired model of agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2013), she nevertheless makes an important point regarding the limitations of the liberal model of public reason and its inability to accommodate forms of political expression that jar with its norms and rules of

² Of course, this notion of the public sphere has only ever existed as an ideal to which the reality of actually existing liberal democracy—with its exclusions and inequalities—has never really lived up to. See Nancy Fraser’s critical interrogation of the limits of Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, which, she argues, is based on an outdated conception of bourgeois society (1990).

engagement. Indeed, the very appeal of populism lies in its violation of the established codes of political discourse.

My point is that any effective resistance to the post-truth/populist onslaught, and indeed any attempt to renew the idea of the public sphere, must involve alternative renderings of truth in politics, and even the recognition of expressions of truth that break with the political consensus. To give a relatively recent example: we have seen protests and insurrections around the world in reaction to the killing of an unarmed black man by a white police officer, protests which have laid bare the institutional violence, inequality and racism that underpins liberal democratic systems. In their symbolic, and in some cases actual, violence—for instance the destruction of property—these protests have disrupted and radically transformed our usual understanding of the public sphere. Here, civil disobedience becomes an essential element of public reason and an extension of what Kant would regard as our critical faculty of judgement—no doubt beyond Kant’s own intentions.³ Such acts of insurrection have preserved and even renewed the sphere of autonomous critical judgement, just when it was in danger of being permanently “locked down” as a consequence of the pandemic. Another example would be movements on behalf environmental justice—such as Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain—that seek to draw attention to the climate crisis through disruptive acts of civil disobedience. As such, they constitute an important contribution to the democratic process (Celikates, 2016). These protests represent a political and ethical disruption of the public space, confronting it with a truth that, as it were, comes from outside, from another place, from what Derrida (2005) calls “the democracy to come” (*avenir*). The power of this truth comes from the fact that it reminds us of its original vocation in contesting the established order, in confronting political power, particularly the power of the state, even if that power is formally democratic or relies on democratic procedures of authorisation.

³ For Kant, resisting the authority of the law was illegitimate: one could employ one’s own critical judgement in public discourse, but at the end of the day, one had a duty to obey. Even for neo-Kantians like Rawls, civil disobedience is strictly circumscribed and is only justified under certain limited conditions; acts of civil disobedience are essentially viewed as aberrations in a just constitutional order. According to Rawls, “[w]hen the basic structure of society is reasonably just, as estimated by what the current state of things allows, we are to recognize unjust laws as binding provided that they do not exceed certain limits of justice” (1999, p. 308).

Perhaps we can say that this insurrectionary truth is the reverse of populist post-truth. While the latter also claims to oppose the “establishment” and the dominant discourse of truth, and while it does so in the name of “freedom” (in opposition to the liberal consensus, the mainstream media, “political correctness”, etc.), in reality it seeks to impose a new and more authoritarian order of power and truth, based on conservative values and traditional hierarchies and patriarchal norms. In other words, post-truth is part of a fundamentally reactionary political and ideological project that seeks to preserve and even intensify the current regime of neoliberal inequality. It does this through the mobilisation of popular resentments against immigrants, minorities and anyone who is seen to oppose the absolutist “will of people”. The fact that post-truth is more likely to be a weapon deployed by those in power, or those with the capacity to mobilise large, powerful constituencies, should be evidence enough that post-truth populism does not in any way threaten the economic and political order. The war between the populists and the “liberal establishment” is nothing but a parlour game of elites. By contrast, insurrectionary truth—which we see expressed in certain emancipatory forms of politics, in various protest movements and movements for social and environmental justice—represent a more genuine challenge to the status quo. But, how is their “truth” different from that of the post-truth populists?

Post-Truth and Postmodernism

To answer this question, I want to place it within the context of a certain controversy which has been simmering beneath the surface of the recent “culture wars”, but which I think forms one of its key nodal points. That is, whether postmodernism can be blamed for post-truth. Commentators on both the right and left have alleged that postmodern theory has been in some sense responsible for the relativisation of truth. For instance, cultural conservatives like Jordan Peterson have, rather outlandishly, attributed the decline of Western Enlightenment values, as well as traditional gender roles, to what he calls, somewhat misleadingly, “cultural Marxism”, by which he means the postmodern theory that has been dominant in academia and which he associates with moral and epistemological relativism.

A more sophisticated critique of postmodern theory has come from Bruno Latour, who some years ago speculated that “critique” had

reached a point of exhaustion. The critical impulse of postmodernism, in deconstructing dominant discourses and hierarchies of knowledge, in unmasking “regimes of truth”, has today left it foundering in the face of post-truth discourse, fighting the wars of today with the weapons of yesterday. Postmodern critique is unable to come to terms with a new form of power that is no longer on the side of truth, that no longer even pays lip service to it and, in a manner similar to postmodernism itself, questions objective “facts”, expert knowledge and scientific authority. This is particularly worrying, Latour argues, when it comes to combating the right-wing assault on climate science, which sows the seeds of doubt by invoking “competing evidence” and “alternative facts”. As Latour (2004) puts it:

And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. (p. 227)

In other words, postmodern theory has perhaps become a victim of its own success: the right has learned to speak its language and now uses it in a dangerous attack on science. At a time when scientific knowledge and expertise have never been more important, and when truth itself has never been more vulnerable, surely it is irresponsible, or dangerously naïve, to carry on deconstructing facts, evidence and science as though they still had any authority today.

Latour raises some very important questions here, not only about post-modern theory, but also about the relationship between truth and power. Has power itself become, in a perverse kind of way, “postmodern”? Has a strategic reversal taken place whereby political power, which once cloaked itself in truth, now no longer needs to do so? Perhaps the naivety of “critique” is to imagine that truth remains on the side of power and to not recognise that these have to some extent become de-aligned or even opposed. The danger is that we have been outflanked by conservative forces in society, which have taken up the radical mantle of postmodern critique. This would seem to tie in with a certain ideological re-alignment of the left and the right; where once the radical left was on the side of

personal freedom against traditional institutions and conservative values, against the law of prohibition (the rallying cry of May '68 after all was “it is forbidden to forbid”), it is now the radical right that claims to be the champion of an irreverent liberty against the stuffiness of left-wing political correctness.⁴

So, in considering the impact of post-truth on politics and the public sphere, we need to think more seriously about the roots of this epistemic crisis. In doing so, I want to, first, defend postmodern theory—or what I prefer to call post-structuralism—against the charge that it is somehow complicit in post-truth, despite some superficial resemblances.⁵ On the contrary, poststructuralist theory, precisely in its interrogation of the power effects of truth, might actually provide some answers to the post-truth condition. Second, I will argue that poststructuralist theory can make an important theoretical contribution to the idea of the public sphere through the theorisation of an alternative conception of truth in politics. Here, I draw attention to Foucault’s later work on parrhesia, or “fearless speech”.

Metanarratives and “Regimes of Truth”

Some time ago, Jean-Francois Lyotard diagnosed the “postmodern condition”, which he defined as an “incredulity towards metanarratives”. The universal discourses of modernity—particularly the notion of a universal objective truth or the idea that the world is becoming more intelligible through advances in science—have been undergoing a profound dissolution in the post-industrial age. Processes of legitimation have become more questionable and unstable; the contingency and arbitrariness of dominant discourses of knowledge was becoming more visible. Scientific knowledge was losing its epistemological authority and could no longer serve as the foundation for society’s symbolic order. There was, instead, according to Lyotard, an “‘atomization’ of the social into flexible networks of language games” (1991, p. 17). In other words, the post-modern condition meant there was no longer one dominant, coherent

⁴ This is a point addressed by Angela Nagle in her book *Kill All Normies* (2017) which explores alt-right Internet subcultures that, she argues, unlike earlier forms of right-wing conservatism, are openly transgressive and “punk”.

⁵ See also the work of Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2019), Prozorov (2019), and Flatscher and Seitz (2020).

understanding of society but, rather, a plurality of narratives or perspectives (“*petits récits*” or “little stories”) that are less totalising and more modest and regional. The decline of the metanarrative, thus, referred to a kind of shift or dislocation in the order of social reality, such that we can no longer rely on firm ontological foundations to provide the grounding for thought and, indeed, for political action. Politics could no longer be guided by universally accepted truths.

Lyotard was *describing* the postmodern condition rather than endorsing it. Nevertheless, his diagnosis gave a name to the critical and deconstructive approach characteristic of poststructuralist theory, typified by such thinkers as Derrida and Foucault. Derrida sought to unmask and destabilise the “metaphysics of presence” that underlay Western philosophy, and which continued to inform our understanding of the world. The idea that truth—going back to Plato—had a stable identity and universal validity, rested on a series of *aporias* or tensions, inconsistencies, arbitrary exclusions and moments of self-contradiction that could be revealed through a deconstructive reading of texts. Moreover, if such identities and categories could be shown to be unstable and inconsistent, even arbitrary, then the legitimacy and authority of the discourses and institutions upon which they were based was itself open to question. Derrida’s later interest in the “democracy to come” as an ethical-political “event” that comes from the outside, from a place of *alterity*, and radically calls into question sovereign institutions, emerges directly out of this deconstruction of key philosophical categories. Deconstruction is a kind of philosophical anarchism, an epistemic anti-authoritarianism aimed at displacing hegemonic discourses, bodies of knowledge and institutions; if these derive their authority and legitimacy from questionable assumptions, this means that they are not set in stone and that alternatives are always possible (Newman, 2001).

Foucault’s “genealogical” approach—characteristic of his thinking in the late 1970s—also sought to unmask the violent exclusions, multiple coercions and power effects of institutional discourses that drew their authority and legitimacy from a certain understanding of truth. Modern psychiatry, criminology, medicine and so on were “regimes of truth” whose dominance was based on an exclusion of alternative discourses and forms of knowledge, and whose functioning in society led to practices of incarceration, surveillance, disciplining and the establishment of a general system of normalisation. This was in the name of a certain truth (the truth of one’s identity, sexuality, body, sickness, mental illness and

so on) but one that was nevertheless historically contingent and culturally constructed—that is to say, *arbitrary*. Truth is, for Foucault, always bound up with power and can never be entirely separated from it. As he put it in an interview in 1976:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. In societies like ours, the 'political economy' of truth is characterised by five important traits. Truth' is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad in the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles). (Foucault, 2000a, p. 131).

What does it mean to say that “each society has its regime of truth”? Poststructuralist theory is interested in the historical, cultural and discursive conditions for the emergence of truth. Our understanding of the truth, and our ordering of statements into “true” and “false”, is something that changes historically and is culturally determined. This is even the case with scientific knowledge, which is subject to sudden paradigm shifts and revisions based on new discoveries and evidence. Philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend, took an anarchistic approach to science, arguing that progress in science actually depended on a *violation* and *disruption* of its existing methodological rules (Feyerabend, 1993). The idea of a “regime of truth” does not mean a relativisation of truth or

the rejection of truth altogether, but rather a focus on its specific discursive and historical articulations, as well as its power effects. To say that truth is historically or culturally constructed, and that it is bound up with power, does not mean that truth does not exist, but rather that there is no universal, overarching, absolute category of truth that stands outside history—or at least not one that has any real intelligibility or usefulness. To talk about regimes of truth means to look at how truth works on the ground, in existing social conditions; what are its concrete effects, how it orders our experience of the world and our sense of ourselves. As Richard Rorty put it: “there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—*ours*—uses in one or another area of inquiry” (1991, p. 23).

Perhaps we can today talk about “regimes of post-truth”. Jayson Harsin (2015) argues that with the shift from the dominant media institutions that Foucault was writing about, and which he saw as one of the key apparatuses of power, to new media technologies and Internet-based platforms, particularly social media, there has been a “regime of truth change”. Truth now circulates in a much more decentralised “market”, where it competes for our attention in a world of instantaneous communication and continuous information. The discursive production of truth now relies not on hegemonic institutions, but rather on sophisticated algorithms and data-driven predictive analytics that create individualised profiles based on a users’ search history and preferences—marking the shift from the society of discipline that Foucault was analysing, to what Deleuze (1992) called the “society of control”. Post-truth, as a certain kind of truth discourse through which our reality is ordered, is only really thinkable in this new media environment. While ICTs have led to a certain democratisation of knowledge and, moreover, provide an important tool for the organisation and mobilisation of new forms of dissent (Castells, 2015), at the same time, the “networked society” constructs its own regime of power and truth, governing the circulation of truth statements and determining their effects. Foucault’s analysis of these regimes can give us a critical perspective on how truth claims—and post-truth discourse makes *all* kinds of claims to truth—are complicit with power, whether that be the power of big institutions or the multiple, amorphous circuits of power that make up contemporary networked societies.

Nevertheless, does this emphasis on the discursive and power effects of truth preface the current post-truth condition? Does the claim, in other

words, that truth must be understood as part of a “regime” lead to the idea that truth is *nothing other* than its regime, or can be nothing other than a tool of power to be mobilised in political struggles? Certainly, there are moments in Foucault’s thinking and writing that would seem to suggest this. For instance, in his lectures on war from 1976 to 1977, Foucault outlines a perspectival and bellicose model of truth. In the militant’s discourse, truth is deployed like a weapon as part of a political struggle against the juridical and moral authority of the sovereign: “The more I decentre myself, the better I can see the truth; the more I accentuate the relationship of force, and the harder I fight, the more effectively I can deploy the truth ahead of me and use it to fight, survive, and win” (2004, p. 53). Here, there is a clash between two different ways of seeing the truth. From the gaze of the sovereign (and of the philosopher), truth is a discourse of legitimation, which is why it stands above the fray of battle and becomes a universal, neutral moral standard by which to judge and arbitrate (we might say this position of neutrality is also presupposed in liberal notions of public reason, particularly in the Kantian and Rawlsian versions). Whereas, from the position of the militant, the one who rebels against sovereignty, truth is a discursive weapon wielded from a particular, partisan position in order to achieve certain strategic interests. While Foucault was interested here in the positioning of truth as part of radical left political struggles, we can see how this *weaponisation* of truth today seems to resonate with the post-truth condition, in which “alternative facts”, competing narratives and perspectives are mobilised as part of the power struggles of the radical right. The idea that, as Foucault put it, “knowledge is made for cutting” contains within it the potential for a dangerous ideological promiscuity.

The Parrhesiast vs. the Populist

By contrast, Foucault’s later preoccupation, from early 1980s until his death in 1984, with the ethics of the care of the self in the cultures of Greek and Roman antiquity, offers a rather different, and I think more productive, understanding of truth, one that still has political significance, but which is at the same time governed by an ethical sensibility that resists its incorporation into the game of power politics. This alternative approach to truth can be found in Foucault’s interest in the Greek notion of *parrhesia*—or frank and fearless speech, the ancient practice of speaking truth to power.

According to Foucault, parrhesia, as one of the key practices of the care of the self, involved an obligation that one imposed upon oneself to speak the truth, regardless of the risks. Indeed, what gave parrhesia its particular ethical quality was that it involved an element of risk and, therefore, of courage—the parrhesiast often spoke the truth at great personal risk, as Plato did when he gave unwelcome philosophical counsel to the tyrant Dionysius at Syracuse (Foucault, 2010, pp. 48–49). Parrhesia is, therefore, always a *challenge* to power. It is combative, and it stages a risky confrontation between truth and power. Importantly, the parrhesiast is also one who is prepared to go against the opinion of the majority and to speak a singular truth against the *demos*, thus introducing a confrontation between the ethics of truth, and the democratic will that became particularly acute in the classical age of Greece with the condemning to death of Socrates by the Athenian democracy. While democracy is necessary for there to be parrhesia—in the sense that it gives everyone an equal right to speak (*isegoria*) and to exercise power—it also poses a threat to parrhesia when the democratic will becomes intolerant of dissenting voices (Foucault, 2010, pp. 48–49).

Parrhesia is, therefore, precisely the problem of government. If democracies are to be governed well, if democratic decision-making is to be guided effectively, then it must be exposed to the ordeal of truth, to a principle that is always different from it and that is at times in an antagonistic relationship to the democratic will. Parrhesia, thus, introduces a disruptive, even anarchic, ethical element into the democratic space, which is often intolerant of it, and, in doing so, it tests the limits of the public sphere. How radically different this relation to truth appears when compared to today’s post-truth paradigm, a condition characterised—especially in the context of populist politics—by the absolute lack of integrity, by irresponsibility and a disdain for any ethical standards, or even, on the part of the purveyors and consumers of post-truth discourse, by a kind of disdain for oneself. When populists present themselves as the ones speaking the “truth” of the people against the power of the elites, they reveal themselves as cynical political manipulators and entrepreneurs engaged in a power game; more like the sophists of the ancient world, rather than the parrhesiast who refuses to play this power game, who lacks the protection of a political constituency and who assumes all the risks of speaking the truth as a genuine ethical position. Moreover, those who follow populist leaders, who allow themselves to be deceived by them and who uphold their absurd narratives and outlandish claims as if members of

a religious cult, participate in a kind of voluntary servitude, a form of self-abasement and de-subjectification. By contrast, parrhesia, in its injunction to tell the truth, implies an ethical concern for the integrity of the self.

Today we are no doubt witnessing a similar crisis of truth in politics: the *demos* is often inhospitable to dissenting voices; populist political leaders shamelessly manipulate truth and spread misinformation, mobilising key constituencies and fuelling the culture wars in order to gain political advantage, both as deliberate agents and symptoms of post-truth discourse. Yet, we have to understand the post-truth condition, which represents such a threat to the public sphere, as being part of a project of power that imposes an alternative order of truth, one that is deeply hostile to pluralism, to differences of perspective and opinion. This is why Trump could rail against the “fake news” media; why populist movements and leaders who claim to challenge the status quo in the name of freedom and democracy can be so intolerant of those who disagree with them; why those who poke fun at the pieties of “political correctness” can at the same time insist on the sanctity of traditional values and institutions; why those who complain about the lack of “free speech” on university campuses blacklist left-wing academics; and why those who point to “alternative facts” refuse to question their own interpretation of those “facts”. Purveyors of post-truth become absolutists when it comes to the truth of their own narrative. Behind the discourse of post-truth there is not postmodern playfulness or hermeneutic freedom (Zabala, 2020) but, rather, a deadly serious ideological and political project that seeks to preserve the worst elements of the neoliberal order.⁶ Post-truth discourse is ultimately a discourse of power.

Conclusion: Renewing the Public Sphere

Any coherent understanding of the democratic public sphere relies on a paring of pluralism and consensus: one is free to disagree, as long as there is some kind of agreement about the rules and norms by which we disagree. Indeed, as Arendt (2013) would argue in her republican-inspired image of the public space, agreement presupposes disagreement and consensus presupposes differences of opinion. Communicative models of public reason assume that one enters the deliberative process

⁶ Wendy Brown sees authoritarian populism—a political and ideological assemblage of social conservatives and economic libertarians—as neoliberalism’s Frankenstein (2019).

with a position different to that of other participants, but that one is also open to divergent views and is able to be persuaded by them. However, we must recognise that the democratic public sphere can also impose limitations and constraints on discourse and political action, limits which may be at times necessary and justified, but which nevertheless need to be constantly interrogated; or it can involve institutional measures and procedures which endanger the very freedom and pluralism upon which it relies. This is what Derrida (2005) refers to as the “auto-immune” impulse of democracy, whereby anti-democratic forces use democratic procedures to win power—as in the case with authoritarian populism—*or* where liberal democracies seek to secure the public space against enemies, yet, in doing so, threaten to shut this space down altogether.

The value of the parrhesiast’s discourse of truth, which is always an *event*—an event that sometimes takes shape in a protest or movement of mass civil disobedience, or which can be heard in the lonely voice of the whistleblower⁷—lies in its disruption of the public space and its willingness to challenge accepted institutional procedures and practices, even if these are democratically endorsed. As Foucault has argued, the courage of truth that characterises parrhesiastic discourse is in its willingness to defy the demos and to confront it with another kind of truth that comes from elsewhere; just as today it is sometimes necessary to confront the democratic public sphere with a truth that speaks a language that is alien and jarring. The best corrective to post-truth discourse is not state or corporate regulation—not fact-checking or social media censorship—which is only grist to the mill, further fuelling conspiracy theories and ideological polarisation, but rather a return to the idea that truth itself can be radically disruptive, that it can be on the side of *movement* and *transformation* rather than the status quo and that it can be anti-institutional and opposed to consensus.

The ethical disruption of the public sphere is not to impose another order or “regime” of truth upon it, but rather to ensure that this space remains open, and that its norms and procedures are subject to ethical scrutiny; that it lives up to its promise of justice. It serves to remind the public sphere of its original vocation, not only in resisting the power of absolutist sovereigns, but in providing a space for open debate and deliberation that is autonomous from both the state and the market. Above

⁷ Here perhaps the figure of Julian Assange is exemplary of the parrhesiast today.

all, it is the idea that public reason and the public sphere should involve an ongoing critical reflection on its limits. This is what Foucault, in his discussion on Kant, identified as being central to the enlightenment. The importance of the enlightenment lay not in creating a system of universal norms, but in opening up a new kind of ethos or philosophical attitude of permanent critique—critique of the limits of our historical conditions and of ourselves, which allowed us to think and act differently, to be *other* than what we are and to not be governed so much. Indeed, the only way truth itself can be preserved is by opening it up to a critical interrogation of its relationship to power. As Foucault put it: “I will say critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects on power, and question power on its discourses of truth” (2007, p. 47). Therefore, the ongoing critical task of the enlightenment “requires work on our limits, that is a patient labour giving form to our impatience for liberty” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 319). The most effective response to the post-truth condition and to the crisis it creates for the public sphere is for truth to position itself once again on the side of freedom.

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The Context of Fake News, Disinformation, and Manipulation

John Erik Fossum

INTRODUCTION

In his survey of reviews of the state of democracy during the latter part of 2019 and early part of 2020, Matthew Flinders finds that “the anxieties that have surrounded democracy for at least half a century have in recent years grown in scale, complexity, and intensity.” This is “linked to the emergence of a clear populist signal, the growth of anti-political sentiment and—critically—the emergence of a clear “trust gap” between the governors and the governed.” (Flinders, 2021, p. 486). It is easy to see that such circumstances lend themselves to a mode of politics where fake news, disinformation, and manipulation are legion.

We can take Flinders’ statement to suggest that there are two quite different readings of the democratic implications of the fake news, disinformation, and manipulation challenge: on the one hand, as the rise of a certain type of political actor that claims that established politicians

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and their conduct of politics have lost touch with ordinary people and their concerns, and in addition, actively seeks to undermine confidence in science and scientists. Thus, the factual and evidence-based foundation of democratic politics is challenged by the rise of a particular species of populist politician and populist parties marked by a distinct style and relatively unencumbered by conventional party politics (Moffitt, 2016). If these phenomena can be identified with and *confined to* a specific set of actors, parties, and their supporters, then the political challenge is how best to contain or isolate them.

The other reading of Flinders' statement approaches the democratic challenge from a more structural angle and searches for the roots of anti-political sentiment and the trust gap in the circumstances surrounding policy-making and politics. One important set of factors pertains to structural changes in the party system, not only in terms of new cleavages or a reconfiguration of the cleavage basis, but more fundamental changes in the very social and political anchorage of political parties (Mair, 2013). The implication is that the central role of parties as mediators between civil society and the political system is changing. These changes are in turn related to the emergence of new media forms and important changes in political mediation. They feed on and are stimulated by other changes in the structure and conduct of policymaking and politics, and in globalisation-related reconfigurations of political orders. Key to this is a *dislocation or reshuffling of the policy-politics configuration*, which is driven both by globalisation and regional integration, as well as changes in party systems and partisanship.

The two readings suggest different causal dynamics in terms of how fake news, disinformation, and manipulation affect democracy. If structural changes are important sources of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation, then the rise of populism is hardly the only source of fake news and disinformation. If so, the irony in focusing on the most blatant manifestations of fake news as espoused by populist politicians is that it may *detract attention* from those factors that helped create such traits in the first place.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how, and the extent to which, we may consider fake news, disinformation, and manipulation as *bell-wethers for the health of democracy*. I do that by means of developing a scale that ranges from democracy to autocracy where the scale is explicitly aligned along fake news, disinformation, and manipulation lines. The assumption that informs the scale is that the more pronounced the role

of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation the less democratic the country or political system. This is received wisdom, and there is no reason to doubt that a decline in democracy is positively correlated with the rise of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. Such a deliberate stance is what we normally associate with so-called populist politicians (in line with the first reading above).

The second structural account of democratic decline raises questions about the role of actors' objectives and possible unintended effects. Further, the structural account opens up the possibility that a decline in democracy may occur without a significant rise in fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. On this latter point, Norway is a critical case: it scores very high on international democracy indexes, is not a pronounced case of fake news and disinformation, and yet has an affiliation with the EU that represents a major challenge to constitutional democracy. The Norway case brings up the question of whether fake news and disinformation is an adequate measure for discerning democratic decline.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL-DEMOCRACY PATHOLOGY SCALE

When discussing democratic pathologies in contemporary society, we confront a wide range of concepts and real-life cases. They straddle from illiberal democracy to authoritarian populism to technocracy, to fully fledged authoritarian regimes. An important distinction is between those systems where leaders actively propound fake news, disinformation, and manipulation but nevertheless insist that their political systems are democratic and those systems where there is no reference to democracy. In Western societies, subversive forces very often try to uphold a democratic façade, or the semblance of democracy, whilst at the same time actively suppressing efforts to sustain democracy.

A further distinction is between those societies and political systems that have well-devised and functioning corrective devices to counter fake news, disinformation, and manipulation, and those that do not. Political systems where leaders deliberately resort to fake news, disinformation, and manipulation will either lack proper corrective devices or the leaders will actively seek out whatever corrective devices there are as targets. It follows that in such societies, the leaders play a central role in orchestrating democratic decline. Even in functioning democracies where leaders are not actively targeting corrective devices, these may not function effectively. In

such instances, we need to look for unintended consequences of actions and structural changes that provide scope for fake news, misinformation, and manipulation.

What, then, are corrective devices to counter fake news, disinformation, and manipulation? Such devices would be closely associated with those institutional and procedural arrangements that are necessary for ensuring input, throughput, and output legitimacy.¹ At the level of input legitimacy, we refer to properly functioning: public spheres and media; political parties and other channels that link citizens to the political system; and elected bodies that translate citizen input into decision-making. At the level of throughput legitimacy, we refer to proper and transparent procedures for decision-making and due process. At the level of output legitimacy, we refer to those factors that enable the political system to fashion and carry out policies that will prove capable of solving problems and handling conflicts in equitable and transparent manners.

In addition to these largely institutional and procedural elements, it is important to underline the role of political culture, especially trust in government (vertical) and in fellow citizens (horizontal). In general, we may posit that the higher the level of trust the greater society's buffer against fake news, disinformation, and manipulation.

An important methodological challenge is to establish how these various elements function as corrective measures, especially in relation to fake news and mis(dis)information. In some instances, the causal links can get quite long. Nevertheless, there may be mutually reinforcing effects across factors, which may generate democratically favourable or democratically deleterious spirals. Some constellations of factors are more prone to be mutually reinforcing—in a positive as well as in a negative manner—than are other ones.

These two dimensions, commitment to functioning democracy and presence/absence of corrective devices, are the two key dimensions that make up the pathology scale. We can then imagine three different scenarios: (a) commitment to democracy and well-established corrective measures; (b) paying lip-service to democracy whilst undermining corrective measures; and (c) authoritarianism, which entails rejecting democracy. The scale is based on the assumption that there is a direct link between decline in democracy and rise of fake news, disinformation, and

¹ For this distinction see Schmidt (2013).

manipulation, and where this rise is an effect of deliberate political action. Since we want to pay attention to unintended effects and instances where there is a decline in democracy without a rise in fake news, disinformation, and manipulation, we need to introduce a further category, here below listed as Level II. This modified scale can then be used to rank political systems in ascending order on a pathology scale with four values:

Level I—Functioning democracy with well-established corrective measures.

Level II—Functioning democracy albeit with inadequate corrective measures.

Level III—Formal democracy without corrective measures (illiberal democracy).

Level IV—Authoritarian regime.

Whereas we may find instances of fake news, misinformation, and manipulation in political systems that can be located on Level I, these are isolated incidents and inconsequential for the proper democratic functioning of the political system. The scale is constructed in such a manner that the magnitude—and deleterious effects—of fake news and manipulation increases as we go up the scale from I to IV, and there is a noticeable shift from misinformation to disinformation. As already noted, fake news, disinformation, and manipulation are hallmarks and defining features of authoritarian systems (Level IV), but they also figure in systems grouped on Level III and to some extent Level II. For our purposes, it is important to establish whether the incidents of fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation are sufficiently pronounced for us to establish that a given political system belongs on Level II or Level III on the scale. That provides us with a means for establishing how salient fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation are for the democratic functioning of contemporary societies.

In the following, I will elaborate on the entries in the scale. Level IV is of no interest to us here, neither is Level I. Therefore, I will focus on Levels III and II.

LEVEL III PATHOLOGIES

It is natural to start with this level because it refers to political systems that are *democratic in name only* and there is a strong connection between democratic decline and rise of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. Such instances are normally the result of a largely leader-led (and directed) process of democratic deterioration of the basic institutional-constitutional and political cultural support structure of democracy (the structural arrangements and the norms guiding perceptions and conduct). The decline of the latter can have serious effects on institutional arrangements. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018, pp. 7–8) note:

Without robust norms, constitutional checks and balances do not serve as the bulwarks of democracy we imagine them to be. Institutions become political weapons, wielded forcefully by those who control them against those that do not. This is how elected autocrats subvert democracy – packing and “weaponizing” the courts and other neutral agencies, buying off the media and the private sector (or bullying them into silence), and rewriting the rule of politics to tilt the playing field against opponents. The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy’s assassins use the very institutions of democracy – gradually, subtly, and even legally – to kill it. (pp. 7–8)

Level III pathologies are found in those political systems, which are clearly on a de-democratising path and where their political leaders are careful not to abandon the democratic label, because that helps them to downplay the magnitude of change, and they can buy off or intimidate critics that point to the widening gap between democratic theory and actual practice. We can expect that to last as long as democracy remains the hegemonic legitimisation principle in the world. If authoritarianism gains further ground as an alternative in ideational terms, the need for such legitimisation dwindles accordingly.

There are also those that “innovate” on the democratic label to make it sit better with the specifics of their political setting. That is certainly the case with Victor Orbán’s Hungary, and his invocation of the notion of “illiberal democracy”. Orbán’s oxymoronic notion of illiberal democracy opposes Christian democracy to liberal democracy, with the former pertaining to certain policy choices and ideological stances:

1) liberal democracy favours multiculturalism, whilst Christian democracy “gives priority to Christian culture”; 2) liberal democracy “is pro-immigration, whilst Christian democracy is anti-immigration”; and 3) liberal democracy “sides with adaptable family models” rather than the Christian family model. With respect to each of these three issues, Orbán emphatically states that the Christian view can be categorised as an “illiberal concept.” (Plattner, 2019)²

The process of instituting illiberal democracy entails radically altering the constitution; weakening checks on majority rule; asserting control of courts and the media; and orchestrating the behaviour of civil society. These measures amount to blatant attempts to undermine corrective measures and hence give the government a free hand, as much as possible, to manipulate public opinion to its ends. Nevertheless, the retention of the democratic label means that many of the instituted measures are given the shine of being democratic. This insidious approach adds to the manipulative tone and amounts to efforts to undermine democracy “from within” rather than from without, so-to-speak.

The question that many populist scholars have raised is how far this cloaked authoritarian turn extends. Jan-Werner Müller argues that at the heart of populism is an anti-elitism that is combined with a rejection of pluralism. Populists, according to Müller, do not reject representative politics; “they just insist that only they themselves are legitimate representatives” (2016, p. 101). This combination means that populists in power can turn authoritarian. Müller therefore considers populism as a threat to democracy. It follows that populism cannot be considered a corrective to liberal democracy in the sense of bringing politics “‘closer to the people’ or even reasserting popular sovereignty... But it can be useful in making it clear that parts of the population really are unrepresented...” (2016, p. 103).

Nadia Urbinati (2019) notes that when populism is in power it seeks to establish a new form of representative government that is at the same time a *disfigured version* of democracy. The new form of government typically draws on the key populist distinction between the people and the elite. The populist leader plays a central role in shaping this distinction and in the process transforms the political system from party democracy to

² <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/illiberal-democracy-and-the-struggle-on-the-right/>.

populist democracy. The populist leader espouses an anti-establishment position and rhetoric that presents the people as pure and the establishment political elite as morally corrupt. The leader plays a central role in “people-forming” because the leader seeks to establish a close connection to a *part* of the people that the leader seeks to sustain. In doing so, the leader claims to incarnate the people against a treasonous political elite (the political establishment).

Urbinati underlines that in her view populism is “not an ideology or a specific political regime but rather a *representative process*, through which a collective subject is constructed so that it can achieve power” (2019, p. 5). This collective subject is not the entire people, but only a part of the people. She goes on to say that:

[p]opulists want to replace *party* democracy with *populist* democracy; when they succeed, they stabilize their rule through unrestrained use of the means and procedures that party democracy offers. Specifically, populists promote a permanent mobilization of the public (the audience) in support of the elected leader in government; or they amend the existing constitution in ways that reduce constraints on the decision-making power of the majority. (Urbinati, 2019, p. 4)

This process represents a revocation of party democracy: the populist party is clearly a vehicle for the leader to ascend to power. Nevertheless, once in power the relationship between the leader and the audience or adherents is what matters. The party is placed on the back-burner, and elections are mere acclamations or declarations of support for the leader. New media aid the leader in establishing and sustaining this direct relationship with the audience.

Level III of the pathology scale is reserved for political systems whose leadership actively and deliberately engages in fake news, disinformation, and manipulation to subvert democracy. The claim is that these repressive measures are done in the name of the people or to sustain democracy.

LEVEL II PATHOLOGIES

The democratic pathology scale is constructed on the basis of a direct link between democratic decline and the rise of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. The main difference between Level II and III

is that the political leadership—and the political class—does not deliberately attempt to undermine democracy. This level of the scale, then, either encompasses political systems that fail to take proper remedial measures or where democratically deleterious acts are *unintended consequences* of actions or results.³

One example of the latter is the *policy accumulation and democratic responsiveness trap*, which refers to conditions for policy-making in functioning democracies that in serving democratic ends nevertheless can have pathological effects. Adam et al. (2019) note that:

responsiveness is both the key virtue and the key problem of modern democracies. On the one hand, responsiveness is a central cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. On the other hand, responsiveness inevitably involves policy accumulation. ... Policy accumulation renders policy content increasingly complex, which crowds out policy substance from public debates and leads to an increasingly unhealthy prioritization of politics over policy. Secondly, policy accumulation comes with aggravating implementation deficits, as it produces administrative backlogs and incentivizes selective implementation. Finally, policy accumulation undermines the pursuit of evidence-based public policy, because it threatens our ability to evaluate the increasingly complex interactions within growing policy mixes. (p. i)

These problems, as long as they remain, the authors note, provide fertile ground for populist actors to point to systemic flaws. They may offer unique opportunities for populists to try to frame problems or challenges as crises that require exceptional measures (and power concentration, hence the hankering towards authoritarianism).

The problems and challenges associated with policy accumulation are not caused by the rise of populism and the fake news wave. In this instance, the causal sequence may, if anything, be the opposite. The presence of policy problems, backlogs, bottlenecks, and so forth, in an otherwise responsive political system, can be exploited for manipulative ends. The sheer complexity of the issues makes it difficult to arrest fake claims; hence, the situation lends itself to manipulation. Leaders are acting responsively. They are not trying to undermine democracy and do not deliberately take measures that seek to weaken citizens' rights

³ Conrad (2021) also discusses this distinction.

and constitutional protections. We therefore cannot assume that political systems that suffer from the policy responsiveness trap will necessarily be without corrective measures. The push factors for responsiveness in modern democracy are many, from civil society, from experts (diagnosing and proposing cures for social ills), from the volatile capitalist system and its disruptive effects, from global challenges such as the environment, and so forth. This means that we need to look at *the who, the how, and the what* of policy discourse. Are truth-claims considered, debated, assessed? Whose concerns are addressed and how are they framed? Are there accepted independent (expert) arbiters to assess the veracity of claims? Do interlocutors acknowledge mistakes or misperceptions and propose rectifying measures?

In the case of the policy responsiveness trap, rather than populists causing policy pathologies, we may perhaps say that these pathological traits are particularly present in the rhetoric and actions of populist politicians. Populists may then work as good bellwethers for the state of democracy. If they are blatantly pursuing a policy of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation; manage to frame the issues; are able to steer the political agenda; and manage to have their stances and issue definitions adopted into concrete policies, then we see explicit movement towards Level III.

The example of the policy responsiveness trap shows that there are features of working democracies that lend themselves to manipulation, less by design and more by *default*. Those actors bent on manipulation—especially political leaders—then need to seize the moment and actively take advantage of the problems to forward their manipulative ends. If so, it is difficult to see the actors that we associate with fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation as the main originators of such processes. Instances of fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation would then be better understood as indicators that such a process is unfolding than as underlying or originating causes.

In effect, the responsiveness trap is one particular manifestation of how policy-making gets dislocated from politics. My claim is that a more systematic assessment of instances of *politics without policy, and policy without politics* will show how structural changes produce effects that are democratically deleterious *without* a concomitant rise in fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. The structural changes in question we may refer to as a changing context of correction.

A CHANGING CONTEXT OF CORRECTION: GLOBALISATION AND THE POLICY–POLITICS CONSTELLATION⁴

As we see, for instance from Dani Rodrick’s trilemma, the basic assumption is that globalisation will have negative implications for the policy–politics constellation, in other words, the ability of politics to function as an action coordination mechanism. With the policy–politics constellation⁵, I refer to how politics and policy are structurally configured in modern democracy. *Politics* refers to the distribution of preferences and interests, their contested nature, and claims for (re)distribution, recognition, and representation, whereas *policy* refers to problem-solving terminating in collectively binding decisions. I highlight two basic dimensions in the relationship between policy and politics of direct relevance for fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation. One pertains to the basic assumption that certain forms of politics lend themselves better than others for supporting problem-solving and conflict resolution. It is well-known that politics that is bounded—confined by norms, rules, and procedures—is more amenable to the ready pursuit of policy solutions than politics that is unbounded and unfolds as a struggle for power and interest.⁶ The former is also more readily reconcilable with knowledge and expertise and hence with factually and scientifically based problem-solving. Politics as the pursuit of conflicting values is generally more conflictual and irreconcilable than politics as a pursuit of interests (Hirschman, 1977). The other dimension pertains to the territorial level or scale of governing: the relationship between policy and politics is most productive when reconciled at the same territorial level or scale.⁷ When, for instance, one governing level prioritises politics, the other policy, the result is generally pathological.⁸ This latter point is important to consider in relation to the

⁴ This notion has been inspired by Vivien Schmidt’s argument to the effect that the EU is about policy-making without much politics whereas the obverse is the case with the member states. This problem is in my view far more pronounced in the EEA context.

⁵ This is inspired by Schmidt 2006, 2013.

⁶ This is well summed up in March and Olsen’s (1989, 1995) notion of logic of appropriateness.

⁷ This issue touches on Rodrik’s (2011) trilemma.

⁸ See Schmidt on EU’s policy politics constellation.

process of restructuring of governing that is driven by globalisation and Europeanisation.⁹

When we consider the constitutional-democracy pathology scale against this process of restructuring of governing, we may posit that the higher on the constitutional-democracy pathology scale we get the more out of synch the two politics–policy dimensions get. At Level I, we find a productive relationship between policy and politics; at Level II, there is some disconnect, but politics is not deliberately designed to subvert democracy. At Levels III and IV, politics is framed, shaped, and conducted to subvert democracy. Nevertheless, such regimes may seek to retain effective policy-making and insist that effectiveness is not a function of a democratically supportive politics. That is precisely what autocratic regimes propound: that democratic politics is not necessary for effective policy-making. Nevertheless, such regimes ultimately *depend on* suppression of politics through fake news, disinformation, and manipulation, and there is always a risk that such systems will collapse due to their pathological politics.

For our purposes, the dislocation of policy–politics is particularly interesting for understanding the manner in which political systems slide from Level I to II, from well-functioning to somewhat deficient systems, either as part of the decline in or weakness of corrective measures or through unintended consequences.

These observations on policy and politics have direct bearings on what we consider as corrective measures: they are not only about channels of access and political participation; proper procedures; and responsiveness. As noted above, underpinning these measures is a well-functioning political culture based on a distinct conception of *what politics is* and *what politics is for*. A well-functioning democracy is premised on the notion that politics is understood and conducted in such a manner as to serve policy-making and conflict handling and that policy-making is such structured and conducted as to enable politics to play a conciliatory and action-coordinating role (Crick, 1992). These issues, again, must respond to the politics of scale: political systems must be such scaled as to ensure that politics and policy can operate in a mutually productive and beneficial manner.

⁹ This process has been referred to as rescaling. Rescaling refers to “the process by which systems of social regulation, collective action, representation and legitimation are migrating to new territorial levels” (Keating, 2013, p. ix).

The policy–politics constellation can get out of synch through politics being replaced by other steering media: law or the market, or a distinct combination of the two. The common denominator is an explicit process of de-politicisation where the scope for politics is hemmed in so that it cannot play a productive role in policy-making. Law’s ability to direct action is highly dependent on a mode of politics, and a political process, that together manage to create a culture of trust, cooperation, and conciliation.¹⁰ Over-reliance on law as an action coordination mechanism leads to untrammelled juridification. Law that is only backed up by coercive power is unstable and reflects the failure of politics to serve as an adequate action coordination mechanism. Strong reliance on the market as an action coordination mechanism has political effects that, if not dealt with in political processes and forums, will find other less constructive manifestations, often associated with a rise in distrust.

In today’s world, a conciliatory and productive mode of politics is under a double squeeze: (a) economic globalisation and technocracy crowd out the space for politics; and (b) populists are disrespectful of the conciliatory, accommodating, and solution-oriented approach to politics that allows a viable engagement with policy substance.¹¹ A combination of factors associated with globalisation, the rise of cartel parties, the social dislocation of parties, the policy accumulation and democratic responsiveness trap, and a host of other factors have generated a new constellation marked by the combination of “policy without politics” and “politics without policy”. Each gets associated with a distinct set of institutional arrangements and forums: the former policy without politics is characteristic, for instance, of the EEA agreement where the EEA members Iceland, Norway, and Lichtenstein incorporate EU laws and policy measures basically without participating in the makings of these laws and regulations. There is therefore, generally speaking, very little public discussion (and legitimation) of these laws and regulations. The latter, politics without policy, reflects how political actors—often associated with populist politics—conduct and enact a mode of (symbolic) politics largely dislocated from policy substance. The political discussions that unfold have little or no bearing on the process of policy-making and

¹⁰ Bernard Crick underlines this important dimension of politics.

¹¹ Daniele Caramani (2017), among others, points to a mutually reinforcing relationship between populism and technocracy.

the nature of the policies in place. Brexit may figure here, both as an attempt at reclaiming national sovereignty and through grandstanding, manipulation, distorted renditions of the process and those involved, and so forth. The fact that the two—politics and policy—are not made to meet up in meaningful ways, entails that each—policy-making and political contestation—unfolds without the requisite corrective mechanisms. The situation is thus rife for actors to pursue a mode of politics saturated by fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation. We can from this see that politics as a viable action coordination measure presumes a certain—constructive—relationship between politics and policy.

In the following, I will provide a brief case study of the EEA as a particularly pronounced instance of a reconfigured policy–politics constellation.

EUROPEANISATION AND THE CASE OF THE EEA

Norway is interesting in terms of the relationship between decline in democracy and fake news and misinformation. Norway is one of the few countries in the world that obtains a full score in Freedom House’s report (100).¹² Norway is thus in relation to the constitutional-democracy pathology scale considered a Level I country (lowest degree of fake news, etc.) in these international democracy assessments. There are no explicit attempts to undermine democracy, and Norway is considered to contain very well-entrenched corrective measures, such as, for instance, a high level of public trust in government (Olsen, 2017). At the same time, Norway’s EU affiliation makes it a de facto EU rule-taker (Eriksen & Fossum, 2014, 2015). In this circumstance, the more the EU integrates—especially when this bears on the fundamentals of Norwegian constitutional democracy—the more problematic becomes the affiliation. What does this tell us about the veracity of the constitutional-democracy pathology scale?

There are three possible interpretations here. One is that the constitutional-democracy pathology scale’s assumed link between fake news, disinformation, and manipulation and democratic decline is unsubstantiated. In other words, we can have democratic decline without much

¹² Countries and Territories | Freedom House.

of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. Democratic decline may be a largely unintended effect of other developments.

A second possible interpretation is that political systems confine and delimit fake news, disinformation, and manipulation to a few particularly problematic issues and seek to prevent spillover effects to other issues. Political systems may practice silence by deliberately putting a lid on the discussion of particularly thorny issues. Fake news, disinformation, and manipulation are about how talk and spread of information undermine democracy; *democratic decline, however, can also ensue through silence, by refusing to talk about and engage with particularly controversial issues.*

A third possible interpretation is that restructuring governance across levels of governing can reconfigure the policy–politics constellation with negative effects on a society’s corrective measures against fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation. This form of restructuring is then clearly not picked up by democratic rating agencies such as Freedom House.

There are aspects of Norway’s EU affiliation that speak to all three interpretations. Norway’s EU affiliation is dynamic, complex, and so comprehensive [it consists of around 70 different agreements (NOU, 2012)] that it is bound to have bearings on Norway’s policy–politics configuration.¹³ Further, the issue of Norwegian EU membership has figured as one of, if not the most, politically divisive issue in Norway, at least since the Second World War.¹⁴ This conflict does not go away, and it must be somehow managed. As I will show, the way in which this is managed is itself reflective of the problems of bridging an arrangement where the policy–politics relationship is upended by globalisation-induced restructuring of governance.

Norway’s dynamic EU affiliation (Norway is as closely affiliated as it is possible to be for a non-member) serves as a constant reminder of the EU’s presence in all walks of life. Nevertheless, the paradoxical

¹³ The EEA agreement is a dynamic agreement, which integrates Norway in the EU’s internal market. Through the full range of Norway’s EU agreements, Norway has incorporated roughly three quarters of EU legislation compared to EU member states, which have incorporated everything. The EEA agreement includes such areas as research and development, education, social policy, the environment, consumer protection, tourism, and culture (collectively known as “flanking and horizontal” policies).

¹⁴ The EU membership issue reawakened or gave added impetus to old and entrenched cleavages; it pitted centre against periphery, region against region, rural against urban areas and deep divisions within and between political parties.

situation is that despite the contested nature of Norwegian EU membership, Norway's close EU affiliation has *evoked surprisingly little conflict* (Eriksen & Fossum, 2015; Fossum, 2019; NOU, 2012). An important reason is that the Norwegian governing party constellations have instituted a set of gag rules to keep the EU membership issue off the political agenda (Fossum, 2010).¹⁵ That onus on silence over talk, in turn, has facilitated the process of EU adaptation.

These traits of Norway's EU affiliation speak to a clear case of "policy without politics". Norway's representative-democratic institutions are barred from shaping the formation of the rules and norms it incorporates from Brussels. Norwegian representative-democratic institutions are hard-wired to deal with these issues as foreign-policy ones, whereas EU member states' representative-democratic institutions are hard-wired to deal with these issues as domestic concerns and hence engage their populations much more directly. The absence of political participation in EU decision-making bodies is matched by the absence of a national Norwegian process of democratic will-formation behind the shaping of these rules and norms. Norway has only a limited repertoire of means for politically affecting how these rules and norms shape and condition Norwegian socio-economic and political development, and Norway's means are generally operated through the political and administrative system, at a clear remove from popular influence and oversight. The limited scope for political influence biases this arrangement towards policy and rule import. That is amplified by the sheer scope of policy and rule import; by the significant element of spillover built into the dynamic EEA agreement; by the fact that the process of policy import is dominated by government executives and technocrats with limited scope for popular voice; and by the manner in which the Norwegian political system handles the policy and rule import. As noted, the policy without politics dimension is readily apparent in the fact that the Norwegian political system has developed gag rules and other mechanisms for preventing the EU membership issue—a matter of constitutional and constitutive high politics—to intervene and shape the process of EU adaptation. Norway is compelled to work out conflicts and problematic aspects of incorporated

¹⁵ Norway's EU affiliation is often presented as a domestic de-politicising compromise: it has enabled EU membership opponents to keep Norway out of the EU and at the same time has provided EU membership proponents with guaranteed access to the EU's internal market (and almost all EU programmes).

rules at the domestic level, under circumstances where conflict handling is disconnected from policy-making/legislation (Fossum, 2019). There is also a disconnect from other societies and their discussions of the EU.

Further, Norway's EU affiliation fosters "politics without policy" at the domestic Norwegian level. The structure of Norway's EU affiliation has a built-in propensity for disconnecting the political scene from policy substance. Many of the issues that incrementally and cumulatively shape Norway are worked out at the EU level with Norway accepting them with minimum domestic engagement and influence. When policy and politics are properly connected, there is a political process whereby citizens are made aware of what is at stake; are presented with the relevant range of options and their implications; and are invited to participate in the decision-making. Instead, in Norway there is very limited popular engagement at the level of policy initiative and during the decision-making stage.

This policy-politics dislocation has deleterious democratic implications, which suggests that we need to place Norway at Level II on the pathology scale rather than at Level I. For our purposes, it is important to establish whether, or to what extent, the policy-politics dislocation undermines corrective mechanisms against fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation. No such systematic study has thus far been undertaken.

Some EU opponents will say that the EEA agreement is a case of manipulation, since the agreement that was entered into in 1994 was very different; today's arrangement is far more comprehensive in depth and breadth than anyone had imagined in 1994. The EU membership issue was decided in a referendum; the EEA agreement was not. Hence, the claim of "doctored de facto EU membership via the EEA". The gag rules and the generally depoliticised EU affiliation are seen as means for consolidating and sustaining this instance of structural manipulation. Nevertheless, almost all political parties have been part of governments that have been formally committed to this arrangement and very little has been done to change the status quo.

There is a fairly prevalent propensity by government actors as well as by EEA supporters to understate the effects of the nature and implications of Norway's EU relationship. A case in point is the law division in the Justice Ministry's doctrine on limited intervention ("doktrinen om lite inngripende tiltak"), which justifies using a low constitutional threshold for incorporating EU laws and regulations. This is facilitated by a lack of attention to the accumulated effects of EU law incorporation. Legal

scholars have voiced strong criticisms against this form of legal reasoning (Holmøyvik, 2015). What does the retention of such a practice in light of heavy criticism from highly qualified experts count as? The “NAV scandal”, where a large number of persons were incarcerated for unemployment benefits fraud because they had not remained in Norway to seek jobs, is interesting. The social benefit agency NAV deemed it unlawful to receive benefits whilst being outside of Norway. These cases and rulings were inconsistent with EU legal provisions that Norway had incorporated, but the practice continued for many years. A government investigation basically concluded that most involved actors were complicit. The report was criticised for pulverising responsibility. It is acknowledged that there was an informal norm inside the Norwegian political and administrative system in favour of confining unemployment benefits to persons within Norway (Pavone & Stiansen, 2022). Is this simply a matter of lack of knowledge? Or does it count as misinformation? A further example is how politicians’ framing of the EU as polity follows their political convictions: EU proponents have generally cast the EU mainly as an economic organisation to downplay its politically intrusive effects, whereas EU opponents have framed it as a supranational juggernaut or a European super-state to underline its politically damaging effects. Further, Norway’s gag rules are meant to facilitate conflict handling; do they end up fostering pathological forms of politics?

These examples suggest that the reconfigured policy–politics relationship creates a lot of space for actors to construe public policy as manipulation, whether that is the case or not. Decision-makers struggle with reconciling the expectation of sovereign rule from the status of non-membership with the expectation of EU compliance from the nature of the current EU affiliation.

We may also hypothesise that the policy–politics dislocation has bearings on political discourse and the political agenda. In addition to instituting silence on the most controversial EU membership issue, and when faced with significant constraints on their realm of action, it is quite natural to assume that politicians will veer towards and prioritise issues and concerns that they can effectively deliver on, rather than those that matter most for Norwegian society. This suggests that there is a clear bias in political discourse and in how elections are fought in favour of issues that politicians know that they can make a difference on. The pathological feature would come across insofar as these issues are confined to

local affairs or are insubstantial; hence, elections lose salience as means for staking out Norway's future direction in a rapidly changing world.

Another complementary hypothesis is that established Norwegian politicians are particularly hamstrung; hence the stage is open for "political entrepreneurs" who feel less bound by international commitments and therefore can criticise the other parties for failing to address key issues. The only reason this has not given a more substantial boost to populist politicians thus far is that there has not been any viable alternative to the EEA agreement (except EU membership which is excluded by gag rules) and Norway is quite well-aligned with the EU. The hypothesis that requires systematic comparison with EU member states is that Norway is particularly hard-wired in favour of populist politics. This is not confined to right-wing populist parties but runs through the political system (note, in particular, the role of the Centre Party). Nevertheless, if Norway is particularly structurally induced, the puzzle is why there is not more populist grandstanding.

The argument thus far is that the particular policy-politics constellation that marks Norway's EU affiliation could render Norway particularly exposed to fake news, misinformation, and manipulation. I have provided some suggestions to that effect, but these are weak cases. It is perhaps more important to spell out the reasons why there is not more. A key element here is clearly the high level of trust in government. This trust does, however, appear to rely on a fairly conventional conception of sovereignty and constitutional democracy that the EU is in the process of reconfiguring. This suggests that the trust is based on rather shaky ontological foundations.

CONCLUSION

This chapter took as its point of departure the widely held notion that there is a direct link between democratic decline and the rise of fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation, and the more salient the role of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation the more pronounced the democratic decline. In response to that, I devised a constitutional-democracy pathology scale with four levels, which ranged from democracy to autocracy. The scale would serve two main functions. It was designed to reflect the assumed link between democratic decline and the severity of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. Further, it was used to

discuss how closely we can associate democratic decline with fake news, disinformation, and manipulation by including Level II on the scale.

On the former function, I showed that there are clear merits to gradating democratic decline along severity of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation, as reflected, for instance, in the distinction between levels I, II, and III on the scale. Nevertheless, I also showed that movements on the scale, for instance from level I to level II, cannot solely be attributed to a rise in fake news and disinformation, as the policy accumulation and democratic responsiveness trap showed us. This trap is part of a broader pattern of dislodging of politics and policy that relates to changes in the structure of party systems and the process of globalisation-induced governing restructuring. These structural changes provide scope for the rise of politicians and parties espousing fake news and disinformation. The implications of these structural changes for democracy extend well beyond those actors espousing fake news and disinformation. That was illustrated with reference to the case of Norway, which scores high on international democracy indexes, albeit has become situated in an EU affiliation that is problematic for constitutional democracy. In Norway's case, democratic decline is as much a function of silence as talk (the talk that we associate with fake news and disinformation). The Norway case showed that silence, gag rules, and constitutional abeyances (Foley, 1989) can have democratically deleterious effects.

The upshot is that we cannot rely on fake news, mis(dis)information, and manipulation as the main bellwether for the health of democracy. We need to pay attention to important structural features and, as suggested in this chapter, the policy–politics dislocation.

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Journalism, Truth and the Restoration of Trust in Democracy: Tracing the EU 'Fake News' Strategy

Asimina Michailidou, Elisabeth Eike, and Hans-Jörg Trenz

INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation, particularly its social media dimension, is inextricably linked with what most scholars, politicians and journalists consider an unprecedented 'fake news' epidemic, which is putting the very legitimacy of democratic government in peril (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Edson

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et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2018). At the same time, digital media are considered the catalyst in the (re)surfacing of extreme political ideologies and the disruption these cause to democratic discourse conventions and trust in representative democracy (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Sunstein, 2017). Consequently, we observe an increasing radicalisation of political discourse, often characterised by ‘trench warfare dynamics’ (Karlsen et al., 2017) and extreme political views (Ernst et al., 2019). Thus, the process of public opinion formation through the public sphere is disrupted in the double sense of the erosion of the trustworthiness of news and of the consensus of core democratic values. For critical media scholars, it is clear that the digital spread of misinformation, division and hatred is a ‘peril for democracy’ and a pollutant of ‘[t]he channels of information that inform democratic citizens—the lifeblood of democracy’ (Ward, 2019, p. 33).

Nevertheless, the empirical evidence that supports the ‘fake news’ epidemic thesis and the link between extremism, digital media and the declining trust in democratic institutions—including journalism and the democratic public sphere—is inconclusive, if not scant (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Halberstram & Knight, 2016; Hong & Kim, 2016; Rosanvallon 2008; Srijan & Shah, 2018). Phil Howard observes that ‘only one part of the political spectrum—the far right—is really the target for extremist, sensational and conspiratorial content. Over social media, moderates and centrists tend not to be as susceptible’ (University of Oxford News and Events, 2018). In a similar vein, Karlsen et al. (2017) point out that the echo chambers that were meant to signal the fragmentation of the public sphere remain empirically elusive. Cas Mudde (2018) picks up on this point—corroborated by a study on selective exposure to misinformation by Guess et al. (2018)—to highlight that it is rather hyperbolic to talk of a ‘fake news epidemic’, because it is clear that: (a) only a small group of people with a specific political/ideological profile read and spread ‘fake news’ online (the vast majority of these being extreme-populist right wingers); and (b) people read some ‘fake news’ but also read a lot of ‘normal news’ too (Mudde, 2018). Instead of focusing on pan-European legislation that will tackle a non-existent ‘fake news epidemic’, Mudde redirects our attention to mainstream media’s click-bait strategies—strategies employed to ensure that as many people view their articles and, thus, increase their revenue. He also highlights the lack of in-depth investigation and analysis in journalistic work, whereby mainstream news outlets publish reports that are based on uncorroborated evidence and/or on single sources. In this, Mudde echoes much of the

literature on post-truth and ‘fake news’, in which journalism is one of the core villains in the ‘prophecies’ about the state of democracy in the post-truth era (Farkas & Schou, 2020, pp. 58–60).

In this chapter, we disentangle the complex relationship between the democratic public sphere, journalism and truth. Instead of holding journalists individually accountable for the spread of ‘fake news’, we consider the various enabling and constraining factors of journalistic work and practices. Journalists are not individuals that are closer to the facts or more devoted to the truth than are others. Rather, they are embedded in a professional field of journalistic practices, which help to establish the value of information and establish their use in a way that becomes acceptable and convincing for the majority. To account for this complex relationship between journalism, truth and trust in democracy, we discuss institutional approaches to journalism and identify constraints to the traditional model functioning of journalism in light of new digital challenges.

The chapter proceeds as follows—first, we give an overview of the literature on the relationship between journalism and trust, distinguishing two levels of truth and trust in the public sphere. We then link these levels of truth-trust to the digital transformation of the public sphere and its impact on information abundance, plurality of views and hyper-scrutiny in public debates. Subsequently, we assess the EU’s anti-disinformation strategy and propose relevant news media actions in light of these new challenges to meet the public sphere’s normative standards in democracy.

Between Truth and Trust: Journalists as Informed Opinion-Makers

Journalism’s relationship to truth is ambivalent. On the one hand, journalists claim the ‘ontological truth’ of news and their privileged role as ‘truth finders’ through their own methods of investigation. On the other hand, they do not work like scientists and, therefore, do not have the epistemological means that could substantiate the ‘truth’ in journalism work (Broersma, 2013, p. 33). In practice, this means that journalists have to weigh various accounts of truth and to acknowledge that their informed opinion cannot lay claim to an absolute truth, but instead remains tentative, contested and open to revision whenever new information comes forth and doubts about the correctness of available information are raised (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2018, p. 53). Their mediating role notwithstanding, there is no guarantee that society can agree on the truth-value of information and its public uses.

The modern public sphere, which is grounded on the principles of free speech and publicity, is not only dependent on ‘scientific facts’ but also on intersubjective agreement. It requires a shared epistemology among the truth finders and their publics (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1871). Journalists are, then, critical mediators of truth and a safety valve that prevents the imposition of one institution’s or person’s truth on the whole of a society. They ‘tell the truth’, which they uncover from the ‘facts out there’, by applying de-personalised and rationalised working methods (Broersma, 2013, p. 32). At the same time, journalists stick to rules of impartiality and fairness. They support public reasoning by allowing for the expression of plural voices (governmental and oppositional, mainstream and marginal) and, therefore, ideally arrive at a balanced account of different versions of the truth. This includes the difficult task of critically putting to the test the validity claims raised by these plural voices in a way that informs public opinion.

The public sphere is inherently driven by critical debates and exchanges that contest the value of information and the degree of informed opinions. Information is, therefore, not synonymous with ‘the truth’, which only needs to be picked up by journalists and amplified to become accessible for broader publics. Truth is not an external input to news, but an unstable outcome of fact-finding, information-seeking and contestation, where journalists act as professional brokers. News media derive their trustworthiness from their ‘selectivity’ capacity rather than a claim of representing ‘the absolute truth’ (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), specifically, their capacity to (convince the public that they) select reliable and appropriate sources and information, and provide credible and objective assessment of these (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Readers of the news, as well, change their expectations and learn and experience that news does not represent ‘the truth’ but ‘a truth’. What counts then is not simply the truth-value of information and news but also trust in the institutions and procedures that generate news and allow for the establishing of the value of news as a collectively binding force for the political community at large.

Trust in journalists is, in this sense, a prerequisite for society to reach agreement about the value of information and of the public use of information to identify and detect problems. At the same time, a well-functioning journalism and public sphere are needed to generate trust in the functioning of democracy. Trust has, thus, a plural meaning. It is trust in representatives, who defend or contest the value of truth; it is trust in

the procedures that allows for the establishing of the value of truth; and, ultimately, it is also trust in the mediators, specifically, in the institution of journalism.

This complex relationship between the public sphere, journalism and truth allows us to re-conceptualise the making of truth and falsehood in public debates. The public sphere is not simply there to establish truth through its intermediators in journalism. Journalists are not defending truth standards against what is identified as ‘fake’ or ‘wrong’, but operate within a field where the value of information remains principally contested. Standards and procedures of journalism are therefore not applied in a way to detect truth in an absolute way and defend it against falsehood, but to approach truth in the most reliable and acceptable way. The truth-value of information is not attached to it as an attribute that decides over its use in public debates; it is rather the (unstable) outcome of such procedures of critical debates and journalism practices.

‘Fake News’ as Proclaimed Truth

From the above, it becomes clear that what is critical for the democratic functioning of the public sphere—besides the content of news—is the procedure through which the value of information is established. This is either through an argumentative exchange, which remains principally open and inconclusive (trust in the procedures and institutions of public contestation) or through personal attributes and style of representatives who proclaim the value of information through the media. In the first case, the value of information relies on an argumentative exchange in search of truth, and in the second case, it relies on the blind faith of publics and the face value of information received by them. Journalism and the news media have, thus, principally two options when generating trust in the value of information:

- Truth through argumentation. This is the type of truth we arrive at through the consideration of different arguments in a critical and open exchange among journalists, experts and political representatives. Truth is the unstable and preliminary outcome of the procedures of fact-finding and fact-checking. Even if arguments and debate do not lead to an ultimate agreement on the value of information as truth, democracy can still rely on trust in the process of establishing the truth and the collectively binding forces generated

by it. Procedures of establishing the truth: this is what journalists ought to adhere.

- Truth through proclamation. Contrary to the Socratic, or deliberative, type of truth established through the exchange of arguments, proclamatory truth entails the acceptance of the truth-value of information based on the authority or the person defending it, the suggestive force of the underlying dogma, or followers' blind trust in the proclaimed truth. Truth would be an external, but stable and unquestionable input that determines the content of news. Expressions of critique or distrust in the value of information are not foreseen or even precluded. Journalism and the news media would then simply be a forum for trusted authorities to proclaim truth, which would have an ultimate binding force for their followers. The press would ultimately be partisan, and readers would align according to the trustworthiness of news sources for whom journalists are only the mouthpiece.

We can see that the latter mode of establishing the value of information through proclamation would easily lead to the strengthening of trust in single representatives at the cost of undermining trust in the procedures that allow establishing the truth. The public sphere would not be 'deliberative', but become 'representative' again, as in the pre-modern era (Habermas, 1989), with the difference that not one general absolute truth is defended with authority, but several versions of categorical truth. The result would be polarisation of different 'trust communities' that diverge in how they interpret the value of information. This model of journalism as a mouthpiece for the proclamation of partial truths is not new; we find it in the partisan press of the pre-digital era, and in many cases, it remains a core pillar of national media systems today (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

The 'fake news' debate thus relates to a shift from deliberative to categorical conceptions of truth, and it is, therefore, no coincidence that critical observers also speak of the return of the partisan press that spread their partial truths to faithful adherents, such as Fox News in the United States (US) (Levendusky, 2013). The denial of the promoters of 'fake news' to enter an argumentative exchange and their often-aggressive strategies to proclaim their truth against science, bears the risk of a retreat of reason in public debates. Deliberative rationalists, in turn, might

take a more defensive stance by highlighting consensus about scientific facts instead of epistemological struggles over knowledge. As public contestation of scientific facts is increasingly perceived as risky, science communication in the media is, thus, either reduced or oversimplified. This might be an indicator of the fact that also deliberative democrats increasingly lose trust in the media as mediators of the value of information and in public sphere procedures of establishing the truth. Following this line of argument, if existing media infrastructures become dysfunctional and the public sphere is disrupted, democracy needs to be protected from the damaging effects of a disrupted public sphere and deliberative fora ought to be sheltered.

We therefore need to approach the role of journalism in the digital age not as an institution that ought to merely re-assert its authority, but rather to reinstall procedures of truth finding that have a collective binding force and do not divide society into different trust communities represented by different types of media. This requires non-partisan journalism, independent of financial and political influence (Broersma, 2013; Davies, 2019; McNair, 2017; Michailidou & Trenz, 2015; Ward, 2015, 2019). It is under this prism that we unpack, in the following, the interplay between different layers of trust building shaped by competing expectations about the ideal functioning of journalism. We distinguish between three inter-related functions of journalism in democracy: publicity, public opinion formation and legitimation. Each of these functions can be enhanced, but also fundamentally challenged, by digital transformations. We then review the disruptions to these functions that arise from digital transformations and critically discuss the counter-strategies that are proposed by the EU.

Publicity as Challenged by Information Abundance/Overload/Surveillance

Publicity relates to the public sphere's function in democracy to make matters of shared concern visible and relevant in public, to the public and by the public, in a manner that ensures plurality of voices and the safeguarding of basic principles of civil public exchange (Dewey, 2012[1927]; Splichal, 2002). The abundance of information available online risks overloading legacy media institutions' abilities to verify the accuracy of content distributed online and challenge governments' policymaking ability (Voltmer & Sorensen, 2016). Online publicity is further

distinguished by the hybridity of content and data that flows in semi-public and semi-private spheres, with both content providers (e.g. cultural industries or news industries) and individual users losing control over the flow of data. The freedom of access and openness of digital media content and services often comes at the price of pervasive surveillance, which may limit individuals' freedom and narrow their sources of information, as well as empowering business and states vis-à-vis citizens (Webster, 2017).

In a chain-reaction process, the declining quality of reporting and questionable democratic credentials of media owners fuel the decline in trust in the institution of journalism globally and across Europe (Gallup, 2019). Direct attacks against freedom of speech and the press have also become more frequent, provoked, especially, by populist leaders and new authoritarian governments. In some countries, like Hungary, Poland and Italy, the press freedom index is in steep decline, and governments have also entered a 'war' with journalism, putting increased pressure on the free press, restricting budgets and the autonomy of public service broadcasting (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

In the struggle over digital publicity, we observe how media industries' and governments' monopoly on information is challenged by the rise of digitally driven political mobilisation, with some digitally driven movements transforming into mainstream political parties, such as the Five Star Movement in Italy or the transnational DiEM25. Digital movements of opinion may be civil society-driven, or they may be launched by individual influencers through YouTube or Instagram, often reaching out to millions of people worldwide (Barisione et al., 2019). Social media campaigns can become decisive in democratic elections or referenda, such as Brexit. Thus, the mobilising function of digital communication means that while political representatives no longer rely on the mediating function of journalists to reach out to their electorates, they also face a challenge to their legitimacy as representatives of the people's will by digitally empowered, formerly passive, audiences and new political actors.

Public Opinion Formation as Challenged by Plurality/Polarisation of Voice

The public sphere functions as the carrier of public opinion and will formation regarding both the substance of democratic government and the norms of what are appropriate political expressions (Habermas, 1974; Neidhardt, 1994). It facilitates not only the participation of citizens in

public exchanges about the form and content of government, but also citizens' self-perception of this role. Digital transformations have multiplied voices and opinions that are channelled through a plurality of media, but, at the same time, new digital divides have emerged and media competences are distributed unequally (Bright, 2017). Through digital media, individuals can become richer in information and more connected, but they can also more easily withdraw from public life, as can their private life also be more easily intruded by companies and governments. New sources of biases in opinion have emerged through targeted campaigning, stealth propaganda, inauthentic online expression and unaccountable algorithmic filtering, which may potentially result in manipulation, polarisation and radicalisation of substantial amounts of citizens.

The COVID-19 crisis offers plenty of examples in this direction. 'Fake news' has circulated in every country about everything from how to avoid getting infected, celebrities having tested positive for the disease, to the origin of the virus and possible cures (Brennen et al., 2020; Naeem et al., 2021). Unsubstantiated and alarmist 'fake news' has readily found fertile ground among frightened and frazzled publics around the world, from Greece to Australia, from the US to South Africa. Nevertheless, professional news media, social media platforms, scientists and the general public have come together to scrutinise the credibility of such claims, using precisely the same platforms, sources and strategies to reach out to wider audiences (Trenz et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 case is the latest to offer encouraging evidence that public spheres around the globe have retained enough strength to withstand polarisation, fragmentation and the ensuing susceptibility to misinformation, even under conditions of a global pandemic. Public sphere scholars' early concerns regarding possible audience fragmentation across several digital public spheres have yet to be corroborated to the degree originally feared of corrosive 'echo chambers' (Brunns, 2019; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Instead, empirical analysis shows that the same digitally driven infrastructures and modes of participation that fuel intense polarisation, and even tribalisation, of the public sphere also facilitate cross-camp exchanges and subject the claims of opposing factions and parties to intense scrutiny. The higher the stakes for the public good, the more likely is it that moderate voices will not be drowned but brought under the public spotlight to reinstate reason and balance in the public debate—such as in cases of intense financial crisis, a global pandemic or escalating tensions between nuclear powers.

Legitimacy as Challenged by Hyper-Scrutiny/Hyper-Cynicism

The public sphere constitutes the ideational dimension of democracy. It requests good arguments and justifications for why opinions should be considered valid, and political decisions as just and legitimate (Bohman, 1996; Peters, 1994). The sheer volume of information available to individuals, coupled with the democratisation of participation in the public sphere through social media, discussion platforms, participatory journalism, personalised/curated news feeds and blogs, results in increased scrutiny of the traditional knowledge-producers, mediators and gatekeepers of the public sphere (journalists, experts and politicians). This increase in the seemingly plurality of voices and opinions harbours a dark side, which media and political institutions are still struggling to address in an effective yet democratic manner. While public scrutiny of political and intellectual elites is welcome, if not necessary, in a democracy, the hyper-scrutiny taking place in the digital public sphere may have the unwelcome effect of weakening a commonly accepted benchmark for normative critique and moral standards (Davies, 2019). Digitalisation has multiplied the arenas for the diffusion of selective information that claims validity and also involves media users in constant truth-seeking. This extension and perpetuation of practices of truth-seeking through argument exchange (everything can be questioned all the time) carries with it the danger of the loss of a shared epistemology to assess truth claims (Waisbord, 2018). There is, in the words of Mark Andrejevic (2013), a discrepancy between the digitalisation-fuelled utopian quest for the pure truth and the ‘cultural logic of big data’, whereby no frame is accepted as reliable or trustworthy, and all frames, particularly those of journalists and other public actors, are treated as by definition flawed or suspected for biases. ‘What we are witnessing is a collision between two conflicting ideals of truth: One that depends on trusted intermediaries (journalists and experts), and another that promises the illusion of direct access to reality itself’ (Davies, 2019). Through digital media, regular users are blended with an information overflow and the requirement to become self-selective and develop individual strategies of ‘mastering the web’ without relying on intermediaries, such as journalism.

At the same time, digital and global communication have led to fundamental value and identity conflicts, which shatter the normative underpinning of the modern public sphere. On the one hand, public

sphere transformations have contributed to a ‘silent revolution’, a long-term process of cultural change that marked a shift towards liberalism, with political competition confined to mainstream parties. While on the other hand, Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue that this development has reached a turning point, as new political parties and leaders have emerged in all Western societies who mobilise electorates along a new cultural cleavage that pits adherents of liberal values against adherents of illiberal or authoritarian values.

Group identities take on a transnational dynamic as much in politics (e.g. the #metoo recast of gender equality and the revived environmental activism led by Greta Thunberg) as in culture and entertainment (e.g. the collective understanding of those using Facebook or Netflix, or the fans of a specific TV series or movie saga, coming together across the globe to virtually debate their favourite characters). As a result, the digital transformation of the public sphere pushes the boundaries of the political community, redefining communitarian nationalists and cosmopolitans along a globalised, interconnected axis. In facing the challenge of immigration and refugees, for instance, social media are used simultaneously for the mobilisation of solidarity and for the expression of racism and xenophobia (Michailidou & Trenz, 2019). In Brexit campaigns, social media had become the site for the confrontation between pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics, but debates were not so much about the advantages or disadvantages of European integration than about national sovereignty and the boundaries of the political community (Brändle et al., 2022).

The rise of populism, illiberalism and political extremism undermine the authority of the intermediaries of truth and encourage their adherents to search for their own facts against established media and journalism. They, thus, build up their support base of seemingly self-empowered digital media users. In turn, policies that aim to stamp out misinformation, or algorithms that aim to detect ‘fake news’ online, equally build on the dichotomy between biased and pure truth, and the promise to come up with a clear-cut response. This disregards the old insight of public sphere theory that news making and decisions about the authority of information have always been political acts to the extent that journalism and news media prioritise some stories over others, that they also prioritise according to news organisation agendas and the personal biases of the journalist. As such, journalists are not closer to truth, but rather more faithful to the procedures that allow to establish information value and truth in a way that is consensual to a majority.

Such epistemic conflicts are translated into fundamental disagreement and antagonism between social groups that escape established procedures of conflict management and solution. Digitalisation would not necessarily result in fragmentation (the echo chamber argument) but in polarisation. Adherents to different epistemic communities would even question the legitimacy of how others form their opinions. There is no longer agreement on the meta-problem of how legitimately to form opinions with others in public debate. Some forms of public and media debate are dismissed as elitist, and therefore exclusionary, and therefore illegitimate. Others are dismissed as abusive, as refusing even to listen to the views of others, and therefore again, illegitimate.

However, the conditions that facilitate the discursive weaponisation of ‘fake news’ and the undermining of trust through hyper-scrutiny, also allow for the public sphere to rebound and bring the ‘fake news’ cry-wolves themselves under scrutiny. The COVID-19 crisis is proving a litmus test for this manifestation of what we have previously termed public sphere resilience (Trenz et al., 2021). When the Norwegian Public Broadcaster NRK, for example, published a news article containing controversial claims by experts (a Norwegian vaccine researcher and a former head of the British intelligence service MI6) about the allegedly man-made origin of the COVID-19 virus, the reaction of the Norwegian scientific community was swift and effective—the article was revised to include an apology for having too few sources and miscommunications (Svaar & Venli, 2020). A new article was published, which explained the disagreements within the field about the composition of the virus, as well as about drawing conclusions about the origin of the virus based on this. In this way, journalists set the hyper-scrutiny of public claims about the virus on a more solid basis, relaying to the public how scientists work to understand the virus and the difficulty of establishing the truth from a scientific perspective.

The EU's Response to the 'Fake News' Challenge

From a policy perspective, this parasitic symbiosis of ‘fake news’ and the democratic public sphere has functioned simultaneously as a trigger for action and hindrance to national and transnational efforts to tackle ‘fake news’/misinformation. The EU has used the principle of freedom of expression to both defend its policies against disinformation, but also as grounds to defend its (relative) inaction. The alarming rate at which ‘fake

news' has been taking root in mainstream politics led the EU to classify disinformation as a threat to democratic, political and policymaking processes, as well as public goods, such as public health, security and environment (EC, 2018a, p. 4).¹ At the same time, the EU argued that disinformation needed to be handled differently to illegal content, such as hate speech or incitement to violence. Despite being verifiably false or misleading, it is still legal content and thus protected by the right to freedom of expression as enshrined in the European Union Charter for Fundamental Rights (EC, 2018c, p. 1).

Initially, therefore, the European Commission developed an action plan against disinformation (EC, 2018c), which was voluntary in nature. Online platforms, advertising industry, researchers, media and citizens alike were encouraged to inform themselves of the dangers of disinformation and the potential negative implications it could have on democratic decision-making. The EU's discourse aligned with dominant contemporary understandings of online and social media as spearheading post-truth politics, particularly highlighting the role of online platforms in enabling the proliferation of disinformation and appealing to their responsibility to act to limit its spread. These self-regulatory measures were preferred over binding law, as there was a perceived risk of a backlash against any regulatory action that could be considered as constraining freedom of speech. However, the EU itself criticised the self-regulatory measures that had been imposed by the different signatories and stakeholders and acknowledged limits to this approach (Eike, 2020).

Addressing Information Abundance/Overload/Surveillance in EU News Media Policy

The virtually endless flow and amount of information in the digital era is mostly associated with matters of personal data protection and consumer

¹ The European Commission, recognising the increasing weaponisation of the term 'fake news', has deemed the phrase misleading and having negative connotations as it is "used by those who criticise the work of media or opposing political views" (EC, 2018b, p. 7). Instead, it uses the term 'disinformation', which is, furthermore, intended to imply that "the phenomena is a symptom of a wider problem of information disorder" (EC, 2018b, p. 7) and is defined as "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm" (EC, 2018a, p. 3).

safety in relevant EU policy documents. As far as the challenge of information abundance and overload is concerned, the EU acknowledges that this challenge also affects citizens' right to free and fair elections in a digital environment. Specifically, the EU recognises that current regulations to ensure transparency and parity of resources and airtime during political elections are out-of-date. The Digital Services Act calls for more transparency, information obligations and accountability for digital service providers, as well as effective obligations to tackle illegal content online. The hope is to improve users' safety online and protect their fundamental rights by making clear obligations for online platforms, including 'notice-and-action procedures for illegal content and the possibility to challenge the platforms' content moderation decisions' (EC, 2020a, p. 2). The EU also wishes to continue the self-regulatory measures to tackle disinformation, proposing that the 'rules on codes of conduct established in this Regulation could serve as a basis and be complemented by a revised and strengthened Code of practice on disinformation' (EC, 2020a, p. 5).

At the same time, the EU has taken lead role in addressing the challenge of hyper-surveillance and the blurring of private and public in the digital sphere by introducing the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a flagship regulation with implications for the digital public sphere on a global scale. Although GDPR is intended as a consolidated framework that guides commercial use of personal data and strengthens data protection for EU citizens, particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 Cambridge Analytica scandal, it also:

exponentially increases data security responsibilities and risks for organisations, and a strategy is required to cope with GDPR and other regulations. Information technology plays a key role in data governance, systems strategies and management, to accomplish personal data requirements, enhancing information security and developing breach-awareness capabilities aligned with those of the organisation. (De Carvalho et al., 2020)

Balancing Plurality with Polarisation of Voice in EU News Media Strategy

As a counter-measure to the challenge of polarisation of public opinion, the EU is actively encouraging the strengthening of deliberative democracy infrastructure, the freedom and pluralism of the media industry, as

well as raising awareness and building resilience against disinformation and influence operations ‘to ensure that citizens are able to participate in the democratic system through informed decision-making free from interference and manipulation affecting elections and the democratic debate’ (EC, 2020b, p. 2). The understanding of disinformation as a tool for manipulation of public opinion, and a threat to democratic decision-making, is what produces the argument for tackling disinformation:

The integrity of elections has come under threat, the environment in which journalists and civil society operate has deteriorated, and concerted efforts to spread false and misleading information and manipulate voters including by foreign actors have been observed. The very freedoms we strive to uphold, like the freedom of expression, have been used in some cases to deceive and manipulate. (EC, 2020b, p. 1)

According to the EU, the COVID-19 pandemic has also been accompanied by an unprecedented ‘infodemic’ of mis- and disinformation, creating confusion and distrust and undermining an effective public health response (EC, 2020c, p. 1). This digital wave of information—including everything from misleading health information and conspiracy theories to illegal hate speech, consumer fraud, cybercrime and foreign influence operations—is said to demonstrate ‘the crucial role of free and independent media as an essential service, providing citizens with reliable, fact-checked information, contributing to saving lives’ (EC, 2020c, p. 11).

The media sector is described as a ‘precondition for a healthy, independent and pluralistic media environment, which in turn is fundamental for our democracy’ (EC, 2020d, p. 4). Following on from this, the EU proposes a series of initiatives to address the risks to media freedom and pluralism, including to ‘create a safer and better environment for journalists to do their work, as well as to promote media literacy’ (EC, 2020d, p. 4). The EU also underlines the importance of increasing citizens’ media literacy in combating disinformation, describing it as including ‘all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow citizens to access the media, to have a critical understanding of it and to interact with it’ (EC, 2020d, p. 18). The Commission launched a ‘NEWS’ initiative for news media to work on collaborative transformation and to:

[l]ook holistically at the challenges facing the news media industry and provide a coherent response, bringing together different funding instruments under a common banner. This will increase the coherence, visibility, and impact of actions supported under different funding streams, while fully respecting the independence of the media. (EC, 2020d, p. 9)

In a parallel effort to address publicity distortions due to digital advertising, Article 24 of the Digital Services Act (DSA) proposes that online platforms ensure that users can identify ‘in a clear and unambiguous manner and in real time’ (a) the information displayed is an advertisement, (b) the source on whose behalf the advertisement is displayed, as well as (c) ‘meaningful information about the main parameters used to determine the recipient to whom the advertisement is displayed’ (EC, 2020a, pp. 58–59).

Transparency as the Answer to Hyper-Scrutiny/Hyper-Cynicism?

The challenges to legitimacy caused by the digital transformation may be eased by the EU’s measures to increase transparency of online platforms and service providers, support legacy media and empower citizens through media literacy. Fact-checking groups and civil society also contribute to bringing scrutiny to ‘fake news’ producers, as well as to governmental and corporate online platforms. Avaaz is an example of such resilience in civil society, with their extensive fact-checking of online communication, and political activity advocating further regulations from the EU. In this way, the public sphere is showing resilience to ‘fake news’ both from the top-down and from the grassroots-up. The digital transformation has enabled the rapid growth of online campaigning, which offers new tools, such as, the combining of personal data and artificial intelligence with psychological profiling and complex micro-targeting techniques, as well as algorithmic amplification of messages. While some of these tools are regulated by EU law, such as the processing of personal data, others are ‘framed mainly by corporate terms of service and can also escape national or regional regulation by being deployed from outside the electoral jurisdiction’ (EC, 2020b, p. 2). Having formerly considered self-regulatory measures more appropriate, the EU now seems to find that regulation is needed. In 2020, the EU proposed the Digital Services Act (DSA) aimed at protecting citizens’ fundamental rights in the online

environment, by adapting commercial and civil law rules for commercial entities operating online (EC, 2020a). This regulation is designed to protect EU citizens and will even apply to online platforms established outside the EU, when these are used by EU citizens.²

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have discussed the ‘fake news pandemic’ not as a failure of journalism as a collective actor and institution, but of established procedures or truth finding within the broader public sphere. Although there is abundant empirical evidence for the disruption of the democratic public sphere (Bennet & Pfetsch, 2018; Schlesinger, 2020), such disruptions do not necessarily lead to a post-factual or post-truth democracy. The challenges of the post-truth era can also activate resistance and resilience mechanisms across all three core functions of the public sphere, both at the macro/policy level and the micro/individual level. Focusing on the former, we have reviewed here key EU actions and regulations aimed at addressing disruptive digitalisation processes. That there is any regulatory action at all in this direction is in itself an indication of resistance—albeit at an elementary state—against the most democratically corrosive aspects of digitalisation. In terms of substance, the EU actions and regulations address all three core functions and relevant challenges of the digital public sphere in a manner that strongly denotes, not only a liberal democratic normative outlook (privacy protection regulation, for instance), but also a (neo?) liberal economic ideology. The latter comes through in the voluntary nature, for instance, of the counter misinformation actions initially proposed in the period 2018–2020. More recently, however, we see a shift both in terms of urgency and in the wording of EU regulation and actions, whereby the role of professional journalism is explicitly recognised as a pillar of democracy. The earlier voluntary character of proposed actions has also now turned mandatory for social media platforms and digital public sphere behemoths, such as Google and Apple.

² The DSA states that “[t]his Regulation shall apply to intermediary services provided to recipients of the service that have their place of establishment or residence in the Union, irrespective of the place of establishment of the providers of those services” (EC, 2020a, p. 43).

Crucially, the recognition of news media not only as commercial enterprises but also as a public good indicates a first step, albeit reluctant, away from the hyper-marketisation outlook that has defined the digital public sphere era thus far.

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PART II

Post-Truth Populism and the Disintegration
of Europe



From Denouncing to Defunding: The Post-Truth Populist Challenge to Public-Service Media

Maximilian Conrad

INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at post-truth politics from the vantage point of the populist challenge to public-service media. In the field of political theory, one important strand of the rapidly expanding literature on post-truth politics has focused on post-truth politics as a transformation in political culture, characterised by a declining status of the symbolic authority of the truth in political discourse (Newman, 2019, 2022). According to this reading, post-truth politics is distinguished by two central elements: on the one hand, a specific brand of populist politician that appears to “play fast and loose with the truth” and is, at best, strikingly indifferent to factual correctness (Newman, 2019, p. 94); while on the other hand, post-truth politics is also marked by postfactual attitudes on the part

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of the supporters of populist politicians (MacMullen, 2020), for whom concerns about the truth in terms of factual correctness appear to be subordinate to other, potentially more legitimate, concerns. The use of the concept of “alternative facts” at the outset of the Trump administration in early 2017 underlines this element and highlights the assertion that in post-truth politics, factual correctness *may* indeed be no more relevant than emotion, and that scientific facts are considered merely a matter of opinion. On this point, a number of authors have, however, raised important concerns to the effect that these twin phenomena of post-truth politics need to be understood primarily as a symptom of deeper underlying problems (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Fossum, 2022; Monsees, 2021).

Beyond this, the present chapter draws attention to one aspect of post-truth politics that tends to be overlooked and therefore deserves considerably more scholarly attention. This aspect is the fundamental hostility towards journalists and, indeed, the very institution of journalism (Cook, 2005; Reese, 2021; Vos, 2019). This hostility appears to be a constitutive element of what will be referred to here as *post-truth populism* and is reflected in the use of terms such as “fake news”, “system media”, or “liar press” (see Monsees, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020). In this chapter, the deployment of such terms is understood not simply as a method to silence critical journalists and/or avoid engaging with their questions, but moreover, as an attempt to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of professional journalism. Against this backdrop, this chapter presents a somewhat different take on the topic of post-truth politics: it is *forward-looking* in the sense that it explores what the post-truth populist hostility towards professional journalists, and the institution of journalism, might mean for the future of liberal democracy. Could it be that “fake news” allegations are part of a deliberate populist strategy to undermine the credibility of quality journalism? And if this is the case, could it also be that such efforts are merely a stepping stone on the path to a fully fledged post-truth era?

The chapter has a theoretical and an empirical ambition, but it also has certain agenda-setting aspirations. Regarding the latter, the chapter aims to raise awareness concerning, and prompt further empirical research into, the role of the populist hostility towards journalism and, in particular, towards public-service media in the context of the development of post-truth politics. At the theoretical level, the chapter develops the notion of *post-truth populism* as a specific type of populist politics in which

efforts to denounce professional journalism feature prominently. The core argument to be made is that post-truth populism is not merely characterised by a disdain for professional journalism, but also—and arguably more importantly—by an ambition to *defund* and potentially to eventually *dismantle* public-service media. The argument made in this chapter is that in order to achieve this end, post-truth populists employ a strategy consisting of two parts: first, they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of professional journalism (including public-service journalism) by creating a narrative of professional journalists’ liberal and elite/establishment bias. And second, post-truth populists also *exploit* such narratives in order to attack the financial basis of public-service media. To the extent that this strategy succeeds, the post-truth populist challenge to professional journalism needs to be viewed as an important step in the direction of a post-truth world in which the absence of independent and critical journalists would make it increasingly difficult to discern fact from fiction. This is connected to the role of journalism in democratic societies (see Norris, 2014; Ryfe, 2020; Strömbäck, 2005), which is discussed in more detail in the second section.

Empirically, this argument is illustrated by analysing populist attacks on public-service media during the COVID pandemic in Germany and against the backdrop of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany’s ongoing efforts to defund German public-service media. The COVID pandemic was chosen as an illustrative case because criticism of measures adopted to contain the spread of the coronavirus was quick to focus not only on the role of scientific expertise, but also on the way in which mainstream media (including public-service media) reported on the pandemic. This criticism was largely advanced by party-political actors such as, most importantly, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany. As the empirical analysis will show, this criticism entailed claims that only certain views were tolerated in mainstream media, as well as there being verbal and physical assaults on journalists covering various demonstrations against COVID restrictions.

The remainder of the chapter is divided into three parts. The next section develops the theoretical argument on the link between populism, post-truth politics, efforts to denounce critical journalism, and demands for the defunding of public-service media. The following section provides empirical illustrations of the theoretical argument, while the chapter ends with a concluding discussion on the implications of the post-truth

populist challenge to public-service media for the future of liberal democracy, discussing the extent to which this challenge can be seen to pave the way to a fully fledged post-truth world.

POST-TRUTH POPULISM

A common denominator in the literature on post-truth politics has been a focus on the question of whether we currently live within an era of post-truth politics—and, if this is the case, then what makes this era different from previous eras in terms of the types of lies, deceit and spin that have arguably always characterised politics. Numerous authors have claimed that the processes observable today are indeed something novel, although some have pointed out that this is not necessarily or exclusively due to the mere scope or technical sophistication of disinformation spread via social or other digital media (see Waisbord, 2018a). At the same time, quite a few scholars are also critical of the discourse on post-truth politics and claim that despite such indications, there is nothing unusual about what we are experiencing. They go on to argue that by using the buzzword of post-truth politics (or focusing on the symptoms) we run the risk of overlooking either the root causes of the phenomenon or the potential detrimental effects of efforts to counter it (see Farkas & Schou, 2020; Monsees, 2021).

One aspect that has been conspicuously absent in this debate is the idea that processes such as the polarisation and fragmentation of the public sphere (Sunstein, 2017) may actually only be among the first signs of a process that may ultimately result in a fully fledged era of post-truth politics. With this argument in mind, this chapter therefore does not simply attempt to define and analyse expressions of post-truth politics in political practice, but aims instead to discuss what the populist hostility towards journalists and the institution of journalism can tell us about the future of media freedom and, by extension, the prospect of informed democratic debate in a vital and functioning public sphere. Although it is highly relevant to note that post-truth politics is marked by a political culture in which politicians can win elections despite their disregard for factual correctness, considerably more attention needs to be paid to issues of trust and distrust in mainstream media. In doing so, we are able to interpret better what populist efforts to denounce professional and, in particular, public-service media may mean in light of the development of post-truth politics. On the one hand, “fake news” allegations can be dismissed simply

as a method for avoiding critical questions (Monsees, 2021, p. 6), but they clearly also—whether deliberately or not—serve to undermine the credibility, and thus also the legitimacy, of the institution of journalism and thereby chisel away at one of the pillars of any democratic public sphere. In this section, this theoretical argument is developed in three steps: first, the chapter develops the concept of *post-truth populism* by highlighting the link between post-truth politics and populism. Second, the chapter highlights the role of post-truth populists’ efforts to undermine the legitimacy of professional journalists as part of a broader (and possibly *deliberate*) strategy to undermine the foundations of democratic debate, thus preparing the ground for a fully fledged *post-truth* world where fact can hardly be distinguished from fiction any longer. Third, the chapter highlights the link between denouncing and demanding the defunding of public-service media.

Post-Truth Politics and Populism

The literature on post-truth politics suggests a close link between post-truth politics and populism. Some observers speak of an “elective affinity” between populism and post-truth politics, where post-truth communication is a distinctive feature of contemporary politics that lays the ground for populist politics (Waisbord, 2018b). In this view, populism is not the product of post-truth politics per se, but that developments in information technology, and the resulting transformations of the public sphere, have brought about an information environment in which the sort of post-truth politics that is emblematic of populism thrives (Dahlgren, 2018; cf. Farkas & Schou, 2020, pp. 55ff.; *ibid.*, p. 18; McIntyre, 2018, Chapter 4). This points to an aspect that, for many scholars, constitutes the hallmark of post-truth politics—not the fact that certain politicians lie, nor the fact that post-truth politics is facilitated by such a degree of technical sophistication that it becomes more and more difficult to tell fact from fiction, nor that supporters of post-truth politicians are seemingly indifferent about their lies—but in the words of Silvio Waisbord, the defining feature of post-truth politics is rather the “absence of conditions in the public sphere for citizens to concur on objectives and *processual norms* to determine the truth as verifiable statements about reality”, resulting in a world in which truth-telling is no longer “a shared communicative practice grounded in reason and science” (Waisbord, 2018a, pp. 19f.; *emphasis added*). Other authors have emphasised the *affective*

dimension of post-truth politics, arguing that sharing fake news should be understood less as an act of rational information sharing than as an act of identity expression used to “express [...] a sense of belonging to a group of people being left behind by elites” (cf. MacMullen, 2020; Monsees, 2021, p. 4).

This understanding of post-truth politics rhymes well with the idea of post-truth politics as a transformation in political culture. As such, it is intimately connected to one of the central premises of populism, namely the idea of a clear distinction between a pure people and a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2017). This chapter therefore combines the two concepts and speaks of *post-truth populism* to refer to a style of politics that qualifies as populist in relation to established definitions of populism (see Mudde, 2017; Müller, 2016), but that is also characterised by what is, at best, an *indifference* to factual correctness or, at worst, a conviction that there is no common procedural standard for arriving at a shared truth: essentially the notion that “popular truth” is by definition different from—and irreconcilable with—“elite lies” (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 25). This is an important point in that post-truth populists do not flat out reject the existence of the truth, but rather insist that elites, in particular the mainstream mass media, are withholding the truth by omitting or distorting certain facts and thus not telling the whole story.

A fitting illustration of this is the oft-cited claim, made in the context of the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States, that the White House was presenting “alternative facts” regarding the crowd size at the inauguration ceremony (see Monsees, 2021, pp. 6f.; Newman, 2019, p. 94; Vogelmann, 2018, pp. 19f.). In post-truth populism, facts that challenge “overriding narratives” are brushed aside (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 25), pointing to the rejection of basic standards for making factual observations, but moreover to the way in which post-truth populism questions the truthfulness of professional journalists and thus casts doubt on the trustworthiness of the institution of journalism. This creates a direct link between post-truth politics and one of the defining features of populism, namely the construction of a sharp distinction between *the real people* (whose voice is promoted by the populist politician) and an allegedly *corrupt liberal elite*. In post-truth populism, the media are seen as part of this corrupt liberal elite. For Silvio Waisbord, it is indeed this “binary vision of politics” (i.e. corrupt elites versus the real people) that constitutes the root of populism’s opposition to truth:

here, truth does not exist as a common collective goal (i.e. something to be developed through rational argumentation), but all truths are instead “partial and anchored in social interests” (Waisbord, 2018b, p. 25).

*From Undermining the Legitimacy of Professional Journalism
to Demanding the Defunding of Public-Service Media*

Given the emphasis that post-truth populists place on construing critical journalists as part of the corrupt liberal elite (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020), it comes as no surprise that efforts to denounce journalists through the use of “fake news” allegations are an important part of the post-truth populist toolkit (Farkas & Schou, 2018, pp. 306f.; Monsees, 2021; Waisbord, 2018a, p. 1867). In the case of Donald Trump, it may be tempting to interpret such allegations simply as an easy way to dodge critical questions from outlets such as CNN or MSNBC. However, the argument to be made here is that such efforts also serve another, potentially much more detrimental, purpose in relation to the development of post-truth politics. For one, using “fake news” allegations in order to dodge critical questions is at least in part a way of silencing the journalist asking the question. But in addition, such allegations (or simply name-calling) also sow distrust in specific media outlets and in doing so undermine their credibility and, by extension, also their legitimacy. Such efforts therefore also speak to and reinforce the notion, already prevalent among supporters of post-truth populists, that such “fake news” outlets are indeed part of the corrupt liberal elite that is withholding the truth from the real and pure people. Few post-truth populists have expressed this as clearly as Donald Trump when he referred to such media as the “enemy of the people” (see Carlson et al., 2021; Kellner, 2018; Meeks, 2020), cementing the view that such media outlets should not be trusted, but that they also should neither be talked nor listened to. This is facilitated by the high-choice media environment that has emerged in recent decades and that allows politicians to be highly selective in choosing which media outlets to speak with, as much as it allows citizens to choose which media outlets to follow (Castro et al., 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2017). This is an important point in relation to the issues of polarisation and fragmentation, both of which are key features of post-truth politics (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2019; Sunstein, 2017).

Considering the centrality of this hostility to mainstream media in post-truth populism, it is somewhat surprising that only relatively little research

exists on the connection between post-truth populism and demands for the defunding of public-service media (Sehl et al., 2020). However, some notable exceptions exist that highlight that efforts to denounce journalism are *not simply* part of populism’s “bad manners strategy”. Instead, they do indeed constitute an integral part of the effort to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of journalists—and in particular public-service journalists—that is driven by the opportunity to “evade public scrutiny and democratic control” (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). In this sense, assaults on public-service media are viewed also as an assault on the freedom of the media that places increased pressure on the democratic system (*ibid.*).

From undermining the legitimacy of journalism by construing professional journalists as part of the corrupt liberal elite, it is only a relatively small step to demanding the *defunding* of public-service media. As some authors have argued, political actors can use funding and defunding as a weapon to threaten or constrain public-service media (see Rodriguez-Castro et al., 2021), which makes it the easiest and most effective way to “tighten the strings on public-service corporations and thus to challenge the whole system” (Holtz-Bacha, 2021, p. 227). In addition, it is a “convenient disguise for underlying interests that arise from populists’ overall discontent with the system” (*ibid.*). In the literature, the German right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has become a standard illustration of the broader phenomenon of populist attacks on public-service media. As is discussed in more detail below, the party has had an ambivalent relationship with the institution of journalism more or less throughout its existence. This is reflected in the inclusion of the demand to abolish the license fee in Germany in its party platform from 2016, as well as in its manifestos for the 2017 and 2021 federal elections (cf. Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Rodriguez-Castro et al., 2021; Sehl et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite the central role that the AfD and its supporters have played in this process, such dynamics are by no means limited to Germany, which makes the theoretical argument presented in this chapter a topic of concern in other liberal democracies as well. The move from undermining the legitimacy of mainstream journalism to claiming the defunding of public-service media has also been discussed in countries such as Austria, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, to name but a few illustrative examples from the literature. In Austria, the right-wing populist *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPÖ) has made efforts to undermine trust in the public-service broadcaster ORF and used the highly charged concept

of “Zwangsgebühren” (i.e. *forced* as opposed to the more neutral *compulsory* fees) to demand the abolition of the license fee. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has similarly expressed scepticism about the funding system of the BBC (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020), whereas in Sweden, similar claims have been made by the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (Sehl et al., 2020).

In Germany, the Alternative for Germany has campaigned for a fundamental reform of public-service broadcasting that would be tantamount to a radical *defunding*. This is well-documented in the 2016 party platform (Grundsatzprogramm) as well as in the 2017 and 2021 federal election manifestos, but specifically also in policy initiatives such as the “Grundfunk” initiative. Already in 2016, the party platform presented a view of German public-service media as part of existing “obstacles and hindrances” to “the idea of freedom of communication” (AfD, 2016, author’s translation), proposing to abolish the system of “forced financing” and to provide an opt-out clause to enable them to cancel their access partially or completely (ibid.). Similarly, the election manifestos from 2017 and 2021 framed German public-service media predominantly as a threat to freedom of thought and expression due to their alleged lack of distance to the state. The 2017 manifesto claimed that German public-service media are “dominated by politics to an extent that appears unworthy of a democracy” (AfD, 2017, author’s translation) and consequently demanded abolishing the license fee so that “every citizen can decide for himself whether he [sic] wants to receive and pay for public-service programs” (ibid.). In order to create more “democratic control” over the governing boards of public-service media companies in Germany (the *Rundfunkräte*), the manifesto also called for those to be directly elected by citizens rather than appointed, as is currently the case.

The 2021 manifesto went one step further and linked public-service broadcasting in its current form, as well as private mainstream media directly, to alleged “prohibitions on speech and thought” that have been brought about by “diffuse ideas of ‘political correctness’” that are “stifling public discussion” (AfD, 2021, pp. 164f., author’s translation). The populist distinction between a corrupt liberal elite and the pure people is also evident here, as illustrated by the claim that “the convergence of the old parties¹ into a *cartel of opinion* has solidified the left-wing dominance

¹ In the German original, the party uses the negatively charged term “Altparteien”, which is used to distinguish the AfD from all the mainstream parties in Germany and, in

in public-service broadcasting and in private mainstream media” (ibid.; author’s translation, emphasis added). In its *Grundfunk* initiative (a play on words that turns the German word “Rundfunk”, specifically broadcasting, into “basic casting”) in 2020, the party goes one step further and speaks of a “veritable legitimization crisis of public-service broadcasting”, whose programs allegedly reach “ever fewer people”, but whose intendants call for “ever higher forced broadcasting payments” (AfD Fraktion, n.d., author’s translation). Highlighting the link between efforts to undermine the legitimacy of public-service media and demands to defund them, the initiative consequently demands cutting the budget of *all* public-service broadcasting in Germany to a maximum of 10% of the 2019 budget, while also demanding that it should be completely free from advertising and thus unable to create any additional revenue.

These observations underline the argument that efforts to undermine the legitimacy of professional journalism go hand in hand with claims to defund public-service media. On the one hand, post-truth populists undertake efforts to construe critical media as part of the corrupt left/liberal elite that distorts the facts and withholds the full truth from the people. On the other hand, *the same actors* attempt to exploit this sense of undermined credibility and legitimacy as an argument to justify claims for defunding and—potentially—dismantling public-service media. When taken in combination, these processes have the potential to pave the way towards a fully fledged post-truth world where citizens’ access to reliable information is severely curtailed. This argument is intimately connected to liberal notions about the role of journalism in democracy. As a system of popular self-governance (and recognising differences between various democratic theories as to how this popular self-governance is to be exercised), democracy evidently necessitates informed citizens. In this context, it is the role of journalism to produce and provide the kind of information that allows democratic citizens to perform their role in democracy, regardless of whether this entails preference formation or a more active engagement in and use of participatory and/or deliberative instruments (cf. Ryfe, 2020, p. 295; Strömbäck, 2005). Moreover, and possibly even more relevant to discussions about post-truth politics and post-truth populists’ efforts to undermine public-service media, journalism also performs a watchdog role that is particularly strongly

keeping with the populist distinction between corrupt elites and pure people, to present itself as the only real alternative.

emphasised in liberal theory: watchdog journalism performs the important role of providing a mechanism for strengthening accountability in democratic governance (see Norris, 2014). With these aspects in mind, it is clear that efforts to undermine the legitimacy of journalism so as to justify demands for the defunding of public-service media could be a significant step into a post-truth world. The simple reason for this is that it would severely curtail the provision of information that allows citizens to perform their democratic role, but also because it would weaken accountability mechanisms.

In this sense, the epistemic crisis of democracy (Dahlgren, 2018) that is marked to a significant extent by a distrust in the institution of journalism may indeed only constitute a stepping stone on the road to a fully fledged post-truth world. There is certainly good reason to doubt that the ambition to defund public-service media serves the purpose of creating better conditions for informed public debate by increasing the distance between public-service media and the state. Instead, there is good reason to assume that the ambition driving such demands is the opposite, namely to undermine one of the fundamental pillars of any democratic public sphere. Even if post-truth populists frame efforts to “reform” the funding schemes of public-service broadcasting as a way to enhance media freedom, it seems evident that such efforts are rather a blow to media freedom.

FROM DENOUNCING TO DEFUNDING: POST-TRUTH POPULISM AND PUBLIC-SERVICE BROADCASTING DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC

Knowing about the centrality of this hostility towards professional and, in particular, *public-service* journalism in post-truth populism, the following section now presents a few empirical illustrations of the interplay of such aspects during the COVID pandemic in Germany. Overall, measures adopted to contain the spread of the coronavirus enjoyed broad support in Germany (as in many other countries) throughout the pandemic. Reluctance to accept such measures nonetheless grew, intensified, and to some extent also radicalised as the pandemic dragged on. The intensification and radicalisation of these protests also reflected the increasing polarisation observable in society with regard to social distancing rules, the mandatory use of masks, and, not least, the vaccination campaign. Protests against such measures, adopted at the federal and state level,

emerged relatively early on, but remained a fringe phenomenon in the first few months of the pandemic. However, the *Querdenken* movement that was founded in April 2020, whose protests initially only drew small crowds, quickly became the most important infrastructure in mobilising against such restrictions. By August 2020, two of the movement's biggest protest marches in Berlin drew 20,000 and 38,000 people, respectively (Diehl, 2021; Vieten, 2020).

While such protests—and the *Querdenken* movement itself—have attracted considerable scholarly attention in relation to disinformation and conspiracy theories/narratives, they have not been discussed sufficiently from the vantage point of denouncing professional and/or public-service journalism. This empirical illustration therefore focuses on how populist actors have used the COVID pandemic to raise *and* at the same time to exploit distrust in professional journalism in order to advance their demands for defunding German public-service media. The COVID pandemic is a relevant case in point because it underlines the intimate link between post-truth populists' reluctance to accept scientific expertise and their hostility towards professional journalists. In other words, the COVID pandemic provided post-truth populists with a welcome opportunity to denounce public-service journalism (by questioning its reporting) in order to provide a justification for its defunding.

Consequently, the analysis distinguishes between two aspects: on the one hand, it considers the discursive/narrative dimension of efforts to undermine the legitimacy of professional journalism by looking at the terms (e.g. “fake news”) that post-truth populists employ in denouncing public-service journalism, but also other professional journalists²; and on the other hand, the analysis considers how such efforts are connected to proposals for the radical refunding (or simply *defunding*) of public-service media. Emphasis is placed on party-political actors. While party-political actors are certainly only a relatively small part of the broader protest movement against the COVID measures, there are considerable overlaps between the organisers/participants of these protests and the voters of right-wing populist or right-wing extremist parties (cf. Nachtwey et al., 2020). This element is, however, more pronounced in the East German

² As the analysis will show, public-service and other mainstream professional journalists are often denounced in combination, even though the claim for defunding is obviously limited to the institution of public-service journalism.

COVID protests (Frei & Nachtwey, 2021). In Germany, the most important of these party-actors is clearly the Alternative for Germany (AfD), in particular with regard to its declared ambition to “reform” Germany’s public-service broadcasting system and to abolish the license fee. But the protests against German COVID measures have also resulted in the founding of a new party that emerged directly out of the *Querdenken* movement ahead of the federal elections in 2021, namely the *Basisdemokratische Partei Deutschland* (or *dieBasis*) (Frei et al., 2021; Frei & Nachtwey, 2021; Virchow & Häusler, 2021). Despite the party’s limited political weight (having achieved 1.6% of first votes and 1.4% of second votes in the federal elections in 2021), its emergence and relative electoral success is nonetheless indicative of the fact that the reluctance to accept scientific expertise (and methods), and a belief that the mainstream media are not telling the whole story, exists also in circles other than the far right of the political spectrum.³ This latter aspect makes the party relevant in relation to the aims of this chapter, especially as regards the discursive dimension of efforts to denounce professional journalism and to question/undermine scientific expertise.

The Discursive Dimension: Denouncing Public-Service Journalism

Defunding public-service broadcasting in Germany is one of the declared ambitions of the AfD. Their efforts to denounce mainstream journalism are therefore clearly not *prompted* by the COVID pandemic, but the pandemic has provided a welcome opportunity to emphasise the party’s critique of mainstream media as an alleged threat to freedom of thought and expression. The party has argued that mainstream media only present certain facts and only tolerate certain views and opinions. The terms that the AfD has used in the COVID context are therefore a continuation of the terms that it had already used previously, including the term “liar press” (Lügenpresse) that had (re-)emerged in the wake of the PEGIDA protests from 2014 onwards. However, the term played only a relatively minor role during the pandemic, possibly because a guideline issued by

³ As pointed out by Frei and Nachtwey (2021), there is a significant difference in this regard between COVID protests in East Germany and Baden-Württemberg, where the *Querdenken* movement emerged: while the East German protests have been dominated by the extreme right, the ones in Baden-Württemberg are characterised much more strongly by people from esoteric and anthroposophic backgrounds (Frei & Nachtwey, 2021, p. 5).

the party for the 2021 federal election campaign advised against using this term, and also the related term “Lückenpresse” (cf. AfD, 2021b, p. 34).⁴

The analysed material shows different, but partly overlapping, categories of efforts to denounce public-service journalism. Among others, these include references to public-service media’s lack of distance to (the institutions of) the state, their role as propaganda and/or brainwashing tools, and the inappropriateness of what is framed as “forced financing” through the instrument of the license fee. Regarding the alleged *lack of distance* to the state, MP Peter Boehringer speaks of German public-service media as “*system media* that are now officially becoming *state media*” and that the “liar press will from now on be state-subsidized” (Boehringer, 2020; emphasis added). In its campaign for defunding German public-service broadcasting, the party further insinuates that German public-service media are *not at all* independent, suggesting that “we need independent media, without any influence from the state or parties” (AfD-Fraktion NRW, 2020). The underlying argument, as made clear by Joachim Paul, one of the initiators of the *Grundfunk* initiative, is connected to the composition of the *Rundfunkräte*, specifically, the governing boards of German public-service broadcasting institutions. According to the narrative propagated by the AfD, “through their political control of the governing boards, CDU, SPD, FDP and the Greens have secured massive influence on the reporting of public-service [media]” (ibid.). This has allegedly also resulted in public-service media’s violation of their obligation for neutrality in their reporting (AfD Kompakt, 2021a). This reflects the populist distinction between corrupt elites and the pure people and underlines the sharp distinction that the AfD draws between itself (as the only real alternative) and what it considers to be mainstream “old parties” (i.e. “Altparteien”).

The alleged lack of distance to the institutions of the state is commonly connected to claims that public-service media in Germany are merely a propaganda tool—and even a *brainwashing* tool—in a state that cannot be considered fully democratic. Among representatives of the AfD, it is therefore quite common to use terms such as “state media”, “state press”, or “state broadcasting” (see AfD-Fraktion NRW, 2020; AfD Kompakt, 2021; AfD TV, 2020) to suggest that public-service media in Germany

⁴ In German, “Lücke” means gap, so that the term “Lückenpresse” is a play on the word “Lügenpresse” and refers to a press that omits certain facts and thus does not tell the whole story.

are state/government-*controlled*. Michael Klonovsky—a journalist and writer who has worked as a consultant for leading AfD politicians, such as Frauke Petry or Alexander Gauland—sarcastically points out that “state broadcasting has a responsibility. It cannot allow the opposition to have a say”, claiming that “we’re not in a real democracy. We are in a chancellor democracy. We’re in a democratorship!” (AfD TV, 2020). However, AfD politicians even go one step further and claim that public-service media are a tool for *brainwashing* citizens. In a Facebook post that is no longer available (after Jörg Meuthen’s departure from the AfD), Jörg Meuthen spoke of “GEZ-brainwashing”⁵ and “primetime manipulation of opinion”, demanding “journalism instead of activism” (Meuthen, n.d.). Marc Jongen, an AfD MP, argued that “the media are the channels through which the heads of citizens are informed *and programmed*” and speaks of German public-service media as having “turned into a moralist broadcasting company that transports state ideology into people’s heads, which has this mission and also understands itself in this way” (AfD TV, 2020; emphasis added).

The allegation of lack of distance to the state/government is also made explicit in the COVID context, where the coverage of German public-service media is denounced as “pushy court reporting” (“Hofberichterstattung”) that is allegedly “scathingly criticized by scientists” (AfD Kompakt, 2021b). Indeed, the AfD even claimed that German public-service media contribute to the polarisation of German society by creating sentiments against unvaccinated people. Tobias Rausch, the party’s media policy spokesperson in the parliament of the state of Saxony-Anhalt, pointed to how a commentary in the nightly news show *tagesthemen* demonstrated a lack of neutrality. He went on to claim that through their “agitatory indictment [of] unvaccinated people, the GEZ-force-financed broadcasting companies are contributing to further division of society”, reminding them of their “duty to report in an objective and balanced manner” and “calls in particular on public-service media to report in a neutral way” (AfD Kompakt, 2021e).

However, denouncing German public-service media during the COVID pandemic is by no means limited to the AfD. DieBasis makes similar claims and speaks of “‘quality media’ that have been brought

⁵ GEZ is the abbreviation for “Gebühreneinzugszentrale”, the former (but much better known) name of the institution responsible for collecting the license fee in Germany. In 2013, the name was changed to “ARD ZDF Deutschlandradio Beitragsservice”.

into line” (“gleichgeschaltet”), arguing that people will eventually realise that they “are being lied to and manipulated” and that there is no “epidemic condition, but only an agenda that promises no good for people” (Nadolny, 2020). The party also bemoans what it considers to be a lack of a “culture of discussion” in Germany, alluding to the idea that only certain opinions are tolerated, and speaks of “slandorous articles” that German media publish deliberately for the purpose of creating division among the party’s supporters (DieBasis, 2021a). Elsewhere, the party speaks of the “business model” and the “framing handbook” of German “force-financed public-service broadcasting”, suggesting that the latter suggests radical worldviews that do not actually correspond to the orientations of the party’s supporters (DieBasis, 2021b).

Demands for Defunding Public-Service Media

There is a close link between the dimensions of denouncing and demanding the defunding of public-service media. As a good illustration, the **AfD** demands the “slimming down” (i.e. defunding) of the “politically correct hippie spaceship of public-service broadcasting [which] has in many places lost touch with reality on planet Earth” so as to “reconnect it with reality” (AfD Kompakt, 2021b).

As a justification for the defunding of public-service media, great emphasis is placed on the compulsory character of the license fee in Germany, which is construed as a “force-financing” system (see AfD Kompakt, 2021c), which is a much stronger and more negative term than “license fee” or “compulsory fee”. In a Facebook post (which was deleted after he left the party), Jörg Meuthen called for an “end to the *force-financed* GEZ-System”, suggesting that this would result in “neutral reporting instead of indoctrination” (Meuthen, 2020; emphasis added). Consequently, the party demands the cancellation of the existing broadcasting contracts (“Rundfunkstaatsverträge”) in all German states so as to allow for a “fundamental reform”, at the end of which there would only be a “basic broadcaster” (Grundfunk) whose task would be “to provide citizens with neutral contents in the areas of information, culture and education” (AfD Kompakt, 2021d). The AfD’s *Grundfunk* initiative further aims for the introduction of a so-called “sunset clause” so that even this slimmed down public-service broadcasting system would expire after ten years and *not* be renewed automatically. This is based

on the argument that, according to the initiators, we do not know if we will *need* any kind of public-service broadcasting after this period at all (AfD-Fraktion NRW, 2020; AfD-Fraktion MV, n.d., p. 18).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This chapter has highlighted the intimate link between two defining and interrelated features of post-truth populism's relationship with the institution of journalism, namely the effort to *denounce critical journalism* as part of the corrupt liberal elite against which the populist project rebels, and the effort to use this critique as a justification for claims to defund public-service media. The COVID pandemic has offered a particularly welcome opportunity for post-truth populists to advance both of these efforts. In an environment that was, at least initially, characterised by scientific uncertainty about the origins and the most effective ways to contain and fight the novel coronavirus, it was easy for post-truth populists to exploit and build upon already existing resentment against the allegedly biased elite project of mainstream professional journalism.

Such developments are a clear reason for concern. Sceptics of the academic debate on post-truth politics have a point in arguing that we need to be careful not to overlook the root causes of post-truth politics by focusing too much of our attention on its symptoms, whether in the form of the election of notorious liars like Donald Trump, a growing distrust of professional journalism, or even a rejection of scientific expertise. At the same time, there is a need to clearly spell out the potential consequences of the post-truth populist project. This chapter has placed criticism of professional journalism—and in particular *public-service* journalism—during the COVID pandemic in Germany into the broader context of populist efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the institution of journalism. As we have seen, although actors such as the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany are a central actor in this regard, they are by no means alone in construing the institution of journalism as part of the corrupt liberal elite, an elite which either deceives the people by not telling them the whole story or uses its powerful position to indoctrinate, brainwash, and re-educate people. By framing public-service media as an enemy of the people, post-truth populists create the image that the abolition of the license fee would indeed be tantamount to an act of liberation.

However, such developments need to be seen in a broader context. The post-truth populist attack on public-service media may not be the *first* step en route to a fully fledged post-truth world, but it certainly looks like a stepping stone in that direction. The AfD's *Grundfunk* initiative is consistent with the party's established ambition of defunding public-service media, as documented in the party platform and successive election manifestos. Its demand to cut the budget of all public-service media in Germany to 10% of the 2019 budget is clearly already quite radical. Nevertheless, in the theoretical context of the struggle against public-service media as an integral ingredient in post-truth politics, the relevance of the initiative's *sunset clause* cannot be overstated: unless state broadcasting contracts are renewed, they would simply expire after ten years. This is more than a gentle hint that if the AfD were to get its way, a complete dismantling of public-service media in Germany would be conceivable—with all that it entails for the further development of post-truth politics.

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Post-Truth Politics, Brexit, and European Disintegration

Vittorio Orlando

INTRODUCTION

This work investigates the role played by post-truth politics in the 2016 United Kingdom referendum on EU membership, exploring the links between misinformation, Brexit, and European disintegration. The concept of misinformation has been widely explored in the literature; it can be defined as the tendency of political actors to incorporate empirically incorrect statements in their discourse to influence public opinion (MacMullen, 2020). The spread of this practice, a consolidated strategy in political communication, has led some scholars to argue that we currently live in the era of post-truth (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018). This concept seems to imply a paradigm shift, thus assuming the existence of a past moment in which political actors only relied on factual information. However, this chapter does not intend to investigate such claims;

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conversely, this work argues that it is unnecessary to demonstrate the existence of a previous state of truth to speak of post-truth. Accordingly, it is sufficient to demonstrate that the actors analysed successfully implemented a strategy based on deception to use the term post-truth without ruling out the hypothesis that such tactics already existed in the past. What has changed, allowing us to use the term post-truth politics, is how these tactics are employed and their effectiveness on an unprecedented scale (Suiter, 2016).

A fundamental distinction for this chapter is the one between *campaigning*, intended as a component of the democratic process that in the case of Brexit inevitably included spreading arguments against membership in the most convincing way possible, and *misinformation*, or all those instances in which the Leave campaign circulated factually incorrect or ambiguous information. An example of this is the Leave campaign carried out ahead of the 2016 Referendum. The campaign was characterised by a series of false or equivocal messages representing the European Union in a negative way (Rose, 2017). This chapter looks at political actors, exploring their lack of interest or awareness regarding the empirical reliability of their claims during the Leave campaign; this phenomenon is the core element of post-truth politics, which offers a vantage point from which to analyse populist discourse and the future of European disintegration.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first part consists of an analysis of the most recent literature on the topics of Brexit and post-truth politics, in line with the aim to discuss the role of misinformation in the Leave campaign and frame it in the context of European disintegration. The second part focuses on the actors involved, trying to identify through which media and arenas they have made more use of factually ambiguous or incorrect statements. The third section categorises and analyses the material collected; this part aims to map the Brexit discourse by dividing it into the three frames of security, economy, and sovereignty. The subsequent section of the chapter discusses the findings from the frame analysis; it focuses on the role of misinformation and the circumstances that favoured its use as a political tactic, both in the Brexit referendum and in the discourse on European integration at large. The conclusion goes beyond assessing the impact of misinformation on Brexit by addressing what repercussions these findings can have in the context of European disintegration. Overall, this chapter is in continuity with the work already done on Brexit and misinformation; however, it aims to look

further by discussing the implications of post-truth on a continental scale, contributing to the formulation of a theory of disintegration.

POST-TRUTH AND BREXIT

The concept of post-truth has established itself in academic debates in recent years and is particularly associated with two events that occurred a few months apart: Brexit and the election of Donald Trump (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2022; Newman, 2019). The central notion behind it is that political debate is characterised by a substantial disinterest in empirical reality, which is exaggerated or manipulated based on the need to promote specific narratives. This disregard for factual information has significant consequences for the nature of the Western democratic system, which is based on the assumption that collective decisions result from a rational evaluation of reality.

Although this assumption on democracy is questionable, given that the nature of society is the product of a complex network of power and meaning relationships (Farkas & Schau, 2019), for the purposes of this chapter, post-factual politics is understood as the tendency of political discourse to deviate from facts as they are generally understood and interpreted by the community. Let us take, for example, the claim repeated during the Leave campaign that the UK sends £350 million a week to the EU and that this money could instead finance the NHS. A similar statement lends itself to several questions regarding the nature of our economic system and our value system; however, for the purposes of this work, it is relevant mainly as factually incorrect and as an attempt to promote a specific and distorted understanding of reality. In other words, this chapter is interested in those statements that are not in line with empirical reality and in how reality is a constantly changing social construct.

This debate stems from the observation that, while lying has never been a foreign tool within the political arena, today the truth can be systematically ignored with impunity (Newman, 2019); while politicians tried to circumnavigate the truth in the past, today they can trample on it. Similarly, this chapter does not address whether there was a paradigm shift from an era of truth to one of post-truth. This work does not investigate the causes, or even the mere existence, of such a paradigm shift. Instead, it focuses on how post-truth politics have been successfully employed in the political arena. Misinformation as a tool is particularly effective for

populist actors, due to their tendency to focus their discourse on the division between “real people” and those not conforming to their narrative (Müller, 2017).

In the case of Brexit, this phenomenon has been extensively explored within the literature. In the years following the referendums on the Constitutional Treaty, Hobolt (2007) noted how the effectiveness of referendums on European integration was linked to voters’ competencies, defined as the ability to express their preferences based on factual information. Schmidt (2017) observed how the Leave campaign resorted to lying to spread persuasive, albeit unfounded, ideas among voters. The voters themselves could perceive this substantial use of misinformation (Renwick et al., 2018), leading Watson (2018) to label it as a violation of their epistemic rights. From a comprehensive analysis of the role of news media in the campaign, it also emerged how the Leave campaign managed to frame the contributions of experts as propaganda of the establishment, thus reinforcing that the Brexit vote was about the masses regaining control from the EU’s antidemocratic élites (Moore & Ramsay, 2017). As for the impact of this strategy, a study conducted in 2019 highlighted the existence of a network of over 13,000 bots active on Twitter and mainly supporting Leave (Bastos & Mecea, 2019). Although Bastos and Mecea (2019) carefully pointed out how the contribution of bots is quantitatively marginal compared to the discussion on Brexit that took place on Twitter, this and other similar studies highlight the non-negligible role played by misinformation in the Leave campaign (Safieddine, 2020).

In general, any attempt to measure the exact effect of an external factor on a given vote is somewhat questionable, considering the vast number of interrelated causal factors contributing to an electoral result. However, the instances of misinformation and manipulation discussed so far, both in the mass media and in the social media dimension, suggest an attempt to cause in the voters those emotional reactions commonly referred to as “one of the causes of the Leave vote” (Clarke et al., 2017). The influence of these practices on the democratic process is also evident from the emergence of an institutional and academic debate focused on how to increase social platform accountability (Selva and De Blasio, 2021); such attempts at mitigating the impact of misinformation on the democratic functioning of society are a sign of the increasing role played by these tactics in the aftermath of Brexit and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This work uses misinformation as an umbrella term, thus including factually incorrect and misleading material regardless of the criterion of

intentionality, upon which misinformation and disinformation are usually differentiated (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This decision stems from the fact that this distinction is not particularly relevant for this chapter, as both misinformation and disinformation are features of post-truth politics. These tactics are powerful tools for obtaining electoral consensus, leading to decisions based on factually incorrect elements and thus representing a threat to the democratic system. Accordingly, this work aims to identify which political actors take advantage of post-truth politics, and in which circumstances this approach is effective. The Leave campaign includes all the relevant elements for this investigation since it includes populist actors, the use of misinformation, and an unprecedented impact on European disintegration.

ACTORS AND ARENAS OF POST-TRUTH POLITICS

A central aspect of this work is to look at how post-truth politics can be used to shape public opinion. This approach, then, requires the existence of actors interested in carrying out this strategy and of the infrastructures through which to do so; hence, the choice herein of the distinction between *arenas* and *actors* of post-truth politics upon which this study is based (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2022). As for the actors, they can be defined as agents interested in influencing the outcome of the vote; hence the decision to include political actors, newspapers well-known for promoting Eurosceptic narratives, and the two leading organisations campaigning for Leave. As a consequence, it was decided to ignore the incidental actors, such as individuals or organisations active in supporting the campaign but not in shaping its tactics and language.

A further distinction can be made between foreign and domestic actors. This work includes political actors actively campaigning for Leave, social movements, and mass media. Determining foreign actors can be more challenging, but Russian interference in the Brexit vote has been widely discussed both academically and on the institutional level (Dobrowolski et al., 2020; McGaughey, 2018). The distinction between the two, not unlike the one between misinformation and disinformation, is not always clear-cut, with the extent and effectiveness of foreign attempts to influence the vote still being investigated. This study focuses on the domestic sphere, as it assumes that foreign actors mainly amplified predominantly endogenous notions and narratives, acting as an echo chamber for a discourse moulded by national stakeholders.

As for the political forces involved in the Leave campaign, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) played a central role. In the years leading up to the referendum, the party led by Farage managed to attract the support of those voters disappointed by the convergence towards the centre of both Cameron's Conservative Party and Blair's Labour; it did so by promoting a narrative centred around the notion that the two mainstream parties represented the interests of the establishment, at the expenses of the British people (Tournier-Sol, 2020). This narrative is typical of the populist and Eurosceptic discourse, and part of the Conservative party also adopted it during the campaign (Bale, 2018). Moreover, as both the positions and the methods employed by those actors can be found in other EU member states, looking at the leave campaign sheds light on European disintegration at large.

Indirectly, the rhetoric adopted by UKIP had an impact on the Conservative party, especially by influencing its position in the debate on European integration. In this context, Cameron opted first to include the reform of the European institutions in his programme and later to promise a referendum on EU membership if this process of reform proved unsatisfactory. Moreover, due to UKIP's increasing electoral success, Cameron was concerned with the possibility of losing the support of the more Eurosceptic elements within his party (Hayton, 2018); against this backdrop, it is not surprising how a sizeable minority within the Conservative Party can be counted among the actors in the Leave campaign. While UKIP and part of the Conservatives constituted the campaign's backbone, some members of the Labour Party, various Northern Irish Unionist parties, and exponents of other minor parties, also campaigned for leaving the EU. However, compared to the two major political forces, those political actors did not significantly shape the campaign's narrative; therefore, they should be considered secondary forces for this analysis.

Three organisations mainly carried out the Leave campaign, focusing on somewhat different aspects of a shared Eurosceptic narrative. The main one, designated by the Electoral Commission as the official campaign, was Vote Leave, an organisation formed by exponents of the Conservative and Labour parties, and also supported by the Eurosceptic association Business for Britain. The group focused on the economic drawbacks of EU membership rather than on the immigration dimension. The second organisation, Leave.EU, was closer to the positions and rhetoric of UKIP, thus carrying out a campaign centred on immigration and promoting itself as distant from the establishment, represented in this case by Vote

Leave (Vasilopoulou, 2016). A third group, Grassroots Out, was founded by representatives of several parties, including Farage, in 2016; the organisation merged with Leave.EU and other smaller groups in a failed attempt at being designated by the Electoral Commission as the official campaign (Hall, 2016).

Another actor who played a decisive role in the campaign and in shaping public opinion on the issues of European integration is the British press. The role of mass media emerges from a content analysis conducted by Zappettini (2021), which highlighted how tabloids routinely resorted to populist rhetoric strongly biased towards the Leave campaign and often used incompletely or factually incorrect with the aim of influencing public opinion. While promoting a specific political position falls within the prerogatives of journalism, this analysis looked at those newspapers that for decades promoted a Eurosceptic framing of the EU, often through sensationalistic reporting and factually incorrect claims (Birks, 2021). These findings align with a phenomenon widely studied within the literature on the subject, namely how media discourse has promoted the same antagonistic representation of the EU at the heart of the Leave campaign (Daddow, 2015).

After identifying the actors responsible for the use of misinformation in the electoral campaign, it is necessary to establish *where* they employed misinformation strategies. The analysis carried out in this chapter looks at three arenas, understood both as spaces where narratives are constructed and as infrastructure for their diffusion. The first one, definable as the political dimension, includes declarations by political actors in speech and interviews, as well as material spread by the official campaigns on their websites. The second arena is the social media one, and it has already been deemed relevant in the case of Brexit, given how it promotes a high level of mobilisation and accentuates the pre-existing polarisation in the public debate (Brändle et al., 2021). The third dimension is that of the legacy media, and especially the newspapers in their online form. The importance of this last arena has been often pointed out, for instance, by Maccaferri (2019), who showed how the Europe/Britain dyad had been constructed by the press over the years, emphasising the need for the British people to regain control and reverse a process of decline caused by EU membership.

The actors and arena dimensions might appear to conflate, such as in the cases of social media and newspapers. This stems from the fact that the actors shaping the political discourse are deeply interconnected

with the tools and spaces in which they operate—shaping and being shaped by them—and are better understood through a holistic approach. However, this work considers actors as agents able to carry out a determined strategy to achieve a pre-determined goal, which translates to implementing Eurosceptic practices through misinformation. The arenas are those loci where these practices occur, and the public attitude towards Euroscepticism takes shape in line with what has already been theorised within the literature (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012).

From this point of view, the online press is an actor inasmuch as the editorial policy of a given newspaper spreads articles and content to create and reinforce a Eurosceptic narrative. At the same time, it counts as an arena given how said content finds a place within it—regardless of whether they originate from individuals affiliated with a given newspaper—and originate from public statements by political actors or by the public debate in general. At the same time, content originating from the press (seen in this case as an actor) can be shared on social media, which in these circumstances becomes an arena (Table 6.1).

This chapter identifies cases of misinformation carried out by the following actors: politicians from the Conservative Party and UKIP, the four most widespread newspapers siding with Leave, and the two most prominent campaign organisations: Leave.EU and Vote Leave. As for the arenas, the frame analysis looks at material collected on Facebook and Twitter; on the online editions of the four newspapers, alongside other media outlets of national importance that hosted relevant content regardless of their position in the campaign; and lastly, all the material that does not fall into the first two categories, including the websites of the two campaigns, is classified together. The material analysed consists of

Table 6.1 Actors and arenas analysed

<i>Actors</i>	<i>Arenas</i>
1. Politicians from UKIP and the Conservative Party	1. Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)
2. Newspapers supporting Leave (Daily Mail, Express, The Sun, The Telegraph)	2. British mass media, regardless of their stance in the campaign
3. Leave.EU and Vote Leave	3. Campaign websites and public statements

statements either subsequently proven to be factually incorrect by independent fact-checking websites such as Full Fact, or misleading due to the language utilised. On a quantitative level, the cases included in the sample were selected to include a similar amount of material for each of the actors and the arenas analysed; nonetheless, as shown in Tables 6.2 and 6.3, political actors and mass media are over-represented, respectively, in the actors and arenas groups. This imbalance results from two characteristics of the political debate. First, politicians were at the centre of the campaign; second, the analysis of material on newspapers included both opinion pieces and news.

In the choice of material, the chapter is in continuity with similar works focused, among other things, on the narrative promoted by the most prominent exponents of Leave (Spencer & Oppermann, 2020) and on a wide-ranging analysis of the content shared on social media (Lilleker & Bonacci, 2017). Unlike big data studies, in which a large amount of material is selected to identify a specific narrative, each instance of misinformation included in this work was selected purposefully. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of the empirically verifiable claims and, more importantly, the purpose and meaning of the material collected. The reason for this choice is that the existence of such practices in the case of the Leave campaign is already widely recognised, and this work builds

Table 6.2
Misinformation by
articles (total number of
articles in parentheses)

<i>Actors (total)</i>	<i>Category</i>		
	<i>Security</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Sovereignty</i>
Political actors (25)	17	19	17
Newspapers (12)	6	9	8
Campaigns (14)	6	11	5

Table 6.3
Misinformation by
arenas (total number of
articles in parentheses)

<i>Arenas (total)</i>	<i>Category</i>		
	<i>Security</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Sovereignty</i>
Social Media (16)	9	10	4
Mass media (20)	11	15	13
Campaign material (15)	9	14	13

upon this to analyse the nature of this material and draw conclusions on a systemic level.

The choice of framing misinformation in the categories of actors and arenas underlines some of its features; in particular, it shows how political actors and mass media differ in manipulating information and how the content changes depending on the context in which they are shared. This vantage point also allows for some reflections on how the language of misinformation is not univocal; instead, it changes depending on the policy problems discussed and specific rhetorical choices. A consequence of this approach is that the corpus examined is smaller than similar works, as the material was selected to highlight specific narratives and not to demonstrate their existence.

MISINFORMATION IN THE LEAVE CAMPAIGN

The subsequent analysis looks at 51 instances of misinformation that emerged during the Leave campaign, manually selected from thousands of content generated by the relevant actors between October 2015 and the day of the referendum. For the purposes of this work, disinformation refers to factually incorrect or highly misleading content deliberately spread to pursue political goals; this definition draws explicitly from the work of Bennett and Livingston on disruptive communication (2016). However, as noted earlier, the actor's intentionality is assumed in the broadest sense, thus going beyond the terminological distinction between misinformation and disinformation. Indeed, this work assumes that the protagonists of post-truth politics are not interested in knowing if the information is accurate, misleading, or false as long as it resonates with the narrative they are trying to establish. Accordingly, the cases of misinformation selected here either contain precise statements that were later disproven by independent third parties or are phrased to imply a factually incorrect understanding of reality. Hence the need to distinguish between rhetorically charged statements and claims based on false premises: a methodological approach consistent with the one adopted by similar studies (Höller, 2021).

However, although relevant for the purposes of the empirical rigour of this analysis, the distinction between mere claims and verifiable arguments is not as clear-cut, given how post-truth politics also consists of a communication strategy in which reality is redefined to provoke strong emotional

responses in the electorate. The coexistence of these two sides of post-truth is a consequence of the intrinsic nature of electoral campaigns, which do not consist of the mere presentation of facts rationally analysed by the electorate but rather in an attempt to shape the voter's identities and preferences. Accordingly, the information presented in the articles, speech, and social media content categorised in this chapter can be seen as the foundation on which the Brexit narrative was built; the same narrative was then amplified and spread in the material discarded due to its highly speculative and unfalsifiable nature. For these reasons, some claims that would appear to be hardly falsifiable due to their vague nature, such as the notion that the Eurozone was due to collapse in a few years (Leave Eu, 2016a) or that Churchill would have voted Leave (Lawson, 2016) were included as they can give some insights on the rhetoric that permeated the campaign. In this framework, the material excluded from this analysis is still relevant as it contributed to creating a climate of mistrust towards European institutions by promoting and reinforcing the same narratives found in the factually incorrect data.

The cases of misinformation collected are classified according to three frames: economy, security, and sovereignty. The frames are identified inductively based on what appear to be the pillars of the Eurosceptic rhetoric adopted during the campaign. The first category pertains to the negative economic consequences of EU membership, such as the claim that leaving the EU would have allowed an increase in public spending in the NHS by £350 million a week (Reuben, 2016). This claim, constantly repeated throughout the campaign and later denied by, among others, Nigel Farage (Stone, 2016), shows how the Leave campaign has tried to leverage a real problem perceived by the electorate by associating it with the EU. This strategy is in line with what Watson (2018) observed regarding how the Leave campaign succeeded in convincing voters dissatisfied with the status quo and feeling "left behind" after decades of ineffective liberalists policies, and therefore willing to vote for the promise of change offered by Brexit.

The association between the economic sphere and the migration one promotes the notion that migrants are detrimental to the healthcare system, the economy, and their presence has worrying security implications. The ties between the discourse on immigration and the vote results have been widely explored (Dennison & Geddes, 2018), and this appears clearly in the second category developed for this study, namely that of security. The idea that immigrants represented a threat not only to the

economy but also to the security of the United Kingdom is evident both from the constant references to the risk of Turkey's imminent entry into the EU and from news reports linking the arrival of refugees to the EU (Slack & Groves, 2016), claims later corrected by the Daily Mail due to their misleading content (Khomami, 2016). The choice not to consider immigration as a separate category is since, generally, immigration itself is not considered a danger by the sources analysed but rather in terms of its impact on the economic and security dimensions.

The third category is that of sovereignty, a residual group encompassing all the material not directly classifiable in the first two and those statements highlighting how EU membership is incompatible with the independence of the United Kingdom. In the Leave campaign narrative, the notion of sovereignty also touches the economic sphere and the immigration one, but it transcends these two dimensions as it emphasises how Britain is a prisoner of an undemocratic system both at the institutional and cultural level. This discourse promoted a narrative in which sovereignty is fetishised, and voters must "Take Back Control"; a slogan implying that the British people were menaced due to European bureaucrats controlling them from above and immigrants threatening their freedom from below, for instance, by stealing jobs and hindering the healthcare system (Pencheva & Maronitis, 2018).

This narrative draws from several topics, including the constant threat of Turkey joining the EU, the perspective of the UK forcefully bailing out other member states on the verge of bankruptcy (Vote Leave, 2016a), and some hardly qualifiable claims such as the fact that the EU imposes oppressive regulations on light bulbs and vacuum cleaners (The Telegraph, 2016). While some of these claims have been proven false or misleading (Full Fact Team, 2016), others escape similar scrutiny due to their abstract nature but have nevertheless been included as significant examples of the discourse adopted during the campaign.

As noted above, most of the sources analysed include misinformation relevant to more than one of the three categories. This tendency is evident from the subdivision presented in Table 6.2, and it derives from the nature of the sources collected. Those include lists of reasons to vote Leave (Green et al., 2016; Daily Mail, 2016a); speeches or interviews in which the speaker refers to different topics (Johnson, 2016; Farage & Neil, 2016); and articles that move from crucial topics in the Eurosceptic discourse to describing the consequences of these events over the three

categories discussed (Vote Leave, 2016a). The latter is prevalent with articles discussing Turkey's accession to the EU or the NHS.

Concerning the subdivision of the collected sources among the actors (Table 6.2), it emerges how the material shared by political actors generally includes references to several categories. This strategy is evident in a speech by Nigel Farage to the European Parliament, reshared by his party on Facebook. In the speech, the British MEP observes how Turkey is about to join the European Union, with negative consequences linked to the country's poverty, the influx of "75 million migrants", and remarking the EU's inability to negotiate with Turkey during the 2015 refugee crisis. The speech, like other interviews and public statements by Boris Johnson, Farage himself (Farage, 2016; Ross, 2016), and other politicians (Fox, 2016), shows a certain tendency to start from a single issue, such as Turkey joining the EU or the NHS crisis, to move onto a broader narrative encompassing the three dimensions conceptualised in this work. The conclusion is that a vote to remain is a vote for Turkey, for uncontrolled immigration, and it will expose Britain to terrorism, remarking the need to choose Leave and regain control of the country's borders (UKIP, 2016).

As for the newspapers, the predominant element seems to be the economic one. Alongside the previously mentioned lists of reasons to vote No, both the articles and the pieces of opinion analysed focus on the economic aspect, even when they mention immigration, and on a vague concept of sovereignty (The Sun, 2016). The concept of sovereignty is also present in a more abstract than practical sense in the material shared on social media by the two campaigns. Here, it is preferred to leverage more immediate images, such as the riots that took place in Cologne (Leave.eu, 2016b)—which, according to the campaign, was "neglected by British media"—and the costs of financing Turkey's accession to the EU instead of the NHS (Vote Leave, 2016c).

As far as arenas are concerned, the division between the various categories seems more homogeneous, as shown in Table 6.3. Sovereignty is less present in social media, probably as this concept is more of a broader backdrop than a source of specific topics. This homogeneity suggests that arenas, more than actors, are the determining variable when selecting a topic; although it maintains some constant characteristics, misinformation adapts according to the channels by which it is spread. The analysis shows how social media are used both by political actors and by the official campaigns, and similarly, the websites of the two campaigns host

several interviews and speeches by political actors. As for legacy media, the analysed newspapers mainly present two types of content: news articles presenting factually incorrect or misleading information (Dominiczak & Whitehead, 2016) and opinion pieces or interviews serving as an echo chamber for the positions of political actors active in the Leave campaign. Lastly, all the arenas include lists of reasons why voters should choose Leave, frequent references to Turkey and the NHS, and the notion that the collapse of the EU is imminent and inevitable.

BREXIT, POST-TRUTH POLITICS, AND EUROPEAN DISINTEGRATION

As the analysis in the section above attests, several actors employed misinformation in the Leave campaign in different arenas. This phenomenon can suggest a paradigm shift in political communication strategies. The ambition of this chapter is not to question whether this approach is in discontinuity with the past; instead, it focuses on how false or ambiguous content plays a role in Brexit and in EU disintegration. To this end, this section tries to draw a conceptual map of the conditions necessary for misinformation to become an effective political tool. Regarding Brexit, the Referendum needs to be contextualised in the framework of EU politicisation. As noted, among others, by Zürn (2019), the increase in dissent against European institutions has given rise to a conflict between mainstream political parties supporting the European project and a substantial part of their electorate.

A consequence of this contrast has been the emergence of identity politics, which was promoted and shaped by those political entrepreneurs interested in obtaining the consent of this Eurosceptic electorate. Suppose we accept the notion that the intersection between identity politics, cultural and economic instability, and the EU was constructed by purposive actors (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In that case, it follows that EU membership has been associated over time with a series of harmful elements attributable to the three categories discussed above; this emerges from the literature, and from the material collected in this chapter.

As for the immigration dimension, we have the usual clichés against immigration predating the debate on the EU. The typical features of this discourse are that immigrants commit more crimes than citizens, are unwilling or unable to integrate with the cultural environments of the host countries and will place excessive pressure on public services. These

aspects are partly reworked in an anti-European key, for example, by underlining the risk of Turkey joining the EU by portraying the country as an inexhaustible source of immigrants or by linking immigration with terrorism. In the economic sphere, which is intrinsically linked with the sovereignty dimension, the main criticism is that the UK would have been forced to come to the rescue of the other EU countries in the event of another economic crisis. Furthermore, there is a tendency to underline how resources are diverted from services (mainly, in the material analysed, the NHS) as EU membership forces the UK to allocate its budget differently.

Lastly, concerning the dimension of sovereignty, it is evident how this category draws from the other two. This connection is a consequence of how migration and economic policies fall within the area in which sovereignty is expressly limited by adhering to EU treaties. Accordingly, failure to reform the European treaties was the central element behind the initial push towards the Referendum; throughout the campaign, Cameron was portrayed as unable to guarantee the UK's sovereignty within the EU. This lack of sovereignty is constructed as implying negative consequences on multiple levels. It hinders the country's international competitiveness, preventing the state from determining its tariff policies independently; it also affects the capacity of distinguishing between "positive" and "negative" immigration, a dichotomy typical of Eurosceptic rhetoric and corollary to the notion that EU membership causes "uncontrolled" migrations due to free circulation of people. An example of this tendency can be seen in how the fact that the 2004 EU enlargement led many CEE workers to migrate to the UK has been used to construct a narrative of immigrants burdening the welfare system.

These notions pre-existed both the Leave campaign and the domestic debate on whether the UK had to renegotiate its membership in the EU; in fact, they had been the subject of strategy competition between British political parties for years, in line with the dynamics highlighted by Hooghe and Marks (2009) in their postfunctionalist theory of European integration. This "logic of party interaction and issue politicisation" promotes fertile ground for the use of misinformation, as past parties' commitments constrain their strategic positioning over time. The signs of this vicious cycle, consisting of political actors unable to keep pace with their narrative, can be seen within the Conservative party in the years leading up to the Referendum; specifically, those Tories in support of

Remain saw their room for manoeuvre reduced by having to compete against the Leave front while using its same arguments.

In a context characterised by these ideological forces exploited by political actors, an additional element can contribute to forming a fertile environment for misinformation. This element is the presence of an external systemic crisis, which lends itself to being instrumentalised and tied to existing ideas. Political actors can construct this sort of connection, which can become real for the public as long as people accept it and consider it part of the political discourse. In other words, it is not enough to associate an external event with a series of pre-existing ideas, but this juxtaposition must appear convincing enough to be digested by the public. In the case of Brexit and the three categories analysed in this chapter, the two external events in question are the 2009 Eurozone crisis and the 2015 European migrant crisis. The impact of these events on the European integration debate has been extensively explored in recent years, mainly focusing on how such crises have been used to reinforce pre-dating Eurosceptic positions (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018). Specifically, and regarding the Leave campaign, these two events served as a catalyst. For example, in the case of immigration, the causal chain that led to misinformation in this area can be summarised as follows.

Over the years, the UK's population has changed demographically, both due to the influx of immigrants from the former British colonies and due to the EU enlargement in 2004. This demographic change has led to the emergence of racial tensions, accentuated by a markedly Islamophobic attitude due to the association between Islamic minorities and terrorism which is promoted by the mass media (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008). These tensions have, in turn, been used by political actors in their rhetoric, which focuses on the contrast between “us and them” and which identifies membership in the European Union as one of the causes of immigration and as an obstacle in allowing the United Kingdom to carry out an independent migration policy (Zappettini, 2019).

In this context, external events such as the Syrian refugee crisis have reinvigorated a narrative that sees immigration as a burden to economic development and a threat to security. As was also highlighted by an analysis of comments on the decision to resettle Syrian refugee children in 2015, the juxtaposition between refugees and Brexit intensified following the crisis (Goodman & Narang, 2019). This connection is partly due to how the press and political forces have exploited the Syrian crisis to build a rationale for Brexit. In the campaign, this narrative included

Turkey's entry into the EU; an understandable link considering the country's geographic location and its majority Muslim population. Moreover, the ties between the two events are further strengthened by how Turkey welcomed millions of refugees following the Syrian civil war.

The triad formed by Turkey-immigration-terrorism is a constant presence in the material collected and applicable both to the security and the economic dimensions. The same also applies to the Eurozone crisis, especially relevant in the economic framework; according to the Leave campaign, the UK was about to sacrifice its sovereignty in favour of deeper EU integration, which would have led the country to be financially responsible for other member states (Jessop, 2017). These external events have been exploited as catalysts for pre-existing ideas by interested actors, leveraging emotions, and recombining narrative elements, often in a factually inaccurate fashion. This approach is in line with the communication methods typical of populism, mirroring what Waisbord (2018) has defined as an "elective affinity" between populism and post-truth. This affinity is particularly evident with regard to the division between people and the establishment, personified in this case by the EU, as well as the tendency to reject and distort facts in contrast with a specific narrative.

However, the type of populism that played a crucial role in the case of Brexit is difficult to position within the political spectrum. It exhibits some significant internal inconsistencies, such as rejecting the European elites and globalisation while embracing economic liberalism and arguing how the UK would strengthen its position in this system by leaving the EU. This ideological ambiguity, at least concerning the grand debate between right and left, and between alternative economic systems, makes this strand of populism—heavily relying on misinformation—particularly well-suited to deal with the theme of European integration through referendum campaigns.

Populist political actors can simplify or ignore reality, focusing instead on the voter's emotional dimension; simultaneously, followers of post-truth politics can reject any factual information in contrast with the preferred narrative as lies of a corrupt political elite. As a result of these dynamics, campaigning does not require discussing concrete policymaking solutions since it is sufficient to attribute any issue to EU membership and propose a clear solution, such as Brexit, to solve them. This process has allowed populist actors to exploit the lack of high-quality

information (Renwick et al., 2020); in the contest of European disintegration, this can mean either more states leaving or different forms of institutional reform within the EU.

CONCLUSIONS

Within this chapter, analysis was undertaken to examine how misinformation was systematically used as a tool in the Leave campaign, exploring the links between post-truth politics, Brexit, and European disintegration. Specifically, it explored how populist actors exploit misinformation to shape the public discourse on the EU; the study of these dynamics can help trace the future patterns of European disintegration. This chapter shows the dynamics through which different arenas offer political actors the infrastructures necessary to spread misinformation, and it does so through a frame analysis of material collected on newspapers, social media, and campaign websites. The material collected was then divided into three analytical frames: security, economics, and sovereignty. The analysis highlighted how, throughout the Leave campaign, the actors claimed ownership of the narrative on UK membership in the EU, directing the public debate within the three frames discussed above and thus crafting a narrative appealing to undecided voters. This process was facilitated by relying on pre-existing ideas on immigration and sovereignty, consistent with the arsenal of populist rhetoric and identity politics. These ideas were particularly effective in influencing the vote as external factors, such as the Eurozone and the refugee crises, were exploited as catalysts during the campaign.

Another element that strengthened this process was the use of misinformation, a very effective tool in the hands of populist actors. As highlighted by this study, the use of incorrect or ambiguous information is very effective in the debate on the EU, given the complexity of the matter; this approach also lends itself well to referendum campaigns, as the choice between two options makes simplistic solutions more enticing. Although the sample of sources analysed by this work is limited, it is still possible to come to some conclusions, regarding both Brexit and European disintegration, in general. Brexit is, currently, the only case of a country leaving the EU; inevitably, the Leave campaign is the only successful antecedent available to actors interested in promoting an agenda of European disintegration in their respective countries. The same tactics implemented during the Leave campaign are likely to be adopted by Eurosceptic actors

in other EU states. This chapter has contributed in two ways: first, by proposing the study of Eurosceptic discourse through the three analytical frames discussed above; and second, by describing a pattern behind the misinformation processes based on the triad of actors, ideas, and external crises. Future research will need to look at these dynamics in other member states, as the ability to identify and study the change in these elements could provide a deeper understanding of European disintegration. Furthermore, considering how misinformation proved itself an essential political tool, we can expect it to be used again in the future; especially by those populist actors interested in reversing the process of European integration, the heroes of post-truth politics.

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“Europe is Christian, or It Is Not Europe”: Post-Truth Politics and Religion in Matteo Salvini’s Tweets

Giulia Evolvi

INTRODUCTION

“The great Cardinal Biffi, for many years Archbishop of Bologna, argued that we need to prefer (regular) immigration from countries that are closer to our history and our civilization.” With these words, sent in a tweet on 2 January 2020, Italian politician Matteo Salvini expresses his positions on migration. The tweet exemplifies several narratives that are connected to religion and that are frequently spread by Salvini through his social media accounts: the protection of the so-called “Judeo-Christian” history and heritage, the opposition to immigration, and the perceived threat that non-Christian migrants (Muslim migrants in particular) pose to “Western” civilisation. Hence, Matteo Salvini is known for spreading hateful discourses against Islam and migration online (Il barometro

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dell'odio, 2019). His party, Lega Nord, holds several characteristics of the global populist far-right (Mudde, 2019), and he often praises political leaders such as Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. Salvini self-identifies as Catholic and uses social networks to circulate pictures of himself praying, holding a rosary, or visiting religious places (Marchetti et al., 2020). While the majority of the Italian population self-identify as Catholic, religious commitment is declining (Introvigne & Zoccatelli, 2021), and it is uncommon for a political leader to publicly display religiosity. This chapter will use the example of Salvini's Twitter account to discuss how online political discourses often employ religion to kindle hateful debates and support an extremist political agenda. In particular, I would argue that this type of narrative contributes towards, and is the consequence of, a climate of post-truth politics.

In the contemporary political landscape, online conspiracy theories and instances of misinformation and disinformation are often connected to religion, but they have not yet been thoroughly analysed in relation to religious discourses (Douglas, 2018). According to Lazer et al. (2018), misinformation and disinformation are types of false information that are unintentionally or intentionally spread. The circulation of false information results in "post-truth," which was declared the 2016 Word of the Year and is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford University, 2019, as cited in Boler & Davis, 2020, p. 2). My argument is that "objective facts" become less influential not only because of the circulation of discourses that are openly false, but also because of claims that are incomplete, misleading, or unverifiable. This follows Conrad's (2021) argument that right-wing populists employ the spreading of both inadvertent and deliberate disinformation to create resentment and fear about migration in the public sphere. My contribution to this approach is to focus on religion, as a force that can fuel hateful and emotional narratives against marginalised groups, and can be used to subtly fabricate false claims.

The next section of the chapter offers an overview of previous literature on the topic, and I will employ the terms "disinformation" and "post-truth" following the chosen definitions of the authors I quote. I will offer a survey of the literature on hate, antagonism, and emotions, connecting it with post-truth and religion. I will, then, describe the characteristics of Salvini's communication within the Italian public sphere and discuss the use of qualitative textual analysis to explore relevant themes and

discourses. Afterwards, I will present some examples of Salvini’s tweets. In doing so, I will describe the three main strategies that I have individuated from my data and which are employed to spread false information: generalisations, hyperboles, and misleading connections. In conclusion, I will analyse how Salvini creates emotional and hateful narratives, and how the mobilisation of religious identity is both a consequence and a cause of the contemporary post-truth climate.

POST-TRUTH POLITICS AND RELIGION

Post-truth politics are part of a political struggle to define power relations within society, especially in connection with right-wing politics (Farkas & Schou, 2018). The post-truth climate is sustained by the Internet circulation of disinformation, which may also influence the so-called mainstream media (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). While disinformation is heavily associated with political events, such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, it constitutes a global phenomenon. For instance, the 2017 political election campaigns in Indonesia were characterised by the circulation of false information, which contributed to racism and social divisions (Lim, 2017) and how Indian president Modi employed social media to spread disinformation during his 2019 election campaign, often to promote Hindu nationalism and increase religious polarisation against Muslims (Das & Schroeder, 2020).

In looking at political discourses within the Italian digital public sphere, I argue that religion plays an important role in the spreading and reception of disinformation and post-truth narratives. For instance, Douglas (2018) reports that American fundamentalist Christians are more likely to be the target audience of disinformation. Furthermore, Douglas writes that conspiracy theories frequently include religious content, as happened when Democratic politicians in the US were accused of being part of Satanic rings or supporting ISIS. While there are not many studies that directly connect religion with post-truth politics, previous literature shows the importance of religion within online nationalist and populist discourses, as well as hate speech narratives. For instance, Islam and Islamophobia become entangled with racism in the online discourses of the far-right regarding cultural nativism (Froio, 2018), and tweets about nationalism are frequently connected to race, political partisanship, and religion (Shahin, 2020). In previous studies, I have analysed how the

Internet is fertile terrain for the spreading of disinformation in connection to Islamophobia (Evolvi, 2017, 2018). In this regard, George (2017) employs the term “hate spin” to describe the entanglement of religious hate and politics. More specifically, hate spin is “the use of either incitement or manufactured indignation as a political strategy that exploits group identities to mobilize supporters and coerce opponents” (p.160). Hence, hate spin indicates the use of deep-rooted identities, such as religious identities, in political strategies that target certain groups, often through the fabrication and media circulation of online disinformation. In the next section, I will analyse previous literature on the topic of hate and antagonism, and connect it with the use of emotions, to offer a more nuanced depiction of post-truth in relation to religion.

ANTAGONISM AND EMOTIONS

Narratives against religious groups and the mechanism of hate spin can be considered examples of political antagonism, as analysed by Mouffe (2013). Antagonism is the designation of certain social groups, such as migrants, as scapegoats for social problems. According to Mouffe, antagonism arises when the groups that are involved in symbolic conflicts are prevented from intervening in public debates, and their motivations and needs are not recognised. Antagonistic conflicts, I would argue, can become emotional when they involve deeply held beliefs, such as those about religion. In this sense, antagonism can be connected more broadly to the notion of “resentful affectivity” that Capelos et al. (2021) employ to discuss reactionary grievances of populist actors, which include anti-immigration antagonisms. This suggests that both hate spin and political antagonism aim at mobilising people’s emotional responses. However, I do not wish to imply that narratives about religion are not rational, to avoid the binary between “rational” secularist thinking and “emotional” religious discourses. Rather, the theoretical approach of Mouffe is useful to contextualise the public sphere as an arena for conflicts that do not necessarily have a rational solution. This connects also with the reflections offered in this section’s introduction, and the idea that an “emotional turn” that challenges the Habermasian idea of rational debate might better define the current state of the public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Therefore, in exploring post-truth narratives about religion, I incorporate the perspective on emotions by Ahmed (2014). According to

Ahmed, emotions are social and cultural practices rather than psychological factors, and they can serve various purposes within the public sphere. For instance, they can be determined by relations of power and be used to marginalise given social groups. Hence, Ahmed conceptualises emotions as “sticky” objects that are based on relations between spaces and bodies, and that create collective identities through the intensity of given attachments. For example, emotions get attached to immigrants and contextualise them as undesirable bodies that need to be ejected from the community. At the same time, white supremacist and nationalist feelings are often described as discourses of love for one’s country. This love becomes hate for the undesirable bodies of those who are perceived as not belonging to the nation, and may result in hate speech and violence. Using Ahmed’s (2014) work as a foundation, Boler and Davis (2020) analyse the use of emotions in online propaganda, describing it as affectively weaponising information to reproduce racism, misogyny, and nationalism. Furthermore, Abdel-Fadil (2019) applies Ahmed’s theory of emotions to online religious conflicts, showing how emotions serve the purpose of reiterating a sense of belonging to a religious community and perceive false information as affectively factual. This theoretical approach to emotions is, thus, useful in exploring the connections between religion and post-truth, especially regarding social differences and marginal bodies.

Considering the interplay of online hate and emotions in online post-truth narratives about religion, I aim to show that Salvini’s disinformation contributes to creating a climate of post-truth that activates emotions connected to religious identities, which in turn fuel the further spreading of false claims, often at the expense of people who are socially marginalised, such as Muslims. In the next section, I will explain how the analysis of Matteo Salvini’s tweets can reveal these characteristics of contemporary post-truth politics.

MATTEO SALVINI’S TWEETS: AN ANALYSIS

Matteo Salvini is the leader of the Italian far-right party Lega Nord, which was initially a protest movement focused on the secession of Northern Italy from the Southern part of the country (Albertazzi et al., 2018). During the 1990s and early 2000s, the party had a controversial relationship with Catholicism, as it promoted neo-pagan and Celtic-inspired rituals, allegedly connected to the heritage of Northern Italy. However,

under Salvini's leadership, which started in 2013, the party focused on nationalism more than regionalism. With this change in ideology, the party also began to employ the so-called "Judeo-Christian" roots of Europe in anti-immigration and anti-Islam terms to support populist, nationalist, and nativist stances (Molle, 2019).

Salvini's use of disinformation can be ascribed to a general tendency of Italian digital media to spread post-truth narratives within the public sphere. A study on the 2018 national elections and the 2019 European elections in Italy highlighted evidence of social media manipulation and coordinated networks of malicious actors spreading disinformation (Giglietto et al., 2020). The use of social networks and messaging systems by Italian populist parties, such as Salvini's Lega Nord, tend to have a strong influence on voting behaviours, possibly because of the relatively deregulated digital environment and the low trust in so-called mainstream media in the country (Mosca & Quaranta, 2021). Bracciale and Martella (2017) have analysed Italian political leaders' communication style on Twitter, finding that Salvini's includes aggressive and simplistic positioning, with it being characterised by vulgar language that exploits fear and concern for everyday issues. These characteristics of Salvini's communication, including personal attacks and negative emotions, may predict greater electoral success (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019). Salvini's spread of disinformation and use of emotional narratives can be traced to a general tendency within far-right populist parties in Europe. The German far-right party AfD, for instance, tends to present anti-immigration frames as facts rather than interpretations of facts, and to employ ridicule and scandalisation to discredit dissenting voices (Conrad, 2022).

I analyse Salvini's aggressive Twitter communication as an example of the far-right populist creation of alternative facts. In doing so, I do not focus on news that is blatantly false, but on Salvini's interpretations of facts and his narrative strategies to present a "truth" that supports his political agenda. This chapter is based on an observation of Salvini's Twitter account, which counts 1.3 M followers (as of 1 March 2021), between August 2019 and January 2020. This period was chosen because in August 2019, Salvini triggered a government crisis and resigned from his role as Interior Minister. This resulted in a partial loss of popularity but also an intensification of his use of social media, as Salvini arguably tried to rebuild the trust of his supporters, utilising digital media platforms. The observation ended in January 2020, before the COVID pandemic hit and political narratives, including Salvini's, tended to focus mostly on

the diffusion of the virus. During this period, I analysed all of Salvini’s Twitter interactions and I selected 107 of his tweets that discuss religion. These tweets often contain links to Facebook pages (occurring 3 times in the sample), newspaper articles (24 times), videos (20 times), and pictures (38 times), which I also included in the analysis. Furthermore, Salvini’s tweets often attract between a hundred and a thousand reactions, and I included in my analysis the most popular comments as visualised by the Twitter algorithm.

With the help of the qualitative software Atlas.ti, I employed a thematic analysis approach combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the tweets. This methodological approach was not aimed at fact-checking, but rather at looking at predominant discursive topics and power relations, following the approach also employed by Conrad (2022). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) serves the purpose of identifying relevant narrative patterns and clustering them into categories, thus helping to understand what are the predominant topics that Salvini talks about on Twitter. Furthermore, CDA is based on the notion that texts are spaces for the representation of the world and socio-cultural practices (Fairclough, 2013). In particular, CDA helps understand power (im)balances between minority and majority social groups (including religious groups) and it has been employed to analyse discriminatory discourses of far-right populist leaders (Sengul, 2019). This approach proved useful in understanding antagonist and emotional discourses that help Salvini strengthen his political agenda, and to retrieve the tactics he employs to circulate post-truth narratives. In the following section, I will present and analyse the predominant themes and discursive patterns found in Matteo Salvini’s tweets, with a focus on his three strategies to present alternative facts in support of his political agenda.

RESULTS

The analysis of Salvini’s Twitter account shows two main narrative patterns. First, he tends to focus on Christianity, followed by Islam and then Judaism. Second, he employs discussions about these three religions to create three main strategies of post-truth diffusion, which I will describe as generalisations, hyperboles, and misleading connections. In the following sections, I will address Salvini’s use of religion and his narrative strategies in connection with post-truth politics, highlighting also the use of hateful discourses and emotions.

Religion

In his tweets, Salvini focuses predominantly on Christianity, and Catholicism in particular. As seen in Table 7.1, Salvini discusses Christianity through a variety of themes: he talks about the Catholic clergy, both in positive and negative terms, he reflects on the need for displaying crucifixes in public places, and circulates pictures of himself praying. Salvini often mentions Christmas, probably because the time frame of the tweets taken into account included the month of December 2019. Furthermore, he sometimes claims that Christians worldwide are persecuted, and employs Christianity to reiterate heteronormative family values. Table 7.1 also shows that Islam is related to migration and terrorism, exclusively in negative terms. Lastly, some tweets relate to Judaism, because Salvini condemns anti-Semitism and shows political support for Israel. These themes suggest that, in Salvini's tweets, religious discourses about different faiths often overlap to support a nationalist and anti-migration agenda based on the othering of Muslims, and activate emotions connected with the so-called Judeo-Christian roots of Italy and Europe.

During Christmas 2019, Salvini employed a header for his Twitter account that exemplifies some of his religious-related discourses. The header contains a picture of Salvini smiling, wishing "Happy holy Christmas and happy new year," on a background with Christmas decorations and a nativity scene. In December 2019, Salvini has been indeed vocal in celebrating nativity scenes as symbols of the religious spirit of

Table 7.1 Religious themes in Salvini's tweets

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Number of tweets</i>
Clergy	Christianity	74
Crucifix		
Prayer		
Christmas		
Persecutions against Christians		
Family Values	Islam	23
Migration		
Terrorism		
Antisemitism	Judaism	10
Israel		

Christmas, and condemning schools and offices who decided not to display them. The header also contains the logo of Salvini’s party, Lega Nord, and the slogan “Prima gli Italiani” (Italians First), a clear connection to global far-right discourses. In addition, there is a citation from Pope John Paul II saying, “Europe is Christian or it is not Europe.” This citation points to Salvini’s anti-migration ideology: the notion of “Italians First” and the Christian themes of the header echo his strategy to use religion in exclusionary terms, implying that non-Christians (Muslims, in particular) are not part of this collective Italian and European identity. Such a statement is not factually correct, as it implies that there are no European Muslims and denies that non-Christians (including atheists) can claim Italian identity. This can be connected to Ahmed’s (2014) claim that nationalism employs negative emotions towards those who are not perceived as part of the national identity, while reiterating love for the nation.

The header also shows some characteristics of Salvini’s communication style on Twitter. General observations of his Twitter interactions suggest that he employs pictures or videos of himself doing everyday activities and uses citations to support his political agenda. Salvini also frequently addresses his followers and voters directly, for instance, calling them “friends” or wishing them “Happy Sunday” often with the use of emoticons. Together with pictures of himself, he also shares stories about his children, and pictures of pets and babies, arguably because these types of tweets get the most attention on Twitter. Salvini’s communication style suggests that he skilfully employs the textual and visual potential of Twitter to mobilise people’s emotions, for instance, describing a religious-related event, such as Christmas, as a mark of national identity. In the next sections, I will analyse Salvini’s use of religion within the three main strategies used in the circulation of alternative facts and disinformation.

Strategies of Post-Truth Politics

The analysis of Matteo Salvini’s tweets shows that he often circulates news from online newspapers and television programmes. These are not, necessarily, unreliable sources and they do not directly contribute to disinformation, however, Salvini offers interpretations of these pieces of news that support his own political agenda, and gives comments that frequently go beyond simple information. I would argue that this kind of communication style contributes to post-truth politics in three main ways: by

creating *generalisations* about religious groups, and specifically presenting Islam as a monolithic entity; by employing *hyperboles* that foster fear and anger in exaggerating facts about religion; and by establishing *misleading connections* between facts that are not necessarily linked. Below, I offer some examples of these three strategies.

Generalisations

Salvini often discusses Islam and Islamic terrorism to support his anti-migration agenda, as shown in Table 7.1. He tends to generalise in considering all migrants as Muslims, and vice versa, even if this is not factually correct. Furthermore, he denies the inner heterogeneity of Islam and depicts all Muslims as holding the same values. An example is a tweet where Salvini posts a video of a journalist interviewing a father and a daughter who immigrated to Italy from Bangladesh. The video, which is also posted on Salvini's Facebook page, is summarised with the words "She cannot go out alone, it is Muslim law. When she is 18, her husband will decide for her." Underneath the yellow banner, the following words are written, "Integration? No, Middle Ages." Salvini comments on the video in the tweet by saying, "It is so sad. If this is the model of integration, we cannot give away Italian citizenship as a gift as PD [left-wing party] would want..." The tweet also contains the hashtag #NoIusSoli, which Salvini uses to oppose the left-wing proposal to institute the Jus Soli principle of granting automatically Italian citizenship to children born in the country.

By criticising the Muslim father in the video, Salvini implies that all migrants are Muslims and that they all share the same ideology, thus suggesting a misleading generalisation. Furthermore, the Jus Soli law is not connected to religion and would not apply to the men in the video, as it is designated for children. Using words such as "Middle Ages" and implying that Islam cannot adapt to so-called Western modernity, Salvini appeals to people's emotions so as to kindle fear and anger, and spread an antagonistic feeling against Muslims. This strategy seems to provoke other post-truth narratives, as several comments to this tweet also contain misleading information. For example, one of the top comments praises Switzerland and Russia for only allowing legal migrants to live in the country, not helping them with work or housing, and expelling them if they commit crimes or participate in demonstrations. This comment is not substantiated by any source and shows confusion about migration and refugee laws in other countries. The tendency of Salvini to generalise, by

considering Muslims and migrants as a homogeneous and dangerous category, likely legitimises some of his followers in also circulating unverified information to support anti-migration ideologies.

Another example of disinformation based on the generalisation of Islam can be found in a tweet about a mosque in the region of Umbria. The tweet contains a screenshot of a local newspaper, with an article entitled “Mosque, two former mayors and also the Imam are under investigation.” Salvini comments on the picture with the words, “Maximosque stopped thanks to Lega [Nord].” There is also the hashtag #dalleparoleaifatti, “from words to facts.” The picture of the newspaper has the logo of the left-wing PD, to imply that the two former mayors belong to this party, and that Salvini’s party, Lega Nord, denounced the facts. This might have been a strategy to create outrage in the audience, but also shows that Salvini’s party can provide relief by solving perceived problems.

This tweet is part of Salvini’s opposition to the building of mosques in Italy, which he considers sites of terrorist activities. While Salvini includes a screenshot from a newspaper in the tweet, some comments call out the misleading character of this news. For example, a commentator writes that the article is about the abuse of office charges for the land where the mosque is built, and does not have anything to do with religion. While it is not clear whether Salvini intentionally wanted to make his followers believe that this mosque is connected to terrorist activities, it is evident from the comments that several Twitter users expect Salvini to have been spreading disinformation and try to call him out. These examples show how the generalisations that Salvini employs to describe Muslims as terrorists, or unable to accept modernity and gender equality, reinforces a climate of post-truth politics. The use of disinformation provokes different reactions, with both people further circulating misleading narratives to criticise Islam, and users who are sceptical of what Salvini says. Together with generalisation, Salvini also employs hyperboles to further support his political agenda.

Hyperboles

Salvini often comments on news and facts by exaggerating events, and using hyperbole as figures of speech to kindle his followers’ reactions. For example, during a journalist television programme, Salvini criticises the alleged cultural change that Muslim immigrants provoke in Italy with the following words: “As long as it is not illegal, out of respect for

those who are coming here with [dinghy] boats tomorrow morning, I'm eating bread, salami, and [pork-based] *coppa piacentina*." The video of the programme was retweeted by Salvini's Twitter account, and exemplifies some of Salvini's use of exaggerations. He claims here that Muslim migrants who have just arrived in Italy (or are arriving "tomorrow," a hyperbole to say that they have recently immigrated) force Italians to give up their traditions, in this case, eating pork products such as salami and *coppa piacentina* (type of cold cut). It also shows some traits of post-truth politics connected with the previous point of generalisation, because Salvini does not acknowledge the existence of non-Muslim migrants, Italian Muslims, or Muslims who eat pork. Besides, he implicitly criticises left-wing parties and pro-migration actors for forcing people to give up pork, even if this has never been discussed at the political level in Italy, and dietary accommodations based on religion are granted without restrictions for other citizens.

In the video embedded in the tweet, Salvini argues about the topic with left-wing cartoonist and journalist Vauro Senesi. Commenting on Salvini's statement, Senesi notices that he is disrespectful towards Jews, who also do not eat pork. He calls out this hypocritical behaviour, because Salvini has often been vocal against anti-Semitism to defend the so-called Judeo-Christian roots of Europe, but ignores Jews' dietary restrictions here. In the video, Salvini reacts to this criticism angrily calling Senesi "crazy" and arguing that he "needs to be visited by a good doctor [psychiatrist]" for thinking that eating pork is anti-Semitic. This is another example of Salvini's hyperbolic communication style: he tends to appeal to his voters with colloquial language, and he often attacks his opponents, insulting them (for instance, through the exaggeration that Senesi needs a "psychiatrist" for supporting migration) and changing the topic of the conversation. By ridiculing Senesi and spreading the fear of Muslims "forcing" Italians to abandon their culinary traditions, Salvini once again mobilises emotions to criticise his political opponents and offer alternative interpretations of the facts.

Another example of Salvini's use of hyperboles is found in a tweet that criticises a Catholic priest. The circulation of religious-related discourses on Salvini's Twitter, including pictures of himself praying and visiting sacred places, is positively accepted by a part of the Catholic clergy, but challenged by some religious leaders. Therefore, Salvini also employs Twitter to attack some Catholic actors (see Table 7.1, "Clergy"). In an ironic tweet, Salvini criticises a priest helping migrants by posting a video

of the priest singing “Bella Ciao,” a popular anti-fascist song associated with communist ideas, in a church. He writes on the video “‘Bella Ciao during... mass! Are you ok?!?,” ironically implying that the priest is crazy. The text of the tweet says, “Do you remember the priest from Tuscany who wants to bring all of Africa to Italy? Today he did a little concert with ‘sardine’ [name of an informal protest group that criticises Salvini] with ‘Bella Ciao’... during Mass! In a while we’ll see him performing at the Sanremo [Music Festival]! (This is crazy).”

The video embedded in the tweet is authentic, but describing the priest as “wanting to bring all of Africa to Italy” is a hyperbole that pertains to a post-truth narrative. While this priest, like many other religious leaders, is engaged in organising activities and aid for refugees, Salvini misleadingly suggests that he actively wants to bring “all” Africans to Italy, using hyperbolic language, arguably, aimed at spreading fear and outrage. This connects with some recurrent narratives of Salvini, who blames left-wing politicians for allegedly trying to “substitute” white and Catholic Italians through illegal migration, and claims that Christians are under threat (see Table 7.1, “Persecutions against Christians”). By showing that this priest sings “Bella Ciao,” Salvini arguably appeals to his followers who dislike the left-wing and anti-fascist values associated with the song. In the tweet, he employs colloquial and aggressive language, ridiculing the priest instead of engaging in actual criticism of his actions. By giving the impression that a part of the clergy is working with left-wing politicians and groups (such as the “sardine”) to actively support migration, Salvini provokes emotional reactions in his followers, attracting both comments that insult Salvini or that attack the priest. The criticism to his political or ideological opponents exemplified in these two tweets are frequent in Salvini’s social media activities, where he employs words such as “stupid,” “crazy,” or “disgusting.”

This type of language, connected with the use of hyperbole, contributes to a post-truth climate by exaggerating the facts he comments upon and the actions of his opponents. Harsh language against certain groups or individuals is also combined with another strategy, that of suggesting misleading connections.

Misleading Connections

Salvini also discusses facts by putting them in relation to non-connected events, and offering commentaries that are not always pertinent. For

example, he often creates misleading connections in condemning anti-Semitism and supporting Israel (see Table 7.1). A tweet comments on an attack against a Rabbi in New York during Hannukah. Salvini writes, “It is a disgrace and there is an increased concern for the episodes of anti-Semitism, of hate against Jews and #Israel, which terrorists and their disgusting ideological supporters would like to cancel from Earth.” The tweet is a part of a thread where Salvini shares a video of the attack and expresses solidarity for American Jews, arguably trying to spark outrage for the violence and sympathy for the victims.

While the tweet aims at condemning violence, Salvini likely employs the event to strengthen his pro-Israel ideology. Even if the video of the attack does not mention Israel but refers to American Jews, Salvini suggests a connection with anti-Israel feelings that is not supported by sources. In doing so, the tweet conflates anti-Semitism with criticism of Israel. This tweet is also similar to others where Salvini implicitly or explicitly condemns Islam as the principal cause of anti-Semitism. The use of the word “terrorist,” indeed, is probably a reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to Islamic attacks, which Salvini often mentions in anti-Islam terms. While some comments to this tweet remark that Salvini’s party was accused of anti-Semitism in the past, Salvini now tries to portray himself as a supporter of Jewish communities. The reason might be that Salvini implicitly appeals to the notion of the “Judeo-Christian” roots of Italy and Europe, which he uses to build alliances with Jews and exclude Muslims from the construction of national identity.

Mentions of Israel and anti-Semitic actions in Salvini’s tweet seem to reinforce the generalisation that all Muslims are terrorists, and offer the misleading connection that anti-Semitic attacks are always examples of Muslim violence against Israel. Another example of misleading connections is found in a tweet, with the text, “For those who believe, Our Lady of Medjugorje gave a message: people can be judged by their gaze. Conte has a gaze of someone who is fearful and runs away.” The tweet, which also includes a picture of Salvini during the television programme “Porta a Porta,” talks about the at-time Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. In the video,¹ television host Bruno Vespa asks Salvini some questions about the national economy. Salvini blames Conte for not taking certain responsibilities, and mentions the Holy Virgin, who is believed to appear regularly

¹ <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2019/11/porta-a-porta-1fc7c99d-2484-4941-9744-7c3e8f791e19.html>.

and deliver messages in the Bosnian city of Medjugorje. Because Our Lady of Medjugorje said that it is more important to judge people’s gazes than facts, Salvini feels legitimised in criticising Prime Minister Conte based on his gaze alone. As Conte allegedly has the gaze of “someone who is fearful and runs away,” Salvini concludes that he is a liar and cannot be trusted.

In the interview quoted in the tweet, Salvini mentions Medjugorje to change the topic of the conversation and blame his opponent, as also seen in relation to his use of hyperboles in the previous section. While the words of Our Lady of Medjugorje can be meaningful to certain believers, Salvini applies them out of context, almost giving the impression that the Holy Mary delivered a political message. Instead of criticising Conte for his actions, he alleges that his gaze alone suffices to judge him, offering a misleading connection between political decisions and a person’s appearance. Because the belief in apparitions is largely not based on factual evidence, employing this argument allows Salvini to appeal to the emotion of some Catholic believers and make claims not supported by actual facts. Tweets that suggest misleading connections, aim at legitimising Salvini’s political decisions by confusing the actual facts and establishing relations that are often antagonistic and emotional. Reiterating the antagonism between Muslims and Jews, and emotionally appealing to the audience through criticism based on religion rather than political actions, Salvini shows how news and facts can be commented upon in a way that contributes to a post-truth climate.

CONCLUSION

This chapter employed the example of Matteo Salvini’s Twitter to show the entanglement of post-truth politics, social media, and religious discourses within populist communication. Through a qualitative textual analysis of Salvini’s tweets about religion, I explored his use of hateful narratives and emotions. While the literature on post-truth politics often identifies the North American and British contexts as fertile political terrains for the spread of disinformation, the case of Salvini demonstrates that there are some commonalities in the discourses of the far-right globally. Nevertheless, Salvini’s use of religion in post-truth politics shows some peculiarities of the Italian public sphere, such as attention to Catholic symbols and references to the Catholic clergy. While this study was limited to one political actor in one national context, future research

may compare different populist politicians in various countries to add complexity to the current literature on post-truth politics.

The analysis of Salvini's tweets suggests that he talks about Christianity, Islam, and Judaism to support his political agenda. He often ascribes symbolic power to those belonging to the so-called Judeo-Christian roots of Italy and Europe to push forward anti-migration ideologies. Hateful narratives and antagonism are at the core of these discourses, as religion seems to serve the purpose of creating divisions: Salvini stirs hate against Muslims by describing them as "other" than Christians and Jews, and incites internal conflicts among Catholics that hold different political ideologies. In doing so, he designates Muslims as scapegoats for social problems in an example of political antagonism (Mouffe, 2013), and creates hate spins around religious identities (George, 2017). The spread of disinformation likely derives from this instrumental use of religion, which serves a political purpose and does not necessarily involve an in-depth knowledge of religious identities. Religion is used to create narratives in a public sphere not characterised by Habermasian rationality, but rather on emotional reactions and non-rational conflicts, as highlighted by Mouffe (2013). This indicates the need for future research that better explores the public sphere as non-rational and also connected to emotional narratives.

Hence, Salvini uses religion to provoke emotional reactions, arguably because religion often involves deeply held connections and identities. Among the emotions found in Salvini's tweets, negative emotions are predominant: outrage for the alleged violence of Muslims, fear for religious and cultural change, hate against certain political and religious actors. Moreover, the colloquial style of Salvini often combines anger for his opponents with satire and irony. However, these negative emotions are counterbalanced by positive ones, especially the relief that Salvini seeks by banning migration, and the love and attachment for Catholic symbols and holidays. This use of emotions can be understood through the work of Ahmed (2014), who posits that different emotions are used for various purposes, and that the othering of migrants and non-white bodies is contrasted by sentiments of love for the nation. The analysis of Salvini's emotional narratives suggests that he understands the logic of social media well, because his colloquial, direct, and sarcastic style allows him to connect with his followers and mobilise them around shared religious identities. While his tweets attract comments that are very different in tone—going from those praising him to those harshly insulting his

actions—they arguably give him publicity. Therefore, a focus on religion in future studies could highlight some new aspects of post-truth politics, namely its emotional characteristics and its connections with positive and negative narratives around shared identities and political actions.

Furthermore, in his use of hate and emotions in supporting his political agenda, Salvini mainly employs three strategies that can be described as part of post-truth politics: generalisations, hyperboles, and misleading connections. It is not clear whether Salvini spreads false information intentionally or unintentionally, but these three strategies often overlap to support his political agenda and allow him to offer interpretations of facts that contribute to a climate of post-truth politics. Concerning Conrad’s work (2022), the case study of Salvini suggests that disinformation is not only deliberate or inadvertent, but it also can be more or less subtle. Hence, these strategies show that post-truth politics is not necessarily characterised by news that is blatantly false, but can involve implicit disinformation. This suggests that existing definitions of post-truth politics can benefit from a more nuanced understanding of its characteristics, and that future research can look for other commonly used discursive strategies of disinformation and their impact on the public sphere.

This chapter aimed at contributing to the discussion of post-truth politics within the public sphere by emphasising the importance of religion in understanding the use of hate and emotions, as well as to analyse strategies of indirect spreading of disinformation. As shown by Salvini’s tweets, disinformation creates a climate of post-truth that activates religious emotions through the circulation of claims about religion; in turn, religious narratives further fuel antagonisms and emotional reactions that sustain the spreading of disinformation. This suggests that the Internet, and social media in particular, often do not constitute a public sphere for rational debate, but are characterised by emotional antagonism when it comes to topics such as religion. Therefore, the understanding of post-truth politics, especially in connection with political discourses, can benefit from incorporating a more thorough analysis of how religion contributes to strategies of spreading disinformation.

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PART III

Mediatisation and Politicisation
of Immigration



Claiming Authority Over ‘Truths’ and ‘Facts’: Information Risk Campaigns to Prevent Irregular Migration

Verena K. Brändle

INTRODUCTION

Immigration has become a popular topic for concerted disinformation efforts and ‘fake news’ in European public and political debates. Such domestic discourse is often detached from migrants themselves, and the respective literature has so far paid less attention to the discourses in the field of international migration governance when migrants themselves are being addressed. Migration governance today involves a multitude of different actors, not only state actors and international or supranational entities, but also non-state actors, such as civil society and the private sector, and migrants themselves. Information plays a vital role for migrants before and during their journey where they must navigate a flow of messages from a variety of senders, often with contrasting

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input from support networks and governmental actors. Social media and mobile devices have considerably changed the ways in which people on the move today migrate and with whom they engage (Borkert et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

Unsurprisingly, rumours, disinformation, and ‘fake news’ also circulate in international migration discourses between migrants and actors of migration management, often owed to high levels of uncertainty, risks, and vulnerability, and complex migration and asylum policies (including deterrence tools). Since the so-called ‘migration crisis’ in 2015/2016, governments have recognised this information need and “information precarity” (Wall et al., 2017). Despite a lack of systematic evidence concerning their effectiveness and reach (Tjaden et al., 2018), several European governments have launched information risk campaigns (on social and online media) that target migrants before their arrival. Seemingly informative about the risks of irregular pathways and about obstacles people might face in destination countries, respective research has shown that these campaigns are often dissuasive, and in some cases even aim to deter (potential) migrants (see FitzGerald, 2020; Musarò, 2019; Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007). What is more, those information campaigns that involve government actors also raise questions about standards of ethical communication, for example, in relation to transparency and neutrality (Brändle, 2022; Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2020). At the same time, increased political awareness about disinformation, rumours, and fake news circulating online might also have shaped governmental perceptions about migrants’ information levels.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the ways in which such campaigns claim authority over the ‘truths’ of irregular migration. I argue that the post-truth condition is not only characterised by populist right-wing actors, but that to understand it, we equally need to critically engage with the communication of democratic governmental actors. By launching or supporting information campaigns against irregular migration, governments effectively enter discourses about rumours and disinformation and position themselves in the ongoing struggle to define what is truth, what is reliable, trustworthy information, and who has the prerogative to disseminate them. This is particularly critical since governments themselves contribute largely towards what constitutes regular and irregular migration, therefore remaining central and powerful actors in the field of migration governance. After a discussion of the respective literature and

its theoretical implications, the chapter will present a qualitative analysis of several campaigns to provide an empirical overview of such information campaigns and the theoretical considerations therein.

THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

Policy Narratives as Justifications for Information Campaigns about Irregular Migration

Policymaking is strongly influenced by normative assumptions, power, and stakeholders’ interests (Goodin et al., 2006). The field of migration policy is particularly contested, especially since the ‘migration crisis’ in the EU, and is characterised by debates about knowledge claims and policy interests (Boswell et al., 2011; Hadj Abdou, 2020, p. 646). One major assumption that policymakers and international organisations express is that migrants are misinformed, unaware of the risks of travelling towards Europe, and unable to obtain reliable information about the dangers of ‘smuggling’. This assumption might be among the main justifications for why we are witnessing an increase in information campaigns since the ‘migration crisis’ since 2015. In reaction to the increasing movement of people towards the EU, the European Commission (2015, p. 1) has announced “the fight against migrant smuggling as a priority”. Countermeasures in the form of messages in specific online campaigns to inform or raise awareness among (potential) migrants about smugglers and human trafficking have become popular (see Bankston, 2021). The EU Action Plan against migrant smuggling (2015–2020) emphasised the need “to develop a **counter-narrative in the media**, including social media, to uncover their [smugglers’] lies [...]” (European Commission, 2015, p. 6, original emphasis). In reaction to the ‘migration crisis’ in 2015/2016, at least 130 information campaigns have been implemented from 2015 to 2019, of which at least 104 were by EU governments, while 23 million euros have been allocated for these purposes following the EU Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling (Dempster & Tjaden, 2021; European Commission, 2018; National Contact Point in the European Migration Network, 2019). The Commission has further funded (research) initiatives for the design of information and awareness-raising campaigns for (potential) migrants in the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. On the national level, counter-narratives and information

provision present one of many policy initiatives to minimise irregular migration, as illustrated, for example, by the German government attempting “to inform about the risks of irregular migration” (Federal Government of Germany, 2020, p. 11).

As of today, however, the assumption that potential migrants lack information or awareness about the risks of choosing irregular pathways, which is put forward by EU and government officials, is regarded as unnuanced (Alpes & Sørensen, 2015). Research shows that migrants are well aware of the risks of their journey and even a lack of information about the presence of camps and detention centres would not have kept them from migrating (Vammen et al., 2021, p. 35).

Moreover, over the last decade, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other platforms, have become important tools for migrants to access information, to navigate through citizenship and border regulations, and to build-up support networks or connect with family and friends at home (Borkert et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2016). At the same time, social media facilitate the spreading of dangerous misinformation (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Despite evidence suggesting the mushrooming of disinformation and rumours among migrants (Carlson et al., 2018a; Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019), social media enable people to cope with these issues but also contribute to the circulation of overly optimistic rumours about living conditions in EU countries and exploitative messages by traffickers and organised smugglers (see Vammen et al., 2021 for a more nuanced account of smugglers as information providers). Furthermore, mishandled information provision by government officials can, in turn, spread misinformation, cause unrest, and lead to mistrust among migrants, as suggested by research about the Greek governments’ information management (Carlson et al., 2018b). This means that official communication can also be misleading (Brekke, 2004). In the context of migration management, it is therefore safe to say that online and social media provide migration governance actors with the tools to circulate and reaffirm dominant policy discourses about irregular migration. The launching of online campaigns to dissuade irregular migration is one form of doing so.

At the same time, a massive increase in engagement with disinformation unrelated to migration has occurred since 2016, a critical juncture that some consider as the beginning of a new era of post-truth politics or post-factual politics (see Suiter, 2016). This development, which

is characterised by people's decreasing trust in scientific and democratic institutions, is therefore also associated with a state of crisis, for which policy solutions have been demanded. In the EU context, various policy initiatives now actively engage in countering disinformation, especially since the mid-2010s as a reaction to the increasing frequency with which foreign and domestic actors attempt to destabilise political systems and democratic debates through online disinformation and 'fake news' (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020, p. 820). In 2018, the European Commission put a high-level group of experts in place to advise policymakers on effective responses to disinformation, differentiating intentional disinformation from unintentional misinformation (European Commission/Directorate-General for Communications Networks/Content and Technology, 2018).

The 'fight' against rumours and dis-/misinformation is therefore based on the justification that democratic governments are able to discern truth from misleading information. From a normative perspective, democratic institutions are to be protected by their governments, such as the rule of law, elections, and political accountability. The maintenance of stability is one of the main functions of democratic government (Carugati, 2020), especially in times of (perceived) crisis. Government communication is therefore hardly ever used to trigger social change but to inform the public about political decisions, legitimise these decisions, and to enable mechanisms of political accountability (see Warren, 2014).

Government communication is thereby said to fulfil a specific function: democratic government communication is subject to ethical standards of communication such as neutrality, transparency, and the absence of party-political interests (Bowen & Zhu, 2019; Busch-Janser & Köhler, 2007; Gebauer, 1998). In this way, it informs and explains about political decisions, and not only supports public political opinion formation, but also enables political accountability (Warren, 2014). Initially, social media communication promised to affirm such principles and increase civic and social participation (Dahlgren, 2013) and today's governments and international organisations have become avid users of social media. However, demands for transparency have become more poignant (DePaula et al., 2018), and the reality of governments' social media communication is more complex: research suggests that it pursues rather symbolic and representational purposes instead of interactivity and participation, and blurs the lines between information and political party interests (DePaula et al., 2018; Russmann et al., 2020; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014).

Information Campaigns in the Post-Truth Context

Against this background, to understand the phenomenon of disinformation and misinformation, we need not only consider its loudest voices, such as populists, but also look at how established institutions, such as democratic governments, frame their own political agendas within the current post-truth context. The main reason for emphasising this focus is that the post-truth condition also describes a challenging of the democratic status-quo narrative, what Newman (2019, p. 95) describes as “‘establishment’ narrative”, and a challenge to the ways in which societies agree on an establishment narrative (through debates, mainstream media, scientific evidence, elections). The focus is thereby not on determining what is ‘true’, but what the accepted status-quo is. This chapter highlights that, from the perspective of mainstream or established institutions, one of the conditions of post-truth politics is that the establishment narrative has become more difficult to control, to disseminate, and to appear trustworthy. The post-truth condition is therefore not only characterised by populist claims from the fringes transforming to traditional politics, but also by the attempts of mainstream political actors to reinforce and control their establishment narrative(s) against counter-claims. Given the scope and reach that social media provide to spread information beyond their control, mainstream institutions/actors are more aware of the influences of rumours, disinformation, but also of unintended misinformation, and crucially, of information in conflict with their policy goals. In this sense, post-truth has less to do with the content of truth(s), but with the ways in which diverse actors try to control and disseminate their own ‘truths’.

Information campaigns for (irregular) potential migrants support established policy narratives: first, they reaffirm that irregular migration, especially smuggling, is ‘bad’ and immoral.¹ In order to do away with irregular migration, information campaigns therefore deter and dissuade. Existing research suggests that the content of such governmental campaigns is dissuasive and ethically questionable (Brändle, 2022; Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2020; Musarò, 2019). Gärtner (2020), for example, finds that they are based on the construction of “institutional

¹ For further information on the contested term of ‘smuggling’, its normative assumptions, and crucial differences to trafficking, please see, for example, Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) and Zhang et al. (2018).

counter-narratives” to the often overly optimistic hopes of potential migrants by focusing on the risks of the journey. At the same time, irregular migration is generalised and linked to human trafficking and other forms of organised crime (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007). Voices of migrants are visible, but mainly subject to “conditional recognition” (Georgiou, 2018, p. 54). Moreover, Oeppen (2016) shows how such campaigns serve as impression management for involved institutions so as to present themselves as humanitarian actors. Bishop (2020) finds that migration campaigns omit information about rights, such as the right to apply for asylum. Vammen (2021) and Williams (2020) find that the campaign messages are often emotionally charged, framing the decision to migrate irregularly as immoral and egoistic towards other family members.

Second, such campaigns maintain the assumption that through authoritative information from democratic, ‘good’ governments, migrants’ supposed unawareness, rumours, and disinformation can be ‘fought’. Therefore, campaigns are being launched in reference to the context of dis- and misinformation about migration, domestically and internationally. For example, the issue of immigration was the subject of several domestic disinformation campaigns from actors on the extreme right. National governments and the EU are therefore acutely aware of the dangers of disinformation about migration domestically, but also in international migration discourses.

Considering the public salience and contestation of migration (Castles, 2017), governments are likely to react with measures to control migration in ways that enable them to maintain a ‘humanitarian’ image while restricting migration. They consider irregular migration to be in part driven by misinformation and migrant’s unawareness, as well as countries making an impression of welcoming migrants as a pull factor (Hadj Abdou, 2020, pp. 649–650). In this view, irregular migration constitutes a risk to the dominant discourses in international migration about control and regularity, and thus, stability. Governmental information campaigns therefore present counter-narratives to maintain or reinstate a certain type of stability that they, in turn, have defined and now seemingly need to defend against dis- and misinformation among migrants.

The respective literature therefore remains sceptical of the publicly declared aim of information campaigns to ‘inform’, ‘raise-awareness’, and so ‘empower’ people to make decisions regarding migration. Instead, European policy approaches to (irregular) migration are dominated by notions of deterrence as a means to control irregular migration

(Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017; Geddes, 2018, p. 133). Through information campaigns, official communication enters a mix of messages about irregular migration that (potential) migrants must navigate. Behind the publicly declared humanitarian objectives of campaigns (informing, empowering, supporting), campaigns circulate “hegemonic discourses” (see Triandafyllidou, 2020, p. 3) of international migration governance regarding deterrence, security issues, conditional humanitarian care, irregularity, and management (see Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017). It is therefore evident that information campaigns aim to present the dominant discourse about irregular migration as ‘truths’ and ‘realities’. The current “hegemonic” discourse clearly distinguishes regular migration (Triandafyllidou, 2020, p. 2), that is migration defined and controlled mostly by states and international organisations—as well as impossible for many people—as something ‘good’, from irregular migration associated with smuggling, risk, and framed through crime and illegality. These findings therefore suggest that migrants are faced with information from a variety of actors who position their claims as ‘facts’ or ‘the truth’ about irregular migration, and so justify their specific interests. Information campaigns against irregular migration are thus less informative than dissuasive, aiming to minimise irregular migration by circulating the dominating discourse about ir-/regularity as countermeasures against perceived misinformation. In this way, they communicate counter-narratives by claiming authority over the ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ of irregular migration.

In this way, government communication in the form of information risk campaigns about irregular migration neglects that “normative claims and assumptions are central to policy making” (see Tenove, 2020, p. 520). I argue that by aiming to maintain the political status-quo, such campaigns contribute to undermining constructive social and political change, the development of novel ideas that could bring a new perspective to irregular migration, and the social realities of people considering irregular pathways. Such an improvement and paradigm shift in European migration governance is a pressing issue as social and political instability around the world forces people to flee, often, on irregular pathways.

If we consider that governments today have a multitude of tools, such as online media, to affirm and disseminate their authority, counter-narratives against irregular migration in the form of information campaigns require our attention. In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to illustrate these theoretical considerations with a short empirical analysis

of information campaigns from European governments to migrants. In particular, I will show how information campaigns present their messages as ‘truths’ or ‘facts’, how they reiterate hegemonic discourses, and by doing so, de-emphasise aspects of rights and protection. In this way, they stand in the way of social change that can make irregular migration safer.

A FEW WORDS ON METHODOLOGY

Information campaigns are implemented by a multitude of different actors, such as NGOs, international organisations, right-wing political parties, and governments. In this chapter, I focus on information campaigns that are authored and/or implemented or funded with governmental involvement and that are explicitly aimed at migrants in order to assess them within the context of government communication (see also Brändle, 2022). Governmental information campaigns emerged in the 1990s when officials’ concerns about irregular migration from Central and Eastern Europe, in combination with human trafficking, became more pressing (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007). While campaign content varies, their function is “preventing undesirable migration. The purpose of this new strategy is to discourage potential migrants from leaving” (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007, p. 1675).

Although the formats of the campaigns differ, much of their content today is also circulated on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Some campaigns host a main website only. Others come in the form of a single document that is then shared online in meme-like posters or as printed newspaper ads that are shared online. In order to capture the diversity of such governmental campaigns from Europe, I mostly discuss well-known campaigns that have gained popularity among practitioners, as well as heavily criticised campaigns. Within the scope of this chapter, the aim is not to analyse the campaigns systematically or compare them as case studies—they are too diverse in terms of content and context, which would require more space. However, the analysis purposefully selects and highlights their specific and individual features to provide an overview and to contextualise them within the setting of post-truth politics, government communication, and the role of (mis-)information in international migration discourses.

To understand how information campaigns attempt to counter irregular migration on the basis of responding to misinformation, the chapter qualitatively analyses campaign content, press releases, parliamentary

questions and replies, and public debates. Qualitative analysis allows the drawing out of in-depth insights from the material and the uncovering of common themes and patterns (Schofield, 1993). Using the software MAXQDA, a mix of inductive coding and close reading has been applied to detect common themes and patterns. Instead of following specific discourse analytic approaches, the analysis rather applies a “pragmatic” approach, presenting the material to make the most plausible interpretations (see Saldaña, 2011, p. 177). I paid specific attention to the publicly declared goals of the campaigns, their assumptions about migrants, as well as their justifications. These aspects did not so much serve as coding categories but as overall dimensions to make sense of the material. They were often overlapping and usually uncovered the policy narratives that would then ‘snowball’ to other documents and texts, as well as specific themes in the campaigns themselves. This continuing process of re-creating overviews, inductive coding, snowballing, description and meaning-making, allowed for “thick description” of the political intentions and communication behind the campaigns (see Geertz, 1973). In this way, the analysis could draw out examples and discuss how campaigns claim authority over the ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ about irregular migration from a European governmental perspective.

ANALYSIS

I. Strategies of Information Provision

Information campaigns are considered to be part of a toolbox of other instruments for migration management, such as deportation and border control (FitzGerald, 2020). As this chapter looks at online information campaigns explicitly, we can broadly differentiate between two ways in which campaigns provide information: one-way communication and interactive. One-way communication refers, for example, to posters, social media ads, leaflets, or articles on websites. In September 2015, the then Minister of Immigration and Integration of the Danish government, Inger Støjberg, placed printed ads in Lebanese newspapers and paid social media ads to inform potential migrants about tightened immigration laws in Denmark. Around March 2016, the Austrian Interior Ministry had launched TV clips, posters, and Facebook posts stating ‘Smugglers lie’ or ‘No asylum in Austria for economic migrants’.

Interactive ways can concern campaigners’ encouragement of migrants to get in touch with them or aiming to create online communities on social media through engaging returned migrants in telling their stories. For example, on the—now taken down—website of the project called ‘On the Move’, in which the UK Home Office was involved, migrants were encouraged to get in touch with the campaigners, providing an email address to which people could direct questions to receive information about migration (“Want to know more about the risks of continuing your migration journey or safe and legal alternatives?”²). Some, such as the IOM and Italian government’s Aware Migrants campaign, specifically focus on personal accounts, especially video material of returnees and family members of migrants. In this way, peer networks are built, and an image of trustworthy experiences might be created. In this example, governmental or organisational engagement has only a minor role. Peer-to-peer events have been shown to reduce the decision to choose irregular pathways and increase awareness about risk (Tjaden & Dunsch, 2021). Nevertheless, this strategy has been considered problematic due to its focus on tragedy and portraying migrants as “non-political agents”, passive, and “vulnerable” (Georgiou, 2018, p. 52).

Other campaigns encourage people to use the interactivity and participation features of online/social media, such as the similar campaigns by the German and the Belgian governments. Interactivity features on social and online media facilitate opportunities to participate, and so, under certain conditions, can increase democratic engagement (see Mossberger et al., 2007). Participation is particularly conducive to increasing trust and credibility. Through participation, people can engage with governmental actors. Information campaigns provide information for people in order to make them reconsider irregular pathways. Some campaigns explicitly enable migrants to get in touch via a contact form on the campaign website, though this kind of contact is not related to social media accounts. In some cases, the campaigns offer the possibility to “fact-check a rumour” about migration³ or “check whether it [news] is true or false”.⁴ In cases of ‘fact-checking’ services, these are not offered directly to individual migrants but might be summed up in a post or

² The ‘On the move’ website has been taken down recently.

³ <https://www.factsaboutbelgium.be/contact/>.

⁴ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/fact-checker/>.

article on the respective websites “[i]f it is relevant information for other refugees and migrants”.⁵ The impression of fact-checking as a service to migrants portrays the campaign as a helpful tool for them. Fact-checking as a practice is then linked to a trust relationship, especially when it comes to communication of risks and misinformation (Krause et al., 2020). In the case of information campaigns for migrants, trust might lead to credibility that the campaigners, including the governments behind them, have migrants’ interests at heart.

Notwithstanding the different strategies of information provision, the common denominator of the campaigns is that they claim to be (the only) reliable providers of information and are dominantly based on the assumptions that migrants lack information about risks. Their declared aim is “empowerment”⁶ of migrants or to support potential migrants in their process of decision-making, for instance, “[t]he goal of the website is not to deter, but to inform”.⁷ Furthermore, some suggest that the information they obtain from others, especially smugglers, but in one case also the media or peers, might be misleading:

[...] Reliable and trustworthy information on migration is very difficult to find. The media, smugglers, and even people from your community who have already migrated can give a false impression of the journey and life in a new country. [...] (Previous ‘On the move’ campaign).⁸

Others have announced the campaigns to the domestic public in the form of a publicity event that would be provocative and, at the same time, present the government’s spin on migration. In a post to her Facebook followers on 7 September 2015, Danish Minister Inger Støjberg wrote, “The goal is to inform neutrally and factually about the situation [meaning ‘stricter immigration policies’] in Denmark, which the Danish government is currently tightening” (author’s own translation). The Danish ad campaign was justified by the Danish minister based on the statement that “travel patterns are steered by smugglers”, that “Denmark is high up on the smugglers list”, and that Denmark “cannot

⁵ <https://www.factsaboutbelgium.be/contact/>.

⁶ <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-italy-launch-aware-migrants-campaign>.

⁷ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/about/>.

⁸ <https://www.migrantsonthemove.org/homepage/about/>, accessible via ‘Wayback Machine’.

keep up with the current inflow” (Støjberg, 2015). However, also the notion of responsibility is evoked, for example, in the campaign by the Austrian government in 2016. Here, the Minister describes the information provision as “‘an act of fairness’ toward economic migrants” (Republik Österreich Parlament, 2016). At the same time, the campaign is justified in avoiding a perceived loss of national sovereignty and control, thus requiring a stricter border regime (ÖVP Bundesparteileitung, 2016).

Through such statements, governments position themselves as actors who have authoritative information about irregular migration. They can provide information about the ‘real dangers’ that await people on their irregular pathways to Europe. Such claims are portrayed as facts that reaffirm smuggling as an illegal act and portrays migrants as irrational and uninformed. At the same time, governmental actors and the organisations that implement the campaigns, enter the flow of messages about irregular migration that people already must navigate. They might further be steered by political party interests.

II. Reproducing the Dominant Narrative of European Migration Policies⁹

Turning towards the content messages of the campaigns, a focus on risk, deportation, and voluntary return emerges, a typical pattern in dominant discourses in international migration management. Aware Migrants, particularly, portrays these issues through emotive and personal storytelling. People often narrate their experiences in short video clips or are quoted in articles, for instance, “We saw some of us drowning and die in the sea”¹⁰; “We saw several friends die in the desert”.¹¹ To raise awareness about the dangers of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, one campaign story explains that rescue on “rubber boats” is unlikely and smugglers telling otherwise is wrong.¹² In other cases, returnees are interviewed about the horrors of irregular migration, “They always tell you it’s a good

⁹ The analysis in this section draws from Brändle (2022) where more detailed accounts can be found.

¹⁰ <https://www.awaremigrants.org/news/returning-migrants-cote-divoire-ibrahim-recalls-libyan-hell>.

¹¹ <https://www.awaremigrants.org/talking-migrants-families/story-kone>.

¹² Post “Will you be rescued after two hours in a rubber boat?”, <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/>.

boat. But it's never so. It's always a bad boat".¹³ The risk focus does not only centre around life-threatening experiences, but also warnings about crimes by smugglers and about migrants engaging in criminal activity. As an illustration, the 'On the Move' campaign states that "by steering the boat or helping to get other people to pay smugglers, then you will have criminal action taken against you",¹⁴ thus reiterating the legal provisions that states have adopted to prevent 'people smuggling'. These laws are highly contested since they are also designed to deter support for migrants (on irregular pathways), also criminalising this support. Laws against 'migrant smuggling' have, in this way, become a means to manage migration (Ben-Arieh & Heins, 2021).

While many people on irregular pathways face risks and dangers, these risks are presented as almost 'natural' consequences and inevitable facts. In many cases, governmental campaigns claim to inform about 'the real dangers' of choosing irregular pathways. This "truth about the journey"¹⁵ is described as hopeless. Such claims, again, ignore that governments themselves define the regularity and irregularity of migration and so contribute towards the risks to a considerable degree (see Triandafyllidou, 2020). In other words, the concepts smuggling, irregularity, or support, are to a large extent defined by those actors who now warn about their associated risks. Policies and laws are under constant construction and based on normative assumptions (Goodin et al., 2006; Tenove, 2020, p. 520), but are communicated as a matter of fact and as an unchangeable state.

Another focus is put on deportations and voluntary return. Hands-on support and advice are mostly offered to persuade people to return after their arrival in the EU or on their way towards (e.g., "Going back to Somalia? Now there is help"¹⁶). In other instances, governments inform, "[t]hat all rejected asylum seekers must be returned quickly from Denmark" (Danish ad). Voluntary return is often presented as a morally superior option, referring especially to high-skilled people who have returned to their families and then economically contributed to their

¹³ <https://www.awaremigrants.org/testimonies-italy/story-ebou>.

¹⁴ <https://www.migrantsonthemove.org/homepage/migration-info/life-in-destination-countries/life-in-the-uk/legal-risks-of-irregular-migration-to-the-uk/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.migrantsonthemove.org/homepage/migration-info/life-in-destination-countries/life-in-the-uk/reality-of-irregular-entry-into-the-uk/>.

¹⁶ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/facts/going-back-to-somalia-now-is-the-time/>.

communities with start-ups or social initiatives, exemplified by “I am a good example of one such African scientist who was empowered by the opportunities I have been given”.¹⁷

On the one hand, the findings about such campaigns are in line with research on major European policy narratives about irregular migration, often combining notions of security with migrant protection (Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011). These narratives create what Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2017, p. 160) have described as an “ambivalent moral order” in international migration discourse between international care and security. On the other hand, democratic principles of government communication to inform comprehensively, transparently, and neutrally stand against European governments’ invested interest to reduce migration and gain control over irregular pathways. The organisations behind the campaigns (financially and/or in terms of content) are part of the policies that define ‘irregularity’ in the first place. Information for migrants and policies that restrict migration, especially irregular migration, therefore blend into each other and reiterate the dominant policy narratives. They also report about the restrictions and difficulties ‘irregular’ migrants will face in the host country or on their journeys. The conditionality of issues of rights and entry requirements is highlighted often: “Even if granted protection, and thus the right to stay, many face difficulties finding work in Germany”¹⁸; or one of the main slogans of the Austrian campaign “No Asylum in Austria for Economic Migrants”; or:

There are four forms of protection that grant people a right to stay in Germany. Many migrants who have entered Germany irregularly in search for work and a better life are surprised to learn that none of these forms of protection apply to them.¹⁹

There is consequently an “inherent ambiguity *within* EU border security and migration management policies and practices that (re)produces the ‘irregular’ migrant as potentially *both* a life to be protected *and* a security threat to protect against” (Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 3). Together,

¹⁷ <https://www.awaremigrants.org/news/glasgow-university-student-empowers-african-scientists-tech-training-0>.

¹⁸ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/rumours/will-your-life-in-europe-be-easy/>.

¹⁹ <https://rumoursaboutgermany.info/facts/who-is-allowed-to-stay-in-germany-and-who-is-not/>.

the campaigns reflect the “hegemonic discourse” of international migration management (Triandafyllidou, 2020), while actual information that provides new, helpful information for migrants on irregular pathways, falls short (see Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011). Countering dis-/misinformation, however, would require not to repeat the basis on which rumours developed in the first place. Instead of informing and developing new ways of conceiving of irregular pathways, campaigns reiterate old news by employing the dominant discourses of international migration management (see Pécoud, 2021). By presenting their messages as facts, campaigns simplify irregular migration and people’s experiences. Countering rumours with more information is therefore not only an insufficient strategy to persuade and change people’s behaviour (Stray, 2019), but in the case of migration information campaigns, government communication walks a thin line between neutral and political communication.

III. The Contestation of Authoritative Truth

While the campaigns are presented as reliable, trustworthy, and factual/neutral information to migrants, they are often disputed by domestic actors (besides scholars). Most recently, *The Independent* reported that with the campaign ‘On the Move’, the UK Home Office has been running a “fake website” with questionable contents to deter migrants from crossing over to the UK from Calais (Dearden, 2021b). Since the website encourages migrants to contact the campaign to ask about the risks about migration, it was initially unclear who would be the receiver of such questions. Up until a certain point, ‘On the Move’ did not show any indication of the organisation behind it, nor a usually required imprint on the website that provides address details. On 29 August 2021, the website declared that “the information on this website has [*sic*] provided by the Home Office on behalf of the UK Government” and gives further information on visa entry.²⁰ The article by *The Independent* was followed by a longer Twitter thread²¹ which uncovered that ‘On the Move’ was likely the product of the connection between

²⁰ <https://www.migrantsonthemove.org/homepage/about/>, now accessible via Wayback Machine.

²¹ The connection between the two projects has, to my knowledge, first been made by Dan Barker on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/danbarker/status/1421645085150744576>.

the organisation Seefar, an important campaigner for governments and the EU in the field of irregular migration, especially through its project ‘The Migrant Project’ and the UK government’s Home Office. Following the publishing of the article at the end of July 2021, several journalists, activists, volunteers, academics, and NGO workers have submitted Freedom of Information Requests. In a response to one of these requests, the Home Office has now confirmed that it had commissioned Seefar (Home Office, 2021). Furthermore, the UK’s Information Commissioner is probing a complaint about the website (Dearden, 2021a).

Such domestic contestation is no exception. The Danish ads received considerable attention from both proponents and harsh critics, and were picked up by domestic and international news media outlets, often opposing the initiative as cynical and unethical (see Taylor, 2015). In a statement, the Ombudsman of the Danish Parliament (Folketingets Ombudsman, 2015, p. 16) considered the Danish ministry’s information campaign as potentially leaving Syrian asylum seekers with an understanding of the Danish asylum law that “is not accurate/appropriate” and “not in accordance with existing laws and principles in this field”. There were further issues regarding the initial clarity of the English translations of the content.

In another example of domestic contestation, the Minister of the Interior in Austria was criticised for the layout of the campaign: several opposition politicians questioned her, one about whether the colouring of the contents had been intentionally designed in collaboration with the FPÖ due to its similarity (Scherak, 2016), which the Minister rejected (Mikl-Leitner, 2016). Another example is the Rumours About Germany campaign: MPs from both left-wing (Die Linke) and right-wing parties (AfD) filed parliamentary questions about the campaigns (Friesen et al., 2021; Jelpke et al., 2018).

While domestically political accountability can be established in this way, the campaigns are directed at (potential) migrants who have only very limited access to the debates and contestation. Migrants might not be aware that many of the campaigns have been criticised or questioned by parliamentary actors due to potential violations of principles of ethical government communication, such as transparency and neutrality.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have problematised and discussed how governmental actors claim authority over the ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ of irregular migration. Special attention has been paid to embedding the campaigns within the contexts of domestic pressure to appear ‘tough’ on immigration, especially in the current climate of disinformation about migration, while maintaining a humanitarian image and communicating ethically on social and online media. The analysis focused on three aspects of the campaigns: the strategies of information provision, the reaffirmations of the dominant discourse about irregularity, and the contestation of the information campaigns and their claims. The first aspect illustrated that the campaigns are launched and justified based on the assumptions that migrants are, generally, unaware of the risk of irregular pathways. The ways of presenting information vary and are either focused on engagement through fact-checking styles and emotionality through a focus on personal experiences or one-way communication in the form of leaflets or ads. All of the campaigns reiterate the dominant discourses about irregularity as a means to counter assumed unawareness among migrants. Contested policies and claims are thereby presented as “truths” and “facts” about migration, keeping the dominant understanding of irregularity as an immoral, sometimes criminal act. Life-threatening situations are portrayed as unavoidable, questioning the ethics of such communication given that governments themselves have considerably contributed to creating irregular pathways through restrictive immigration and asylum policies. The analysis has also provided insights into the domestic contestation that takes place. In particular, through parliamentary questions, freedom of information requests, and news reporting, some of the campaigns have had to be justified and adapted. This domestic contestation, however, hardly reaches migrants themselves, which sheds doubt on the campaigns’ declared goals to inform, empower, and provide fair options to choose between regular and irregular pathways.

In general, the campaigns raise important questions about the authority and reliability of government communication that addresses migrants directly, especially when it draws on assumptions formulated in reference to a post-truth context. Looking at the current migration and asylum policy regime, deterrence has become particularly dominant and so contradicts the announced goals of the campaigns. Possibly also

reacting to increased pressures from populist right-wing actors, governments have recognised the affordances of social media to reach migrants directly. While it is highly improbable that migrants trust such messages and follow their advice, the campaigns can nevertheless reaffirm the current European approaches to controlling and managing migration. In this way, they contribute to maintaining the current status-quo and thus hinder constructive social and political change towards an improvement of the current situation around the EU’s external borders.

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Facts, Narratives and Migration: Tackling Disinformation at the European and UN Level of Governance

Anna Björk

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a prominent theme in global, regional and national political agendas, which, though having altering emphases, never truly falls out of fashion. The escalating situation in Afghanistan in August 2021 intensified the migration debate in Europe. While countries were evacuating people as quickly as possible before the deadline on the 31 August, the debate over who should be on the planes, what kind of risks should be taken to get them out safely, and whose fault the failure of the operation was in the first place, was getting heated. Meanwhile, in Europe, politicians, journalists, experts and citizens were regularly referring to “2015” as a “lessons

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learned” point in conversation.¹ This refers, clearly, to a point in time where EU borders were faced with an unprecedented number of asylum seekers, resulting in massive local and regional operations for agreeing on possible solutions. Regularly termed as a “crisis”, this experience is now being used rhetorically in various ways, depending on the argument put forth by the discussant.

The narrative in this chapter also gravitates towards the aftermath of 2015. First, it points towards initiatives to tackle migration and promote human rights, through the recognition of the importance of framing, facts, accurate information, data and communications tools in the debates. In my view, this is an indication that directly and indirectly acknowledges that states (through their governments)—as the main subjects of international law and the ones who have the responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil human rights—can be held more accountable for their actions in tackling, for instance, disinformation and radical right discourses against human rights. So far, the efforts do not seem to be indisputably successful, but on the other hand, they have not yet been fully abandoned either.

In this chapter, I do not study migration as a phenomenon, from the perspective of the EU, nor within international law (even though it is clear that these dimensions are all intertwined), but I focus on migration as a political question primarily. The main context—including the key actors—is the EU, with the main agent here being the EU agency for fundamental rights.² However, with this said, I will also be referring to EU policies and Commission priorities, and to some extent to individual member states. The operational environment for them is the global migration governance system, which I will be examining by referring to the drafting process and final document of the UN Global Compact for Safe and Orderly Migration (2018a).³ The GCM has already been analysed as a political document and process many times over, but I hope

¹ Examples here <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/18/europe-fears-a-repeat-of-2015-refugee-crisis-as-afghanistan-collapses.html>; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/europe-braces-for-immigration-surge-as-afghans-flee-taliban-11629927526>; <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-afghanistan-migration-2015-refugee-crisis/>.

² The FRA website includes several references to events and tools in supporting the work on human rights, available for example at https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/73/195.

³ The resolution A/RES/73/195 is available at https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/73/195 (UN General Assembly, 2018a).

to add a further dimension within this chapter by treating it as an illustration of some key political tensions included in migration politics: the interplay between sovereignty and decentralised power and the efforts to tackle disinformation.

The analysis is motivated by the way the emergence of hybrid media spaces have reinforced the need to control and define agendas by means of carefully selected strategies in governance and politics. It is no longer possible to ignore the fact that contemporary channels of information are crucial sites of power struggle in the politics of migration. As such, their impact on the lives of migrants cannot be ignored, either. This development is now a common feature in the politics of global migration governance, explicitly recognising hybrid media spaces as a tool and site for politicking, politicisation and de-politicisation (for the spatial and temporal dimensions of the polit-vocabulary, see Palonen, 2003). I read the recent openings of the FRA and UN as attempts to control this space by using different approaches, specifically, by influencing politicians who have agency in global governance mechanisms and also to establish new ways for international coordination. Based on the analysis, I would argue that they are also establishing the role of narratives and conceptual inventions as part of migration governance, with the need to master the game of using multiple communication channels and sites as a crucial feature in this.

*The Framework: Global Migration Governance and Migration
as a Political Issue in the EU*

In global migration governance, the sovereign states as subjects in international law are seen as the main agents for migration governance, but, as the use of the concept *governance* itself implies,⁴ the everyday approach to migration at all levels leans heavily on cooperative networks, also including private and third sector organisations. To function effectively, migration governance as a system needs to accommodate activities, interests, politics and power structures at all levels, as well as between them. The global migration governance system, then, is a mix of positions where the interests of individual states, transnational civil society actors, regional

⁴ The literature covering the different concepts and theories of governance is extensive. From a conceptual perspective, Bevir's (2008 and 2010) work is a useful overview of the development of the idea.

governance elites and international organisations form a complex political infrastructure.

The UN's history of dealing with displacement and migration is embedded in the aftermath of World War II and the need to respond to its consequences. Migration is a concept for describing human mobility, with its many forms and directions. The idea of "migration governance" has its roots in the aftermath of World War I, shifting in emphasis after the Cold War to being associated with the development framework, and only lately being turned towards the need for a more internationally coordinated system. Therefore, conflicts and wars have been prominent drivers behind the formation of the global migration governance system, bringing with it the idea of responsibility, human rights and (post)colonialism into the mix. This is especially true in the case of involuntary migration, but, undoubtedly, voluntary migration as a governance issue is also contained within the same system (for a discussion of the historical formation of the global migration system, and its current fragmentation, see Kainz & Betts, 2021; for a general overview of the historical phases, see Betts & Kainz, 2017).

In 2013, Crépeau's report to the UN General Assembly stated that migration governance was becoming more and more fragmented, which, for example, made it quite difficult to put normative UN based monitoring mechanisms in place. The Global Compact for Migration is a United Nations framework document and an effort to streamline international cooperation on migration management and avoid further fragmentation. The process was led by individual states as opposed to the Global Compact on Refugees, which was directed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (McAdam, 2018). Though the driving force for this process reaches beyond the Agenda 2030 negotiations, its development is strongly tied to the language of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Agenda 2030 framework explicitly recognises the positive contribution of migrants to their new home states, and the significance of migration to countries of origin, transit and destination. Another important influence is the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda, which expresses within it the freedoms of all migrants and states, and highlights the importance of migration in sustainable development globally. The integration of the International Organisation for Migration⁵ into the UN system has

⁵ Information on the key activities of IOM are available at <https://www.iom.int/>.

brought another layer of research, monitoring and policy analysis into the system. The IOM strengthens the overall framing of migration through research and information on the impact of migration in societies, framed through the neutrality of gathering information and descriptive analyses in the UN ecosystem.

The 1990s in Europe brought about the Schengen regulation, promoting free movement within the EU, as well as the establishment of European citizenship as a distinct category. Before 2010, several European states had started to regulate immigration, integration of migrants and their prospective naturalisation by setting up new administrative measures. The practice of testing immigrant's knowledge and language skills, via varying arrangements, became a prominent practice, the most famous cases being the Netherlands, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Germany and Austria (for an recent overview of such cases, see van Oers, 2020; for an analysis of the early emergence, see van Oers et al., 2010). As such, states already had tests for language skills in place, with the United States commonly being known for its citizenship test (the US test was last revised on the initiative of President Trump, effective from 2020). The distinct feature of the European examples was, however, the way debates for the tests, their preparatory materials and courses, and even the tests themselves, employed nationalistic rhetoric and an emphasis on national distinctiveness (Björk, 2014). Researchers have shown that the seemingly reasonable and administrative procedures supported the politics of national sovereignty by the EU member states, which, through these actions, constructed demarcations between their citizens and others (Bassel et al., 2018; Kostakopoulou, 2010). The pro-testing arguments largely saw immigration as a political question for societal integration and, by doing so, highlighted the need for informing immigrants and the potential new citizens of the basic facts and cultural phenomena of the given state. The materials, and indeed the tests themselves, however, ended up constructing national narratives of how the individual states (the ruling governments at the time) regarded themselves as polities.

These practices were already established by 2015 when, gradually, EU leaders further developed European common asylum and migration policies. The arrival of unprecedented numbers of irregular migrants to EU borders in 2015 and the adoption of the Sustainable Development

Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁶ influenced the development of both common European migration policy and the global migration government. While these two occasions represent different cases and processes in the event-history, they are both highly important for the development of migration governance as, not only, an interplay between sovereignty and decentralised power, but also as a question of human rights. Furthermore, both turned out to be influencing factors in the development of the GCM in their own ways—the SDGs as a starting point for managing migration through data and accurate information and 2015 as a motivation for further intensification of international coordination of migration.

Nowadays, the EU has border control mechanisms, agencies and treaties for securing the rights of migrants and agreements with transit countries in place. Its member states are party to this agreement but also have their own regulations and conditions for entry in place. Politically, then, migration for the EU member states is an interplay between national and EU level regulation.⁷ As the case of intensifying immigration measures by increasing administrative tests shows, the need to establish a sovereign display of immigration policy is still high on the state's agenda, even if they facilitate international and EU level treaties on human and fundamental rights.

In the global context, which I here use in reference to the UN led multilateral governance system, migration is subjected to decentralised power, dependent on the support of sovereign states. Because of the inherent tension between the need for sovereign states to have control over their own immigration policy and the need for a decentralised governance of global migration, immigration has proven prone to politicisation in the context of multilateral governance. The centrality of sovereignty in migration politics was also an issue during the drafting of the GCM, where at the last minute, many European countries with a reputation for strict immigration regulation and radical right wing sympathetic governments, withdrew from the process. This left the document

⁶ For an overview, see <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>.

⁷ For an overview of the impact of the Lisbon Treaty on EU migration policy, see Hampshire (2016). For the purposes of this chapter, migration and immigration as political and politicised issues are in focus rather than the institutional setting.

with much less support from EU member states than expected and highlighted the contested nature of migration once more. The GCM, which had not attracted extensive popular attention until the final steps, was subjected to intense politicisation activities, for instance, in Germany, Sweden and Austria (Conrad, 2021). While out of these examples, only Austria refrained from embracing the final draft, which demonstrates how mis-/disinformation campaigns managed to gain momentum from social media to the institutional level (*ibid.*).

The interplay between sovereignty and decentralised power links migration governance to the current discussion on the challenges to the international rule-based system. The functionality and legitimacy of the multilateral system has been discussed for some time now (if it was ever fully agreed on; but for a current review see Copelovitch et al., 2020; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hofmann, 2020; Peters, 2011), and migration is a recurrently contested issue. The degree of national sovereignty is a prominent focal point within the multilateral system and, especially, the radical right populists have played this card intensely within the past decade. Global migration governance seems to be a point of conflict where “governance” (that is, more plural imaginations and forms of organisations) and sovereign states, which still remain subjects of international law, collide. The negotiations for the GCM, therefore, mix the idea of decentralised power and one of the most politicised issues in migration: the control over borders and the right to choose who is allowed to cross over.

Against this background, it is easy to see that there are no straightforward discussions on migration at the global level. The idea of global migration governance as a feasible way of managing migration (for a recent analysis, including an assessment of the impacts of COVID-19, see van Riemsdijk et al., 2021), even the usefulness of the concept of multilateral governance (Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2019), and, for example, the geopolitics affecting migration governance (Collyer, 2016) are contested and discussed by academics. The attempt to bring together UN member states to sign in the GCM also proved problematic, but with the widely signed Agenda 2030 as one of the reference points, and the difficulties of the migrant-receiving counties in controlling irregular migration and its societal and human consequences locally, efforts were made to intensify international coordination. Most notably, it showed an effort in stepping up to do something about migration at the global level. The experience from 10 to 15 years back, during the Global Commission on International

Migration (GCIM; 2003–2005), was that this series of regional consultations—covering an extensive list of migration-related areas, such as, circular migration, educational migrations, diaspora engagement, smuggling and trafficking—had resulted in very little impact at the policy level. The Commission’s call for greater consultation and cooperation at the regional and global level was disparagingly met with the comment “less dramatic conclusions are hard to imagine” (Aleinikoff, 2007, p. 476, cited in Betts & Kainz, 2017).

Positioning of the Approach

My inspirational lens, commonly used in different disciplines, but which in this case is oriented to political science, is one way to approach framing. I resort to the learnings and positioning of the school of thought which builds on conceptual history,⁸ the history of ideas and the rhetorical perspective to conceptual change,⁹ and their increasingly growing number of applications (for an overview of the development of studying political concepts and debates as an international academic field, see Ifversen, 2021).¹⁰ In general, for this approach, concepts and debates as part of political, social and historical developments are analysed in their contexts and understood as tools and resources for political action. New meanings or concepts may have arisen as responses to change which has already occurred but which has not yet been conceptualised. It is also possible that concepts are developed or used in innovative ways to open up new spaces for politicking. This historically oriented research explores the use and meaning of political key concepts, such as *democracy*, *citizen* or *crisis*—such as the famous work of Koselleck and other editors of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (GG, Basic Concepts in History)—but also the wider rhetorical framework in question (especially in the Skinnerian tradition).

⁸ The origins of this is usually attributed to Reinhart Koselleck (2002).

⁹ This is most often in reference to Quentin Skinner’s work (Palonen, 2003; Skinner, 1999, 2002).

¹⁰ There are now established branches for studying the history of political concepts in International Relations (for an introduction to the field, see Kessler, 2021; for an example of an application, see Roshchin, 2017) and European history (with a dedicated publication series, see <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/series/european-conceptual-history>).

As opposed to some previous applications of the conceptual approach (Wiesner et al., 2018), these sources and series of events represent a case, where the power (politics) of rhetoric and how it impacts debates, political developments and even the lives of individuals, is an explicitly stated goal. The distinctiveness of the situation, highlighted in the FRA example, is due to the development of the hybrid media system and the difficulty in gaining control over its potential, often attempted by opposed actors. Embedded in the Skinnerian/Koselleckian approach for analysing politics as constituted through language, I hope to explicate, through the examples, how migration as a political question has been linked with facts and narratives within the past two decades and, more recently, clearly with the fight against disinformation.

While my position draws attention to particular concepts that are singled out from the sources, within the context of this chapter it is essential to build a conceptual map of “disinformation”. It is important to note that the aim here is not to find a perfect definition for disinformation—albeit it is true that, in the EU context, there is a definition adopted by the European Union and the FRA. However, rather, it is to apply the conceptual horizon of *narrative*, *story*, *facts*, *data* and *information*, while anchoring the discussion on disinformation, broadly, to the cases. The conceptual horizon is applied to explain how the claims for accurate data and information, as well as the activity for building up the infrastructure for producing it, are ongoing processes within the multilevel governance system. It also shows how the impact of (in)accurate data and information on public discourses has become an established agenda point in these processes.

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNICATION AND MIGRATION GOVERNANCE: TWO PERSPECTIVES ON ADDRESSING DISINFORMATION

As the framing of this analysis suggests, disinformation as a conceptual object in, and a tool for, migration governance and politics spreads out in multiple directions. The examples below include both states and the general public as audiences. Both of them become engaged in a narrative, recognising the importance of disinformation for human security, and its role in the efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of nationalist politics on diverse polities. The EU and global migration governance levels are

interconnected through institutions, which are concerned with securing and promoting human rights. Simultaneously, they aim at influencing the political elites of states and governments to tackle and disengage from disinformation in their migration politics.

Disinformation in the European Landscape: Strategy and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights

The European Commission has adopted six priorities for 2019–2024, among them being *A Europe fit for the digital age*.¹¹ This priority sets out to construct a recognised and recognisable European model for dealing with, and realising the potential of, the digital transformation that is ongoing globally. This includes a positioning where the impact of emerging technologies should, for example, “encourage the development of trustworthy technologies” and “foster an open and democratic society” (European Commission, 2022).¹² The EU Digital strategy,¹³ in reference to media and digital culture, also includes several EC initiatives to tackle disinformation, including the Code of Practice on Disinformation, the European Digital Media Observatory, the action plan on disinformation, the European Democracy Action Plan, the Communication on “tackling online disinformation: a European approach”, and the COVID-19 monitoring and reporting programme.¹⁴ The first two years of implementing the EU action plan against disinformation were recently reviewed by an independent auditive group, resulting in a set of recommendations to intensify the measures to achieve greater impact (European Court of Auditors, 2021). The activities launched by the EU towards fighting disinformation are in different documents attributed to the conclusions of the European Council, where they addressed “the need to challenge Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns and invited the

¹¹ See European commission 2022: The European Commission priorities, for an overview of the priorities on their website https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024_en.

¹² See the three pillars to support the work in Shaping Europe’s Digital Future https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/shaping-europe-digital-future_en.

¹³ See the overall introduction in EC’s website <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en>.

¹⁴ For an overview, see EC website <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation>.

High Representative, in cooperation with Member States and EU institutions, to prepare by June an action plan on strategic communication” (European Council Conclusions, 19 and 20 June, 2015, 13).¹⁵

Recently, disinformation has been on the active agenda of the EU Agency for fundamental rights. The Agency’s director, Michael O’Flaherty, has taken up the topic, for example, in his vlog about the urgency of the matter.¹⁶ Tackling disinformation is one of the key topics on the Fundamental Rights Forum 2021, an international conference organised by the FRA.¹⁷ The same topic was explored by the network of human rights communicators in June 2021, also organised by the FRA.¹⁸ The Lisbon Treaty (2009)¹⁹ established the role of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. As an organisation engaging in dialogue, not only with EU institutions, but also with civil society organisations, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency is “an independent centre of reference and excellence for promoting and protecting human rights in the EU”.²⁰ FRA was established in 2007 in the Council Regulation 168/2007 and, since then, its position has been established as an actor for reinforcing the role of human rights as part of the EU institutional framework. FRA has a list of key points in their work, with “immigration, integration of migrants, visas, border control and asylum” included.²¹ Others include information society and the right to privacy and private life, and Roma integration and non-discrimination. Essentially, they collect and analyse data, inform policymakers and work with stakeholders in support of implementing the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. It also includes FRANET,²²

¹⁵ see also Action plan against disinformation (2018, p. 2) and the special report evaluating the implementation of the plan, *Disinformation affecting the EU: tackled but not tamed* (2021, p. 2).

¹⁶ See the recording on the FRA website <https://fra.europa.eu/en/video/2021/video-blog-michael-oflaherty-tackling-disinformation>.

¹⁷ <https://fundamentalrightsforum.eu/thematic-strands/>.

¹⁸ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/event/2021/human-rights-communicators-explore-how-tackle-disinformation>.

¹⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12007L%2FTXT>.

²⁰ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/about-fra>.

²¹ https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-eu-rights-agency_en.pdf.

²² For the basic introduction, see FRA’s website <https://fra.europa.eu/en/cooperation/franet>.

a network of research institutions across member states to collect and analyse information on basic rights issues from different countries.

Before addressing disinformation more regularly as a topic-level theme through different forums, the FRA has actively recognised the role of communication and media spaces in shaping narratives on human rights and migration. Especially, since 2017, FRA has put forth a series of efforts to strengthen human rights communication as part of the EU level immigration policy. Through these measures, FRA has aimed at influencing “the public” because, according to the agency, politicians and the media are responsive to public sentiment (FRA, 2017). One of the concrete outputs resulting from these measures is a report and toolkit, which discusses migration and human rights, entitled “10 keys to effectively communicating human rights” (FRA, 2018). The aim of the publication was not only to support human rights defenders and activists, but also to influence the way human rights had come to be seen as something only belonging to the few. Countering the (politically motivated) misconceptions of human rights, FRA’s approach challenges, for example, the academically established phenomenon of *securitisation*. This is a concept describing the act of framing something, for instance immigration, as a question of (national) security, resulting in judging migrants and migration from the perspective of national urgency and threat, while leaving other interpretations sidelined (see Gerard & Pickering, 2014).²³

The toolkit is part of FRA’s work branch support for human right systems and defenders. Contained within this, the ten principles include suggestions for communication such as “tell a human story; trigger people’s core values; and give your message an authentic voice”. Primarily directed at a specific audience of media professionals, FRA has recently (2020) published the “E-Media Toolkit on Migration—Trainer’s Manual”²⁴ resource online. According to FRA, this is a “web-based capacity-building platform, aimed mainly at those covering migration news to be later disseminated or published by media organisations or any other online platform as news” (FRA, 2020). As a long-term motivation, it is stated to be “the starting point of a broader project on how to cover news while maintaining respect for diversity and human rights” (ibid.).

²³ For an overview of the theory, see Rushton (2018).

²⁴ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/e-media-toolkit-migration-trainers-manual>.

The main rationale is to shift news coverage from framing migrants and migration as a social and political problem to emphasising diversity and respect for human rights. The explicit reference point is the 2015 immigration to Europe and the examples in the toolkit cover the French and the UK examples of reporting the situation (Ibid.).

Accurate Data for a Well-Informed Public Discourse: The UN Global Compact for a Safe and Orderly Migration

In October 2020, the FRA director, Michael O’Flaherty, gave a keynote speech for the Annual Conference of the Geneva Human Rights Platform entitled “Connectivity between regional and global human rights mechanisms”.²⁵ The keynote was about the interconnections between the global and regional human rights systems and included suggestions for future cooperation. In his speech, O’Flaherty, for example, pointed out that the regional European system could strengthen its discursive alignment with the UN bodies by better linking the FRA’s communication and conceptualisation with the reports of the Special Rapporteur’s. Furthermore, he mentioned the toolkit for public officers at all levels of governance, composed with the FRA in the lead, which is available on their website.²⁶ The toolkit brings together data and information from different human rights monitoring mechanisms and has been developed in cooperation with the UN, the Council of Europe, and other EU entities. The development has also included stakeholder engagement and gathering expert insights from academics in the field. The toolkit has been launched and is now acronymed ERFIS²⁷ (EU Fundamental rights information system). As the main group of target users are public officers, the toolkit is also stated to help the EU member states by having more informed discussions and shared understanding of human rights issues and situations globally. Working directly with states is one of the suggested future courses of action O’Flaherty points to in his speech.

While the FRA is looking to strengthen the cooperation of human rights advocates on the European and global level, the global migration

²⁵ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/video/2020/virtual-key-note-address-fra-director-2020-annual-conference-geneva-human-rights>.

²⁶ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/project/2018/eu-fundamental-rights-information-system>.

²⁷ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/databases/efris/>.

governance is also currently being framed through the SDG-based Global Compacts. The Global Compact on Refugees²⁸ focuses on the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, whereas the GCM covers “all aspects of migration”. There were difference in how these were developed—even though they were the result of the so-called New York Declaration (UN General Assembly, 2016)—as the GCM process was led by the states while the GCR was led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In public discourses, the concepts regarding migration can be easily muddled, used without paying attention to accurate expression and also have different political connotations. However, the examples given here concern the implications of migration and immigration in general, without specific references to particular forms of migration or status (e.g. asylum seekers, refugees, migration, emigration and immigration).

The GCM does not explicitly use the concept of disinformation, but continues to address the role of accurate information, data and facts in migration governance, as emphasised in the SDGs. The GCM (United Nations General Assembly, 2018a, 2018b, A/RES/73/195) includes a total of 23 objectives, which deal with the variety of dimensions of migration, many of which feature and emphasise the need to generate, and utilise, accurate and sufficient data and information to steer global migration. For example, the first outlined objective is to “collect and utilise accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies” (p. 7/36):

We commit to strengthen the global evidence base on international migration by improving and investing in the collection, analysis and dissemination of accurate, reliable, comparable data, disaggregated by sex, age, migration status and other characteristics relevant in national contexts, while upholding the right to privacy under international human rights law and protecting personal data. *We further commit to ensure this data fosters research, guides coherent and evidence-based policy-making and well-informed public discourse*, and allows for effective monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of commitments over time. (emphasis added)

²⁸ The document is available at <https://www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>.

Furthermore, the third objective is to “provide accurate and timely information at all stages of migration”, which refers to the state’s role as a responsible provider of information in all their activities, for instance, “for and between States, communities and migrants at all stages of migration” (p. 10). Objective seventeen, in turn, explicitly aims to “eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration” (GCM, p. 25). The focus of this objective includes communities across all phases of migration processes, the political and societal elites and the media and focuses on eliminating non-discrimination practices and xenophobia, while supporting and promoting positive framing of migration and the contribution of migrants. In support of GCM’s focus on accurate data and information, migration indicators were also put in place, reported on by IOM. They are to support the data gathering and information function of GCM and contribute to strengthening channels and infrastructure for the data (IOM, 2018). The wordings and mechanisms emphasise the need for a shared understanding of the situational analysis of migration and the responsibility of states to support this proactively.

Because of the context of the formation of GCM, the need for global coordination of migration was, for the process stated, a key aim regardless of the cause of mobility. One key approach in migration debates since the signing of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 has been to claim for a holistic view on migration—including work-based mobility, as well as involuntary displacement—emphasising the neutrality of the phenomenon, as such, and respect for the human rights of all persons with migrant background regardless of their migration status, or approaches to integration. In GCM, this is, for example, expressed as a “360-degree vision on international migration” (UN General Assembly, 2018a, p. 4/36). It stresses the responsibilities of the states to offer protection to those in need and to appreciate the input of voluntary migrants to the societies.

The road towards the signing of the Compact turned out to be a dissolving one from the EU perspective. This was considered a surprise by many because of the active engagement of the EU in the process from early stages (Badell, 2020). In the case of GCM, there was hope, to some extent, that with the careful drafting of the document, the EU member states could find an agreement on migration. Yet, with the Orbán Regime in Hungary and the right wing populist regime in Austria leading the exit, this turned out to be wishful thinking. The contribution of the

EU member states in the process has been covered by several researchers, who have pointed out the contested nature of migration as a political issue and the EU's failed attempt to depoliticise it (for a recent overview, see Badell, 2020). The plausible-sounding aim of the EU to depoliticise migration governance is another way of describing work that aims at reframing and restructuring argumentation. There are 23 objectives in the document altogether, with the first three focusing on gathering information and accurate data, supporting people's possibilities to stay in their homelands, and providing accurate and timely information at all stages of the process. This emphasises the overriding tone on management, control and functional processes. The introductory text of GCM²⁹ states that the document is "designed to:

- support international cooperation on the governance of international migration;
- provide *a comprehensive menu of options for states from which they can select policy options* to address some of the most pressing issues around international migration; and
- *give states the space and flexibility* to pursue implementation based on their own migration realities and capacities (emphases added).

Conceptualising the GCM as "providing a menu" or "giving the states flexibility to pursue implementation" displays the political and diplomatic reality of the negotiations and the outcome. Considering the United States leads the front of non-signers by stating that the document undermines their sovereignty and was able to persuade some of the EU member states to do the same, one is left wondering what kind of result would be acceptable for these regimes if it is not the menu of flexibility in policy options. Pécoud (2021) has pointed out, however, that because of the difficulty of migration as a political issue, the document is left with internal contradictions, and indeed a depoliticised tone. It seems that this was not, after all, enough, at least not in the political climate of the time.

²⁹ <https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration>.

CONCLUSION: SOVEREIGNTY AND TACKLING DISINFORMATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND MIGRATION AGENDAS

After some years since 2015 or the publication of GCM, and with the current emphasis of the FRA in choice of topics for events, it is perhaps safe to say that there is an ongoing and systematic push to engage in the battle over narratives, images and framing debates on political key questions. Migration as a multidimensional phenomenon can feature as a driver, consequence, or a policy context, in relation to most ongoing global trends, such as societal impact of new technologies or the environmental crisis. Most importantly, of course, it has direct implications for the lives of many, and to political and social institutions in general. Despite the highly complex, influential and developed system of multilayered governance and the highly globalised world, sovereign states still matter in world politics. They form the core unit of international law, constitute the EU through cooperation and political processes and have considerable power over their immigration policy, with the potential successes and failures of these efforts having an impact on multilevel politics. In his opening speech in June 2021, at the annual Human Rights Communicators Network meeting, O’Flaherty discussed seven distinct points for addressing human rights. He noted that the FRA has made efforts to explicate the link between disinformation and ways to communicate better when it comes to human rights issues—a point that, he notes, originally led to the establishing of the network (point 6). He also points to the EU Digital Services Act (5) and the role of FRA itself as an agency gathering and upholding a significant database on human rights related issues.³⁰ In doing so, he refers explicitly to the tension between disinformation and free speech when discussing the former in the human rights context. If the joint efforts of the UN and EU level human rights actors continue to foster the discourse on data, accurate information and positive stories as building blocks for public discourses and international cooperation, it has the potential to support policies on tackling disinformation.

It is clear, however, that the strong element of sovereignty, embedded in migration as a political issue, will continue to play a role in any efforts for international migration governance. Migration remains a constantly

³⁰ See the speech on the conference website <https://fra.europa.eu/en/speech/2021/how-tackle-disinformation>.

contested issue, always there to be politicised in different contexts. Yet, addressing the different sites for framing migration and human rights, also as part of the hybrid media system, is a way of highlighting new sites and opportunities for politicising, depoliticising and framing the issue. This is an example of using the logic of politics-as-sphere type of conceptualisation, where forums and infrastructures work as spaces for politics-as-activity (e.g. agenda setting, politicking within certain limits, etc.). Using Palonen's polit-vocabulary, it could be argued that governance could perhaps be used to limit politicking. How the hybrid communications channels fit into this thinking is an interesting thought experiment. It is also interesting to see who exactly has agency there, as "official" communication is usually reactionary and slow. The FRA examples, at least, put individuals and media professionals into focus and provide them with counter-arguments/narratives to use in everyday life.

The materials here are intended by the drafters to serve as a wide frame of reference, potentially encircling audiences and agencies across societal and political sectors. In this way, they function as something that could be communicated as shared understandings, but leave many doors open for contextually sensitive applications, for instance, further possibilities to use political rhetoric and concepts in innovative ways. It remains to be seen if these efforts have any impact on states' rhetoric, political debates and policies in the aftermath of the recent conflicts.

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Shedding Light on People's Social Media Concerns Through Political Party Preference, Media Trust, and Immigration Attitudes

Sanna Malinen, Aki Koivula, Teo Keipi, and Arttu Saarinen

INTRODUCTION

Social media have brought many positive things to political life: they facilitate the expression of opinions, set a lower threshold for political participation, change internal logics of political movements, and expand people's information resources (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). However, there is a darker side of online participation, as social media are known to facilitate the spread of misinformation, targeted attacks in the form of hate speech, affective polarisation, and political disagreement

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(Barnidge, 2017; Boutyline & Willer, 2017; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Keipi et al., 2017).

Hybrid is the best word to describe the twenty-first century media system. Information is consumed, circulated, and interacted with in many different public arenas by multiple actors' agenda setters (Chadwick, 2013). This means that traditional elite-driven media news production has become challenged by horizontal online political communication actors, such as fake news sites (Hatakka, 2019). The spread of fake news has recently gained a great deal of attention in public discussion due to its highly partisan nature and growth in conjunction with the popularity of social media (Kahan, 2017; Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). Internet-mediated communication and social media have also offered new information platforms for those political ideologies that are not covered by traditional media. As presented in a study from Sweden, recently anti-immigration and racist views have become prevalent in social media discussions and people spread this type of content either intentionally or without checking its reliability (Ekman, 2019). Therefore, social media companies have been accused of enabling the massive spread of problematic content. Some features of platform infrastructure, particularly their vague policies, decontextualised content moderation system, and the algorithmic content curation that promotes content that attracts reactions in users, are driving the circulation of problematic content (Ekman, 2019; Nikunen, 2018).

Misinformation has become so widespread in the online context that the World Economic Forum (2014; Del Vicario et al., 2016) has listed it as one of the main threats to society. Because the online social media environment lacks third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgement on news content (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), users have direct access to all manner of information and peer networks that become primary sources of news content. When the number of relevant information sources decreases, speculation, rumours, and mistrust are likely to flourish (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). At worst, this may lead to reinforcement of confirmation biases, segregation, and polarisation at the expense of the quality of information (Del Vicario et al., 2016). Misinformation and other problematic content tend to spread quickly online, at a pace faster than accurate information, due to social media users preferring to share novel and emotionally triggering content, which they assume will interest their peers (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Affective factors play a large role in the circulation of misinformation and rumours; when they trigger

feelings such as fear or anger, they are far more likely to be circulated (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

As daily life continues to be mediated by social media, the links to political ideology become highly relevant in better understanding of how various population groups view information, trust, and expression. Whereas researchers have extensively examined the links between political ideology, fake news, and media trust in the United States, Finland provides a valuable contrast as a multiparty system in a mature information society. With this population-wide study, we provide a new viewpoint on people's social media concerns through media trust, political ideology, and immigration attitudes.

This chapter investigates how three social-media-related concerns addressing misinformation and disinformation are explained by political party preferences, media trust, and immigration attitudes. We state two research questions:

1. How is political party preference associated with social-media-related concerns?
2. To what extent are media trust and immigration attitudes related to party differences when assessing attitudes towards social-media-related concerns?

The chapter is structured as follows: first, we introduce the specific characteristics of the changing media landscape, then second, we focus on the relationship between Finnish political parties and media. Finally, we present our empirical research design including data, methods, results, and discussion.

HATE SPEECH, FAKE NEWS, AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Online media have facilitated democracy and deliberative participation by providing new and accessible platforms for political discussion and information consumption (Papacharissi, 2004; Santana, 2014). However, an abundance of evidence shows that in the online context, the tone of discussions can quickly turn uncivil and aggressive. This has been explained by anonymity (Santana, 2014), the absence of face-to-face contact (Papacharissi, 2004), infrequent and indirect comments (Coe et al., 2014), or social media users' more extensive and ideologically

diverse networks compared to nonusers (Barnidge, 2017). Overall, hateful or disrespectful tones can weaken the quality of political discussion online, and, accordingly, harm democracy (Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Papacharissi, 2004).

The term *fake news*, which is generally used to denote fabricated news stories purporting to be accurate, surfaced in 2016 and was frequently used during the Brexit vote and the American presidential election. Unlike the term *misinformation*, fake news refers to false information, which is created and spread deliberately and disguised as credible news for political or financial gain (Shin & Thorson, 2017; Silverman, 2017; Vargo et al., 2017). The societal consequences of fake news and misinformation have not yet been extensively studied, but they may affect voting decisions and increase mistrust towards governments (Einstein & Glick, 2015; Weeks & Garrett, 2014). Fake news and partisan media seem to be focused on themes such as anti-immigration, international relations, and religion, which are also themes highlighted by populist parties. Along with their popularity, fake news sites also influence traditional media because they can push their topics into the broader news media (Vargo et al., 2017). For example, the most significant Finnish fake media actor MV-journal (currently UMV-journal) has focused mostly on spreading anti-immigration views. Similarly, to many other anti-immigration actors on social media, it circulates mainstream news about immigration with a focus on crime or other negative topics (Ekman, 2019).

In the contemporary public discussion about fake news and misinformation, tension between demands for freedom of speech and control of inappropriate content—such as hate speech—is ongoing. It can even be said that in the current political climate within Finland—the context of this study—the concept of “freedom of speech” has to some extent become politicised as it is often applied to justify sharp criticism on immigration or even racist slander. As noted by Pöyhtäri et al. (2013), the recent discussion around hate speech has been somewhat confusing because it mixes up illegal comments that are likely to lead to punishment, with mere inappropriate behaviour.

“Hate speech” is a broad term used to denote negative and harmful tones of discussion. However, the conception of what is hateful has remained highly controversial. In the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action, hate speech is defined as:

any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. (2019)

Notably, hate speech is typically aimed at silencing people, for instance, preventing professional journalists and experts from doing their work (Pöyhtäri et al., 2013). Given these definitions, hate speech presents a challenging dilemma in terms of what is acceptable under freedom of expression and what is not.

Current research has shown that populist parties benefit more from social media than other political actors (Zhuravskaya et al., 2019). For example, it is widely acknowledged that populist parties use social media and alternative information as a strategy to question mainstream policies by proposing politically charged alternatives instead of established ones (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). In the populist view, society is typically divided into two antagonistic groups (i.e. ordinary people and the elite), the first group being glorified and the second attacked (Ernst et al., 2019; Mény & Surel, 2002). According to Engesser et al. (2016), in addition to emphasising the sovereignty of the people and attacking elites, populist communication is characterised by ostracising “others” and invoking the “heartland”. Linked to this theme, populist party supporters have been shown to consider journalists as part of the liberal elite (Wodak, 2015).

Populist communication strategy seems to be particularly successful on social media: research shows that people tend to evaluate populist politicians as more authentic than traditional politicians (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Participatory media enables a close and direct connection with the audience, helps to tailor their message to the target group, and fosters feelings of belongingness (Ernst et al., 2017, 2019). Furthermore, Enli and Rosenberg (2018) argued that typical characteristics of populist strategy (i.e. antielitism, spontaneity, and outspokenness) are also strategies that can be used for constructing authenticity. As such, social media are a valuable asset that helps to facilitate a populist communication style.

When traditional media are critical towards populist politics, the countermedia are able to offer a public platform for sharing alternative or even fabricated information. Countermedia, often referred to as alternative media, have played a significant role in the mobilisation of

anti-immigration movements and views of the right-wing populist party (i.e. the Finns Party [FP]) in Finland. The content on Finnish counter-media sites has proliferated, with the sites growing in popularity during the autumn 2015 immigration wave in Europe. In general, countermedia are not always committed to certain political ideologies, but their main aim is typically to make a clear distinction between the elite and the general population, while also opposing the agenda of this elite group (Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

Freedom of expression online is a double-edged sword, because it enables new forms of free expression, but also fosters the sharing of content that may be inaccurate or even democratically damaging in terms of adding to harmful polarisation. Furthermore, political ideologies differ in how they relate to the spread of fake news on social media. During the 2016 election in the United States, 62% of adults looked to social media for their news (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016), and the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on social media than the most popular mainstream news stories (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Silverman, 2017). In terms of the left–right spectrum in the United States, the most popular fake news stories tended to favour conservatives rather than liberals (Silverman, 2017). Some previous findings on people who share fake news confirm that very conservative and older users (over 65 years) are the most likely to spread content referred to as fake news on Facebook (Guess et al., 2019).

In the United States, trust in the mainstream media has continued to decline as accurate and fair reporting is called into question. The decline since 2015 has been particularly steep among Republicans (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In general, perceived trust in media is connected to people's media consumption patterns, so that those who experience less trust in media tend to have more diverse media consumption patterns and use alternative information sources (Jackob, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

FINNISH MEDIA SYSTEM AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Finland is an interesting case for studying questions of media trust, freedom of expression, and fake news for several reasons. First, in Finland, the role of government has been influential in media and news production. The national broadcast company Yleisradio has been dominant in news production, and consumers have not had many alternatives to it

until recently. As such, the government has been able to affect the presenting of news topics and viewpoints to a relatively high degree.

Second, because broadcast media has been somewhat centralised and run by national companies in Finland, alternative and countermedia are a new phenomenon and the majority of people are still unfamiliar with them. For instance, the most famous Finnish countermedia site was established in 2014, whereas the US media landscape is more diverse than in Finland, with alternative media having existed since the 1960s.

Third, in a global comparison, Finnish people's trust in government and institutional authorities has been generally strong (Kouvo, 2014; OECD, 2021). In comparison with the United States—where institutional trust is weaker and supervisory control of freedom of expression is not accepted—the demand for alternative, non-institutional media choices is weaker. However, as Bennett and Livingston (2018) argued, there has been a global breakdown of trust in democratic institutions of press and politics, which is likely to help explain the emergence of extensive misinformation. Many reports and polls (e.g. OECD, 2017) have confirmed this trend of decreasing confidence levels across Western countries during past years.

Drawing from Hallin and Mancini's (2004) media system theory, the Finnish media system is classified as a democratic corporatist model, which is characterised by, for example, substantial professionalisation, institutionalised self-regulation and an active role of the state. Recent survey research from Finland confirms that people's trust in established national broadcast news media is still high, whereas so-called countermedia is the least trusted (Sivonen & Saarinen, 2018). An international comparison of 36 countries by Reuters Digital Institute revealed that in Finland the proportion of those who trust in news and media organisations is similarly the largest (Newman et al., 2017). According to the same report, distrust in the media seems to be connected to perceived political bias, which is most prevalent in countries with high levels of political polarisation, such as the United States, Italy, and Hungary.

Furthermore, the Finnish multiparty system provides a different environment for political polarisation compared to the two-party system of the United States. In Finland, the emergence of current countermedia sites is closely connected to the rise of the anti-immigration movement. As Ylä-Anttila (2018) has stated, the Finnish right-wing countermedia combines “facts with fiction and rumors, sometimes intentionally blurring the lines or spreading outright lies, most often cherry-picking, coloring,

and framing information to promote an anti-immigrant agenda". Finnish countermedia does not necessarily disseminate fabricated stories but instead typically takes news stories from other media sources and reframes them to fit a more suitable agenda (Haasio et al., 2017). Typically, countermedia actors utilise material provided by their readers and in return, the readers share the content produced by anti-immigration websites through their own social media accounts (Ekman, 2019). As argued by Nielsen and Graves (2017), the popularity of fake news is only partly about fabricated news reports and much more about a profound discontent with the news media, including politics and media platforms. Using this strategy, countermedia actors exploit their readers' distrust towards mainstream media, particularly regarding news that reports about immigration issues (Ekman, 2019).

Because challenging the political elite and mainstream media are an integral part of today's populism, countermedia should be understood as offering alternative explanations that challenge the mainstream, providing political fuel for those seeking it (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). A recent study from Finland confirms that lack of trust in traditional media does play a role in the consumption of countermedia. According to Noppari et al. (2019), using a populist countermedia site is motivated by scepticism and frustration. Users typically reported deep distrust in society and expressed their discontent with discussion that dominates the public sphere, with them turning to countermedia to find alternative narratives (Noppari et al., 2019). Hence, there seems to be a connection between having a high distrust, negative attitudes towards immigration issues, and the use of alternative news outlets on social media.

The members and the supporters of the populist right-wing party (i.e. the Finns Party [FP]) are relatively confident about the countermedia, whereas they are less trusting of traditional news media as compared to other parties (Koivula, Saarinen & Koironen, 2016; Sivonen & Saarinen, 2018). The supporters of the Finns party are also more critical towards immigration issues and are active on social media (Koironen et al., 2020; Ylä-Anttila, 2020).

The liberal environmental party Green League (GL) has been the clearest contrast to the Finns Party. Green League members and supporters are highly confident in traditional media; whereas members of the four other parliamentary parties are fairly or reasonably confident

in traditional media¹ (Koivula et al., 2016; Sivonen & Saarinen, 2018). The four other parties are the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP), the National Coalition Party (NCP), the Centre Party of Finland (CPF), and the Left Alliance (LA). Before the rise of the Finns Party in 2011, the right-wing NCP, the SDP, and the agrarian CPF were the biggest parties for more than three decades, leaving a significant mark on the Finnish political system. As these new parties—the Finns and the Green League—have diverged from the traditional left–right spectrum, the Left Alliance has also developed even more strongly from a traditional working-class party into a so-called new left party. Nowadays, the Left Alliance members and supporters are more likely to be highly educated, young, and women (Koivula, 2019).

METHOD

Participants

Our analyses are based on survey data that included 3724 respondents. The data were collected in a two-part process. We obtained 2452 responses during the first part which was distributed by mail to a simple random sample of 18- to 74-year-old Finnish speakers (8000 total), which amounted to a 31% response rate. The data were improved with 1254 volunteer respondents (also aged 18–74) from a nationally representative online panel that a market-research company administered.

Detailed information on the data suggested that the final sample generally represented Finnish citizens as a group, although the oldest users and women were slightly overrepresented (Sivonen et al., 2018). We handled the age and gender distribution bias by using a poststratification weighting to balance the sample's distributions to correspond with the official population distribution of Finnish citizens according to Official Statistics of Finland (Sivonen et al., 2018).

¹ The Finnish parliament consists of nine parties. We do not have the survey data from the Christian Democrats, Movement Now and the Swedish people's Party. These three parties are the smallest in the Finnish parliament.

Measures

We asked the respondents about their concerns and opinions on social media in terms of three topics: the spread of fake news, freedom of expression, and monitoring of discussion. They were asked to rate the statements using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = *completely disagree* to 5 = *completely agree*. Table 10.1 presents the initial statements with the response scale.

The descriptive information of response distribution indicates that measures are nonlinearly distributed and there are relatively few *completely disagree* responses. To have a meaningful number of observations for multivariable analyses, we recoded the variables into three categories by combining responses 1–2 into Category 1 labelled as *Disagree* and responses 4–5 into Category 3 labelled as *Agree*.

Our primary independent variable is a measure of political party preference (i.e. the political party that the respondents felt most closely matched their beliefs). In the analyses, we mainly focused on the six largest parties in the Finnish parliament. Due to a lack of data, the supporters of other parliamentary parties—the Swedish People’s Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Blue Reform—were grouped with other minor parties in the Other category. We also grouped those who did not prefer any party in the None category.

Table 10.1 The descriptive information of dependent variables

<i>Statement</i>	<i>“I am concerned with the spread of fake news on social media”</i>	<i>“Users can freely express their opinions on social media”</i>	<i>“Social media discussions should be more monitored due to hateful and attacking tendencies”</i>
Responses %			
Completely disagree	4.1	9.2	5.5
Disagree	6.1	17.1	8.3
Neither disagree or agree	18.3	30.9	26.6
Agree	33.7	32.7	30.9
Completely agree	37.8	10.2	28.8
<i>N</i>	3650	3634	3642

As for the second independent variable, we used trust in the traditional news media. The initial question was, “How trustworthy do you consider the following” with the scale ranging from 1 = *not trustworthy at all* to 5 = *very trustworthy*. We measured attitudes towards immigration with an item that asks respondents, “How do you relate to increasing immigration” with the scale being 0 = “Very negatively” to 10 = “Very positively”.

Controlling for the effect of sociodemographic variables, we used the respondents’ ages asked via an open-ended question in which the respondents reported their year of birth. We categorised the respondents into three educational classes. The categorisations and descriptive statistics of the applied independent variables are shown in Table 10.2.

Table 10.2 The descriptive statistics for independent variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Party preferences				
CPF	436	12.0		
FP	217	6.0		
NCP	662	18.2		
SDP	523	14.4		
GL	510	14.0		
LA	242	6.7		
Oth	244	6.7		
NA	799	22.0		
Media trust				
Trust in traditional news media	3684		3.7	0.9
Immigration attitudes				
Attitudes towards increasing immigration	3687		4.1	2.6
Age	3711		51.5	15.9
Education				
Primary	456	15.6		
Secondary	1931	53.2		
Tertiary (at least)	1245	34.3		
Gender				
Man	1852	50.0		
Woman	1854	50.0		

Analysis Strategy

We began the analysis by assessing the association between political party preference and the dependent variables. Second, we evaluated whether media trust and immigration attitudes were associated with the dependent variables. Finally, we used decomposition analysis to estimate how media trust and immigration attitudes confound party differences.

Our multivariable method is a multinomial logistic regression analysis that was performed with Stata 16.1. We present the results as average marginal effects. In the decomposition analysis, the method developed by Karlson, Holm, and Breen (hereinafter KHB) was used to obtain the confounding effects of media trust robustly with the nonlinear dependent variables (Breen et al., 2013). We generally hold the supporters of the populist party (the FP) as a reference category. In this way, we were able to evaluate the extent to which supporting the traditional major parties or other parties was related to participants' views of social-media-related questions, as compared to supporting the FP.

RESULTS

First, we analysed how political party preference is associated with respondents' views on the spread of fake news, freedom of expression, and the monitoring of discussion in social media. The results of party differences are presented in Fig. 10.1.

As expected, political preference was associated with social media concerns: the supporters of the Finns Party especially stood out in the comparison as their views differ significantly from those of other parties' supporters. The Finns Party supporters agreed the least with all three statements, which shows that they are most sceptical about freedom of expression in social media and least interested in monitoring discussions in social media due to hateful and attacking tendencies. In addition, they were the least worried about the spread of fake news. We also found that supporters of the Green League and the Left Alliance were most worried about fake news and, accordingly, most positive about content moderation on social media.

The first results of multinomial logistic models are presented in the columns in Table 10.3. Here, the average marginal effects describe the differences in the probability of obtaining a value of 3 (i.e. one agrees with the statement given). The results shown in the columns headed

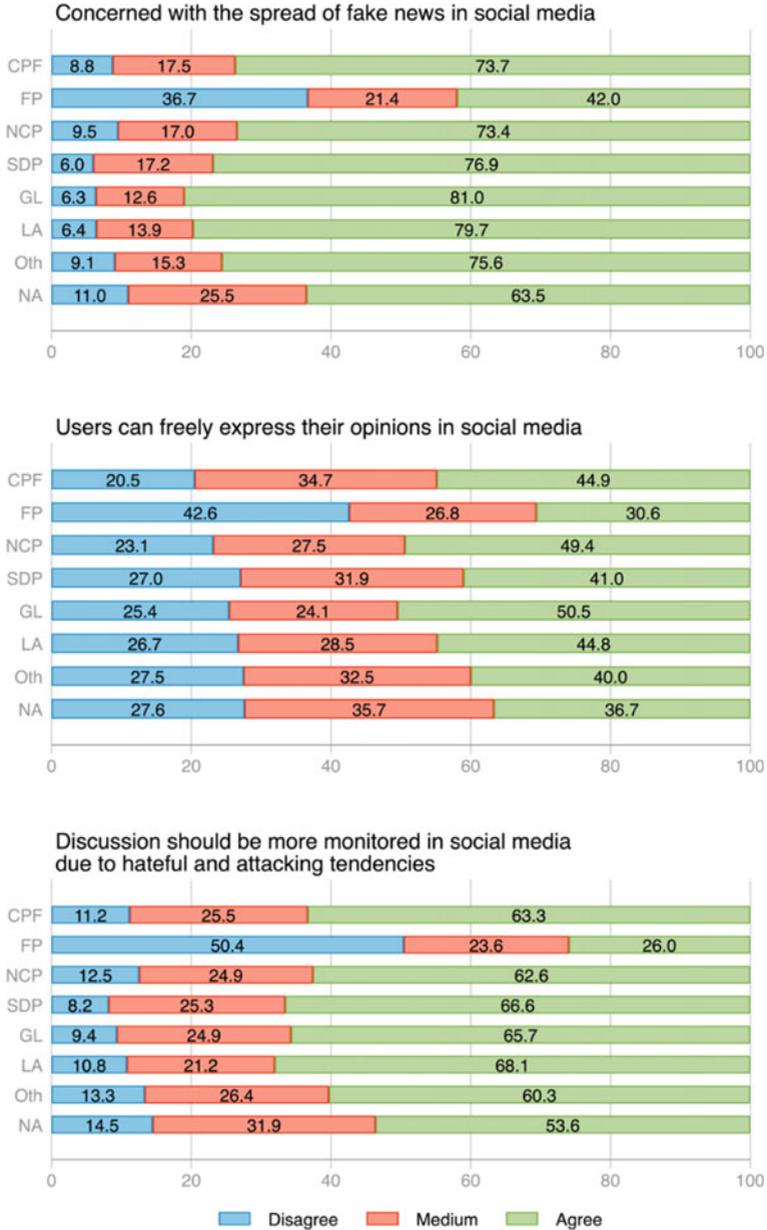


Fig. 10.1 Social media concerns according to party preference

M1 indicates that supporters of other parties differ significantly from the supporters of the Finns Party, even taking into account the demographic background factors of the respondents.

Our next task was to assess how media trust and immigration attitudes were related to the dependent variables. First, we evaluated the direct

Table 10.3 Predicting social media concerns by political party preference, trust in traditional news media and immigration attitudes using average marginal effects from the multinomial logistic regression models

<i>Probability to agree that:</i>	<i>Concerned with the spread of fake news on social media</i>		<i>Users can freely express their opinions on social media</i>		<i>Discussion should be more monitored on social media due to hateful and attacking tendencies</i>	
	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>
<i>Party preference:</i>						
FP (reference)						
CPF	0.29** (0.04)	0.21** (0.05)	0.23** (0.04)	0.15** (0.05)	0.30** (0.04)	0.21** (0.05)
NCP	0.27** (0.04)	0.18** (0.04)	0.25** (0.04)	0.16** (0.04)	0.29** (0.04)	0.19** (0.05)
SDP	0.31** (0.04)	0.22** (0.05)	0.21** (0.04)	0.11* (0.05)	0.31** (0.04)	0.21** (0.05)
GL	0.37** (0.04)	0.29** (0.05)	0.25** (0.04)	0.14** (0.05)	0.35** (0.04)	0.25** (0.05)
LA	0.39** (0.05)	0.31** (0.05)	0.19** (0.05)	0.11* (0.05)	0.36** (0.05)	0.27** (0.05)
OT	0.29** (0.05)	0.24** (0.05)	0.14** (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)	0.26** (0.05)	0.20** (0.05)
NA	0.20** (0.04)	0.13** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.22** (0.04)	0.14** (0.04)
Trust in traditional news media		0.04** (0.001)		0.08** (0.001)		0.08** (0.001)
Attitudes towards increasing immigration		0.02** (0.004)		0.008* (0.003)		0.01** (0.004)
Observations	3478	3467	3473			

Note Average marginal effects with standard errors (in parentheses). Models adjusted with age, gender, and education

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

associations of media trust and immigration attitudes with the party preference by adding the trust and immigration variables to the previously constructed models. The new models are presented the columns headed M2 in Table 10.3. Based on the analysis, media trust and immigration attitudes had a very strong association with all dependent variables.

The higher the media trust and the more positive immigration attitudes were the more likely one was to be concerned about the spread of fake news on social media. Similarly, those with high trust in traditional media and positive attitudes towards immigration were also likely to feel that users can freely express their opinions on social media. It also appeared that high trust in traditional media and positive immigration attitudes sharply increases the likelihood of the opinion that hateful and attacking discussions should be monitored on social media.

Finally, we confirmed how media trust and immigration attitudes contributed to the differences between the parties by using the KHB method. In this case, we decomposed the relationships between political party preference and the dependent variables according to trust in traditional news media and immigration attitudes. The results of the decomposition analysis are presented in Table 10.4. The indirect effects of political party preferences via media trust and immigration attitudes are presented as the logit coefficients. The indirect percentages display the proportions of both variables explained from the total effects of political party preferences on the dependent variables.

The results suggest that trust in traditional media and immigration attitudes significantly contributes to differences between the populists' (i.e. FP) and other-party supporters' views on the spread of fake news, freedom of opinion, and monitoring discussion on social media. In terms of the spread of fake news, media trust explained 15–26% of the differences between the FP and others. The confounding effect of immigration attitudes was even stronger, as it explained 20–28% of the party differences. However, it is noteworthy that party differences remained significant even after controlling for media trust and immigration attitudes.

When it comes to freedom of expression, the effect of media trust was very strong on party differences, as it explained 26.1–39.5% of the party differences. Immigration attitudes were also related to differences between parties, explaining 12–25% of them. The results showed that after taking into account the total effect of immigration attitudes and media trust, the supporters of FP would no longer differ statistically significantly from the supporters of LA.

Table 10.4 The decomposition of relationships between political party preference and social media concerns according to trust in traditional news media and immigration attitudes

	<i>CPF</i>	<i>NCP</i>	<i>SDP</i>	<i>GL</i>	<i>LA</i>	<i>OT</i>	<i>NA</i>
Dependent: Concerned with the spread of fake news on social media							
Direct effect of party	1.95**	1.69**	2.17**	2.35**	2.47**	1.85**	1.56**
	(0.27)	(0.24)	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.35)	(0.31)	(0.22)
Total effect of party	1.17**	0.78**	1.26**	1.22**	1.42**	1.20**	0.89**
	(0.27)	(0.25)	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.35)	(0.30)	(0.22)
Indirect effect of party	0.78**	0.91**	0.91**	1.13**	1.04**	0.65**	0.67**
via:	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.13)
media trust (%)	19.8	26.4	21.0	16.1	16.1	15.1	21.3
immigration attitudes (%)	20.8	27.5	20.7	27.4	26.2	20.0	22.4
Users can freely express their opinions on social media							
Direct effect of party	1.62**	1.56**	1.31**	1.39**	1.29**	1.04**	1.00**
	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.25)	(0.26)	(0.21)
Total effect of party	1.00**	0.83**	0.57*	0.53*	0.52	0.55*	0.45*
	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.26)	(0.27)	(0.22)
Indirect effect of party	0.63**	0.74**	0.74**	0.86**	0.77**	0.48**	0.54**
via:	(0.13)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.13)
media trust (%)	26.1	32.5	39.4	39.5	34.9	29.7	37.6
immigration attitudes (%)	12.3	14.6	16.7	22.5	24.5	17.2	17.0
Discussion should be increasingly monitored on social media due to hateful and attacking tendencies							
Direct effect	2.29**	2.13**	2.46**	2.68**	2.53**	2.01**	1.90**
	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.31)	(0.29)	(0.22)
Total effect	1.45**	1.12**	1.46**	1.50**	1.48**	1.32**	1.16**
	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.32)	(0.29)	(0.23)
Indirect effect	0.85**	1.00**	1.00**	1.18**	1.05**	0.68**	0.75**
via:	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.17)	(0.17)
media trust (%)	25.0	32.3	28.4	27.9	24.2	21.6	26.7
immigration attitudes (%)	12.0	14.9	12.4	16.3	17.4	12.5	12.4

Note Multinomial logistic regressions conducted by the KHB method. Reference party: FP. Logit coefficients for outcome “Agree” (Base outcome “Disagree”) with standard errors (in parentheses) and statistical significances (** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$)

Finally, trust in traditional media explained 21.6–32.3% of party differences when analysing respondents' views on social media monitoring due to hateful and attacking tendencies. Here, we also found that immigration attitudes were related to the party supporters' views by explaining 12–17.4% of party differences. The total effects showed that differences between parties remained significant even after considering the relatively high effect of media trust and immigration attitudes.

DISCUSSION

The main goal of this chapter was to investigate how three social-media-related concerns addressing misinformation and disinformation are explained by political party preferences, media trust, and immigration attitudes. Furthermore, we considered how respondents' demographic backgrounds associate with these concerns and whether media trust and immigration attitudes explain the party differences in views of social media concerns related to fake news, freedom of expression, and monitoring of social media discussion.

The results confirm that the supporters of the populist party, the FP, clearly stand out from other parties. They are particularly sceptical that social media enable freedom of expression and the least concerned about the spread of fake news. They were also strongly against monitoring social media discussions. Our findings underline that the supporters of populism are characterised by an active questioning of established media institutions.

Our results also suggest that media trust and immigration attitudes are highly related to social media concerns in a hybrid media context. First, we found that the higher the media trust and the more positive the attitudes towards immigration, the more likely one was to be concerned about the spread of fake news on social media, think that people can freely express their opinions on social media, and experience that hateful and attacking discussions should be monitored on social media.

According to the results of the decomposition analysis, low trust in traditional news media seems to be a significant explanator of why supporters of populism differ so prominently from others. We also found that attitudes on immigration are lowest among the supporters of the Finns, which was also related to their different views on fake news, freedom of expression, and hateful content monitoring.

Countermedia actors and populist politicians have systematically challenged traditional media institutions and offered media consumers new alternative media sites and narratives (Hatakka, 2019) which might have long-term effects on media trust. A similar media disruption tendency has recently been observed in all Western democracies (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). However, we need follow-up research on how the emergence of alternative media and systematic attacks on the prevailing media system are affecting trust in different media sources, and consequently people's media consumption choices.

Our study naturally has its limitations. Because the concepts of fake news and hate speech are strongly politicised in current political debate and connected to ideological preferences, they are open to various interpretations, especially in self-reported survey research such as the present study. As some have suggested, perhaps the term fake news should be abandoned because it is so vague and used by politicians to attack news media and platform companies (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Although "fake news" is frequently used instrumentally for political advantage, it has also become a useful concept for people in the expression of their frustration with the media environment, including misinformation, political propaganda, or poor journalism they frequently encounter, particularly in the online environment (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). We decided to use the term "fake news" instead of the more accurate equivalent "disinformation" in the survey because it is commonly used to denote all sorts of unreliable information in people's everyday speech. However, we suggest that scholars should thoughtfully consider the context in which the term is applied when using it in surveys. During our data collection period, "fake news" was widely used in news media, particularly because of the Trump's era, and the spread of fake news was considered as a new and alarming phenomenon in public discussion.

Our findings confirm that political communication on social media creates tensions because users' conceptions of what is appropriate online behaviour vary greatly. Although social media promote deliberation and free expression of opinions, there is also public concern for the need to control some harmful forms of participation. As we have found, social media users possess contrasting views about hateful content and content moderation, which arise from their experienced trust in media, immigration attitudes and political preference. To balance these different views in a moderation strategy is a challenging task for social media providers.

Because those who distrust traditional media are also strongly against content moderation, moderation of the views that they support might lead to even deeper frustration and alienation from traditional media.

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In Search for Unexpected Allies? Radical Right Remediation of ‘the 2015 Refugee Crisis’ on Social Media

Gwenaëlle Bauvois and Niko Pyrhönen

INTRODUCTION

The large-scale arrival of asylum seekers and refugees to Europe in the summer of 2015 stirred media debates, realigned political agendas and created opportunities for grassroots level mobilisation—both domestically and on the European level. In Finland, the mediatisation of the ‘refugee crisis’ peaked sharply in late-September 2015 (Pyrhönen & Wahlbeck, 2018, p. 4), focusing both on the influx of asylum seekers and radical right activism. While the ‘refugee crisis’ also gave rise to surges of local solidarity activism to help the newcomers (Seikkula, 2021), the public response was largely mediated with reference to semi-organised,

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anti-immigration vigilantism and online mobilisation—often presented as “counter-reactions to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in the Nordic countries” (Pyrhönen et al., 2021). In Finland, several such movements emerged, among the most prominent being *Rajat Kiinni!* (*Close the Borders!*, hereinafter “CB”) and *Suomi Ensín* (*Finland First*, hereinafter “FF”). These two movements—competing in the mainstream space for the ‘title’ of the largest Finnish anti-immigration movement, especially with the *Soldiers of Odin*—were among the most vocal on social media, most active in the streets and were also able to secure salient mainstream media coverage by the end of 2015.

Informed by recent research illustrating how similar nationalist, conspiratory, and radical right movements have successfully coordinated and scaled up their activities from grassroots level social media platforms (Finlayson, 2020; Kotonen, 2019; Laaksonen et al., 2020), we collected all CB and FF posts on Facebook between September and November 2015, from directly before the radical right’s crisis frames found coverage, also, in journalistic media (Pyrhönen et al., 2021).

While many of the post-truth tropes entail explicit hostility and criticism towards epistemic authorities themselves, particularly mainstream media (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 2)—that are “by definition as good a gauge of the truth as can usually be found” (Dormandy, 2018, p. 786)—it is advantageous for these groups to also develop more nuanced approaches. For instance, emotionalised reframing of salient issues in the news cycle and false equivalences between facts and interpretations can be efficient in disseminating disinformation (Harjuniemi, 2021; Waisbord, 2018) and *reinforming* audiences (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2019) through remediation, without the need for a full-frontal assault on epistemic authorities.

In this chapter, we analyse the *remediation*—a process through which mainstream media content is not excluded, but adapted and transformed (Toivanen et al., 2021)—of the mainstream news cycle on the ‘refugee crisis’ to the social media audiences of CB and FF. The analysis focuses on the post-truth tropes employed by these groups as practices for subverting information and interpretations in mainstream media in radical and subtle ways. In particular, we look into the practice of selectively remediating mainstream news articles in a process that does not directly challenge the journalistic media, but rather appears to embrace its epistemic authority (Ylä-Anttila, 2018)—at least to the extent it facilitates the search and discovery of ‘unexpected allies’ for the radical right. By ‘unexpected

allies’, we refer to actors that would not usually be associated with the radical right, such as moderate politicians, legacy media journalists, liberal celebrities or objectivity-aspiring researchers, and whose words or actions are reframed and remediated by the radical right in order to strengthen and legitimise their arguments and claims.

Indeed, instead of consistently voicing explicit hostility and criticism against their ‘enemies’ (Bauvois et al., 2022), the radical right can also strategically piggyback on the journalistic media’s legitimacy. By being highly selective with which passages they quote and paraphrase, the radical right can effectively hijack the news cycle with the alleged support from ‘unexpected allies’ in the mainstream media. As we illustrate in the analysis, harnessing this dimension of post-truth tropes allows the radical right to reinforce their audience with some of the most established anti-immigration talking points, narrated in a manner that appears to be supported by both journalistic media and the population at large. Before moving into the analysis, however, we first discuss some theoretical and methodological considerations related to the key arenas and actors involved in the remediation process, particularly concerning how remediation structures radical right online activities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social media have opened up new avenues for organising collective action that remediates both mundane and high-profile events in the political news cycle for specific audiences (Toivanen et al., 2021). To the extent that the process of remediation challenges news-framing practices and the agenda setting power of journalistic media, this type of collective action can be considered an instance of “counterpower”, vesting the social media audiences—ranging from more passive ‘likers’ and ‘sharers’ to active discussants and actual political entrepreneurs—with “the capacity [...] to change the power embedded in the institutions of society” (Castells, 2015, p. 5). To a significant degree, this capacity is brought about by platform-specific affordances and network effects—particularly the low marginal costs for remediating journalistic content—that efficiently allows for the reaching of increasingly diverse audiences (Huntington, 2016).

While social media as an infrastructure facilitates both deliberate disinformation and inadvertent misinformation (Conrad, 2021, p. 302), audiences are rarely passive consumers of remediated content. Instead, many participate in selecting events within the mainstream news cycle

to be reinterpreted, either by actively sharing content themselves, or upvoting content shared by others. In so doing, they effectively curate or “produce” (Bruns, 2008) hybridly mediated (Chadwick, 2013) flows of subversively reframed information that can rapidly spread between ‘counterpublics’ transnationally, and occasionally receive salient coverage in journalistic media (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2019; Runciman, 2017, p. 13). For the emergent and aspiring ‘counterpublics’—such as *Finland First* and *Close the Borders* during the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’—one of the key strategies for successfully redirecting hybridised flows of information pertains to presenting the coverage of mundane and ubiquitous political strife as evidence of the political sphere being marked by a societal ‘crisis’ or ‘threat’. Often the crisis or threat is neither an outcome of political and sociocultural change, nor a narrative put forward by the leading figures of a social movement (Ruzza, 2009, p. 87). Rather, it is important to emphasise the collective agency of the counterpublics, whereby both the leaders and audiences collaborate to deliberately *perform crisis* by remediating specific content—polarising media events, in particular—as evidence or indicators of a large societal crisis (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 119–121).

While performing crisis is a repertoire potentially available to a range of actors with significantly diverging agendas and backgrounds, many of these actors and their audiences appear “motivationally post-factual” (MacMullen, 2020, p. 105) in that they appear “seemingly indifferent about the factual veracity of the information” they peddle (Conrad, 2021, p. 302). Regardless of their political goals, this detachment from the bounds of empirical observations is clearly helpful in rousing strong emotions that fuel the crisis performance. It is important to note that motivational post-factualism—as a feature of counterpublic—does not necessitate widespread lying or belief in lies, even as the discussants make strong claims marked by ‘the stamp of certainty’. Rather, as researchers of new conspiracism have pointed out, the bar can be set much lower: “if one cannot be certain that a belief is entirely false, with the emphasis on *entirely*, then it might be true – and that’s *true enough*” (Rosenblum and Muirhead, 2019, p. 43, emphasis added).

In principle, such a post-factual or conspiracist collective mindset can be used to drive a wide range of political agendas. In practice, however, certain types of social mobilisation appear to harness post-factual crisis performance more successfully than others. An expanding scholarship focuses on how particularly “[u]ncivil actors, with explicit racist and anti-democratic goals” (Ekman, 2018, p. 9), far-right and

anti-immigration movements (Laaksonen et al., 2020), and “nativist, authoritarian, extremist, anti-pluralist and exclusionary-populist” platforms (Hatakka, 2019, p. 1316) participate in propagating, proliferating and capitalising on a sense of crisis. With the rapid influx of hybridly mediated content diminishing the capacities for journalistic gatekeeping (Vos, 2020), vulgar, sensationalist and hateful content can be rapidly spread in arenas marked by a dearth of moderation and content guidelines (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020).

Contemporary journalism research is still searching for the means by which to evaluate the extent that social networks actually facilitate conversation topics for public debate, as opposed to “repeat[ing] the agenda of topics proposed by the elite media” (Aruguete, 2017, p. 51). However, such a juxtaposition can be misleading. Even in cases where online groups exclusively or predominantly link news events already circulating in the journalistic media, the groups tend to be highly selective about which topics they address and invite group members to react to and discuss. Indeed, as research on Finnish countermedia by Toivanen et al. (2021) suggests, the process of remediation engages with the remediated content by employing a variety of distinct tropes or “styles”. These include issuing a direct critique of the journalistic source in which the remediated news item emerges, constructing a completely different narrative from individual points established by the original source and, most commonly, reframing the original content to appear as if it supports the agenda of the remediating party (*ibid*, pp. 12–14). Recent research on online anti-immigration groups in social media in the Nordic countries (Ekman, 2018; Merrill & Åkerlund, 2018; Nelimarkka et al., 2018; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019) illustrates how these groups employ a range of remediation styles in order to advance their own agenda and mobilise their followers. Featuring high among the common practices is cherry picking individual excerpts about immigrant crime and sexual harassment from immigration-related coverage, either directly from the journalistic news outlets or via countermedia outlets that remediate journalistic news output (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019).

Picking the topics specifically from mainstream media serves a dual purpose for these online groups. First, by linking their posts to widely discussed topics in public debate, they can easily justify the topicality of the content they create and share it as ordinary citizens engaging in mundane public discussion: “We are only talking about what everyone

else is talking about!” Second, even as the radical right subjects the mainstream media at large to harsh criticism (which typically goes beyond the particularities of subject-matter of the news item at hand), they can claim to find ‘unexpected allies’ in carefully selected (passages of) journalistic content. This way, the radical right can advance their political agenda by effectively piggybacking on the legitimacy created by the epistemic authority of the quoted or paraphrased news outlet.

Indeed, many online platforms “induce this kind of political performance in which people appear as authoritative, interpreters of what is ‘really’ going on, inviting viewers to experience this truth for themselves” (Finlayson, 2020, p. 2). In this sense, the online *producers* (Bruns, 2008) do not focus their critique on just correcting alleged errors and remedying biases as they see them, but rather aim at adopting the role of an ardent whistleblower. In this way, they are not afraid to draw appropriate conclusions from the journalistic content in a manner that ‘stays post-true’ to the original content, while also ‘speaking truth to power’ in a manner that is allegedly not available to the ‘politically correct’ elite.

Both of the rationales for remediating mainstream content rely heavily on “affective economies” (Ahmed, 2004), whereby similar or same narratives become ‘proven’ by their transnational circulation itself, with little need for any external or additional evidence. Communities bonded by affective economies are not only invested in supporting individual pieces of disinformation (for instance, concerning refugees, as in the FF and CB data), they are also keen to find ‘unexpected allies’ in the journalistic news cycle—at least to the extent that nevertheless allows them to spread distrust in the epistemic authority of the mainstream media at large. Without intertwining these two narratives, the online *producers* in FF and CB would find it very difficult to address why their content is so commonly at odds with the observations and conclusions established in journalistic media that quotes and paraphrases academic research, public officials and other expert practitioners (Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

Therefore, while the topics covered by FF and CB groups are thoroughly political—pertaining almost exclusively to immigration, asylum seekers and the alleged political goals of both ‘the Islamists’ and ‘the media elite’—these groups rarely discuss the actual politics (of immigration) in terms of any (more or less) specific policy goals or outcomes. These political entrepreneurs perform politics based on what Weber refers to as “ethics of conviction” (Weber, 1994[1919], pp. 309–369), where they often authentically believe that they can “transcend the messy reality

of politics [because] they have their eyes set on something higher” (Runciman, 2017, p. 7)—namely a victory in the war against an existential, alien threat to their country, manifesting in the influx of refugees. With such an approach to politics, any arguments for incremental policy changes appear, first and foremost, as diversions, minutiae that distracts the audience and discussants from perceiving ‘the reality of the total war’.

As we illustrate in the analysis, these remediation practices allow the curation of an alternative political news cycle that seeks to *rein-form* (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2019) its audiences of the Finnish people’s struggle against the influx of refugees, spearheaded by the radical right—with the occasional and welcomed support from ‘unexpected allies.’

DATA AND METHODS

During the peak of media attention concerning the ‘refugee crisis’, from September to November 2015, we collected all Facebook posts (see Fig. 11.1) by *Finland First* ($n = 76$) and *Close the Borders!* ($n = 172$).

Close the borders! (CB) emerged as a spontaneous and loosely organised protest movement that began its online and offline activities in late August 2015, with demonstrations held in Helsinki and Finnish Lapland in September. After some leading figures of the movement created an active Facebook group in October, their activities quickly spread throughout the

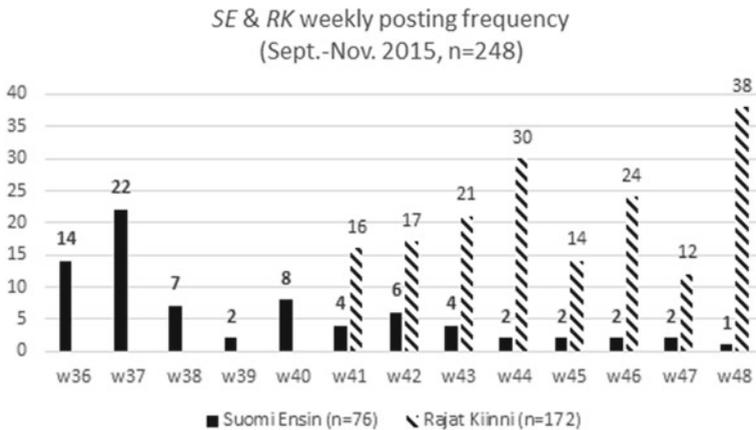


Fig. 11.1 Weekly posting frequency

country during the winter and spring of 2016, attracting up to several hundreds of demonstrators to torchlight processions, marches and gatherings in front of reception centres or in neighbourhoods with immigrant communities. Even former Estonian Foreign Minister Kristiina Ojuland gave an opening speech to one of CB's events on 3 October 2015. Before eventually being permanently removed from Facebook during the spring of 2020—together with a number of other radical right groups—the number of participants in the CB Facebook group had exceeded 10,000 members. In 2015 and 2016, some local CB groups organised events in collaboration with more established nationalist, extremist and radical right groups. These included *Suomen Sisä*, a nationalist association serving as the ideological home of Jussi Halla-aho, who would become the chairman of the right-wing populist *Finns Party* (formerly known as the *True Finns*), and the *Finnish Defence League*, a far-right anti-Islam organisation modelled after the *British Defense League*. In 2016, their offline activities started to reduce as media attention waned and in March 2017, members of CB alongside FF and the neo-nazis organised the last large-scale counter demonstration in Helsinki against refugee demonstrators, with a total exceeding one thousand participants.

The *Finland First* (FF) movement was already active on social media via a Facebook page created in February 2015 before becoming a registered association in 2016. The page had attracted almost 20,000 followers before being banned from Facebook, similar to CB, during spring 2020. Unlike CB, several local FF chapters have remained active on Facebook. The association was founded by a number of active CB members—most notably, co-founder Marco de Wit, a Finnish-Dutch anti-immigration activist, YouTuber and aspiring politician. They sought to expand the political agenda beyond border control to include a range of conservative (anti-LGBT activism), nationalist (reinstatement of the Finnish currency markka) and conspirational (global elite-driven climate and population change) issues (Sallamaa, 2018, pp. 26–27). FF organised a series of events throughout Finland in 2016–2017 and gained massive mainstream visibility with its 100-days long *Finland-Maidan* (*Suomi-Maidan*) demonstration at Helsinki central train station square where they established a camp in February 2017 to protest against alleged 'illegal immigration' in Finland. After many incidents (most of the 57 acts of violence or incitement based on ideological motives reported by the police that year were directly linked to the camp and 56 were committed by the

camp's far-right activists), the camp was dismantled by a major police operation on June 26, 2017.

The most striking general observation about the data analysed—and the one that prompted us to focus the analysis on remediation—is that almost all (92%) of these 248 posts made use of URLs linked to a range of information sources (see Fig. 11.2). This suggests that these groups' online activities primarily consisted of remediating to their audiences the existing coverage in the journalistic media, the countermedia and the blogosphere—sometimes only tenuously linking this content to the 'refugee crisis'. The posts without URLs ($n = 19$) are mostly nationalist memes created by *Finland First*.

Considering that a significant portion of the social media and countermedia URLs point to content originating in mainstream media, the latter is a much more prevalent remediation source than Fig. 11.2 would appear to suggest.

FF and CB adopted a distinctly different format for conducting online discussions. FF is a Facebook page managed by an 'institutional actor account' that only the anonymous group administrators can use to post content—although all group members (~20,000 followers in 2016) can like, comment and share the content posted by the anonymous admins. On the other hand, CB is a public Facebook group where the feed is collectively curated by identifiable group members (~10,000 members in

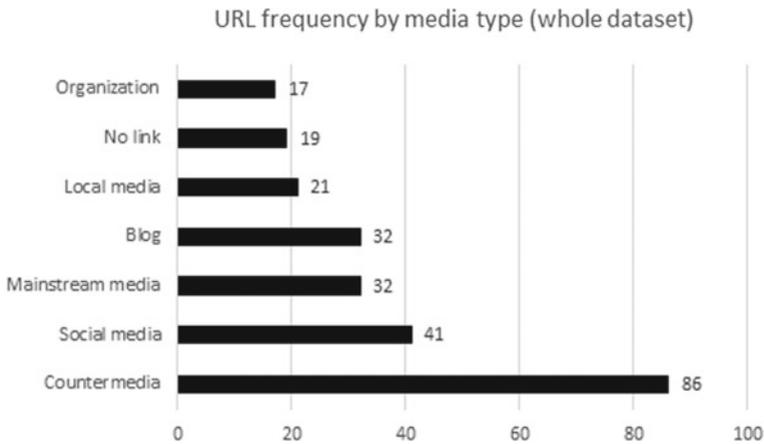


Fig. 11.2 URL frequency by media type, whole dataset

2016), who jointly posted more than twice the number of FF posts. The FF posts, however, cater to its audience by adhering to a more coherent style and logic, resulting in the most successful FF posts generating over five times more likes than the most liked CB posts. However, even though all members were free to post content in the CB group, the actual number of posters was low relative to the group size, and only a few individuals were posting multiple times in the group. For both groups, we only collected the original posts, not the follow-up discussion. In the following section, we analyse how the two Facebook communities remediate mainstream content into a polarised, deeply affective, narrative of the people's struggle against the influx of immigrants.

REMEDIATING THE NEWS CYCLE BY INTRODUCING 'UNEXPECTED ALLIES'

The radical right has been shown to commonly adopt deeply distrustful, even conspiratory positions towards epistemic authorities, often seeking to delegitimise knowledge that can be traced back to authoritative sources (Knops & De Cleen, 2019; Ylä-Antilla, 2018). In practice, however, the ethnopolitical entrepreneurs remediating content for FF and CB audiences do not consistently categorise researchers, journalists and other experts as 'enemies' of the people. Instead, by harnessing careful, nuanced and context-sensitive remediation practices, FF and CB are also able to present certain news items as indicative of wider support for nativist and anti-immigration talking points. In doing so, they leave no stone unturned in order to advance the narrative of new, unexpected allies in Finland and abroad who constantly join the ranks of 'the true patriots'.

The most liked post in the CB dataset (181 likes) is a case in point. This post remediates the globally circulated news item from 14 November 2015—during the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks—where the French President François Hollande publicly described Isis as having committed “an act of war” against France and promised that “France will be merciless towards Isis barbarians [...] within the framework of law”. From the outset—being a socialist president operating in the very core of the global power elite—Hollande would appear a remarkably unlikely figure to champion the cause of the Finnish radical right. Indeed, this instance of remediation relies on the counterfactual post-truth trope

that—by only slightly manipulating the original news item—clearly positions Hollande as an ally, congratulating him as the harbinger of the war against Islam and against terrorists disguised as ‘so-called refugees’.

The posted URL links to *MV-lehti*, the largest countermedia in Finland, citing an article by *The Guardian* from the same day. It is noteworthy that neither *MV-lehti*, nor the CB post, mentions any of the articles originating in the Finnish mainstream media, considering the frequency with which both cite Finnish journalistic sources, in general. The omission of any Finnish mainstream source creates more opportunities for fine-tuning the headline and body text, in both of which *MV-lehti* misquotes Hollande as saying, “We are going to a war which is ruthless!”¹ The CB poster reinforces the notion of Hollande being the leader of European-wide war against Islam by commenting: “This is where the eradication of Islam in Europe starts... It is war now!”.

Often the process of remediation can be harnessed for the purpose of creating or reinforcing alliances in a more straightforward manner, simply by sharing carefully selected content without altering it in any way. For instance, on 5 September 2015, FF shared a statement by Viktor Orbán, quoted in an article by the Finnish tabloid *Iltasanomat*: “After [mid-September], Hungary will send soldiers to its southern border to prevent the arrival of refugees if the parliament accepts the proposal. This is what the country’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban [*sic*] says”. FF only adds to the excerpt their motto (as they do in every single post), “Finland First: We do not surrender, we will not give up!”, and a single question: “Wonder when this happens in Finland?”.

Orbán is often discussed as a strong ally and a model to follow, both in CB and FF. Known as the champion of ‘Christian Europe’, fighting against immigration, Islam and LGBT+, Orbán represents the kind of authoritarian and illiberal nationalism (Palonen, 2018) that corresponds very closely to the ideas and attitudes shared in these groups. While Orbán himself, therefore, is not an unexpected ally for the radical right per se, the radical right finds an unexpected ally in *Iltasanomat*, instead. Simply quoting Orbán in verbatim via links to mainstream media is enough to legitimise the harsh rhetoric and the similar political pursuits found among the radical right in Finland and abroad.

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations in the chapter are made by the authors.

However, the remediation of Orbán's statements by the radical right often goes beyond merely reaffirming him as a prominent source of symbolic support. By explicitly asking when (not if) Finland will adopt similar measures against asylum seekers, FF suggests that Finland will have to eventually follow this 'European trend.' Moreover, by emphasising the fact that Finland does not 'yet' operate in this fashion, FF also implicitly invites its online audience to put pressure on Finnish politicians, and the population at large, to start adapting to an allegedly 'new political reality.'

While the practice of highly selective remediation of content from the foreign press advances the narrative of the Finnish radical right enjoying the support of strong, transnational allies, the great majority of the remediated content emerges from within Finland. Among the most liked posts in the dataset (262 likes, 8th most liked) is a screenshot of a poll from *MTV3*, the biggest private TV channel in Finland, asking the readers on their website at the beginning of the 'refugee crisis': "*Should Finland close its borders?*" This is an example of emotionalised content that can be used with relative ease to fuel the performance of crisis, indicating that the post-truth tropes are not monopolised by the 'alternative' media spheres, but can also originate in the mainstream (Fig. 11.3).

Similarly to the Orbán quotation in *Itasanomat*, there is little need for FF to manipulate this content, as it fits well into the narrative of the government of Finland being either oblivious or dismissive towards the will of the people. After all, 88% of the 22,021 respondents appear to be 'on their side' by expressing their will to close the borders. Of course, beyond the obvious self-selection bias among the respondents in the poll, the original question effectively maintains that Finland's borders are currently open, which was not the case. As this subtle piece of misinformation has already been presented by *MTV3*, there is, again, little incentive for FF to alter the framing that is readily applicable for their purposes. Instead, FF only inserts their motto and the caption: "The people knows! CLOSE THE BORDERS!", which only further builds on the counterfactual notion that the premise of the poll is correct, and that the Finnish people at large are both aware of the current situation and share the same view expressed by the majority of respondents on the topic. The cases where a mainstream outlet serves on a silver platter a perfectly suitable argument for mobilising the radical right provide golden opportunities for actors like FF and CB. Obviously, being able to actually grasp such opportunities, especially with any consistency, takes the distinct effort of being



Suomi Ensinn: Emme alistu, emme antaudu!
Kyllä kansa tietää! RAJAT KIINNI!

Pitäisikö Suomen laittaa rajat kiinni?



Fig. 11.3 An illustration of the poll published by MTV3, remediated on the FF Facebook page with their motto: “Finland First: We will not surrender, we will not give up!” and the commentary: “The people knows! CLOSE THE BORDERS!” (excerpt 12:1)

on a constant ‘standby mode’, actively scanning for valuable, easily ‘remediatable’ content in the political news cycle, skimming through an endless flow of ‘worthless’ news items. When such an opportunity arises, however, it becomes easy for these actors to address the audience with remediated content that is already validated and legitimised with the epistemic authority of journalistic media.

In practice, it can be quite difficult to differentiate cases where remediation *generates* misinformation from cases where remediation merely *circulates and spreads* extant, news-framed misinformation. This is particularly true when the news item in question is not commonly identified as misinformation by the epistemic authorities, either. These news items can present themselves as low-hanging fruit for the radical right, who not only

remediate them as certain pieces of information but also stretch the originally cautious arguments to the extreme. An oft-quoted anti-EU argument, attributed to the then president of the EU Commission Jacques Delors in 1988, suggests that 80% of member states' national legislation originates in the EU (Auel et al., 2015, p. 27). Although Delors never argued that this is the case—rather, he only presented 80% as a projection for what might happen in future—his assessment soon mutated into an argument concerning contemporary political reality. In October 2015, several mainstream news outlets quoted (and misquoted) Markku Kuisma, professor of Finnish and Nordic History at the University of Helsinki, who said in an interview by the Finnish National Broadcasting Company *YLE*: “Currently, 80% of the legislation, *in a certain sense*, comes from Brussels” (emphasis added). While *YLE* correctly reported the caveat established by Kuisma, many other mainstream news outlets did not. For instance, the Finnish economics weekly, *Talouselämä*, cited Kuisma in the headline: “Professor to YLE: Useless to talk about the Finnish independence - ‘80% of laws coming from Brussels’”.

However, Kuisma's original point was not to deplore the current state of Finnish independence, even less the number of immigrants in Finland. Rather, he sought to underline the “unrealism” inherent in the way many Finns relate to independence in public debate and to set the public's expectations straight concerning the ways in which independence should be qualified in contemporary Finland. FF, however, added fuel to the fire by captioning their post linked to the article in *Talouselämä* with: “OUT OF THE EU, CLOSE THE BORDERS and OUT OF SCHENGEN!” The post also accurately cites specific passages from Kuisma's interview, but radically changed the context. For example, when Kuisma compared the degrees of independence between contemporary Finland and the Grand Duchy of Finland (as an autonomous part of the Russian Empire 1809–1917), he also listed “the currency, the central bank and legislation” as areas marked by less extra-national influence. In essence, FF remediated the news article as evidence of Finland having been reduced to a mere vassal of the EU.

Far-right entrepreneurs and media outlets also often target both national and local celebrities viewed as too ‘liberal’ and ‘leftist’, notably in sports. Celebrities who express any criticism against the far-right camp are shamed and called out as ‘non-patriotic’, such as the National Football League (NFL) player Colin Kaepernick who was crucified, particularly by

Breitbart News, for refusing to celebrate Independence Day as it symbolises the mistreatment of Black people (Duvall, 2020; Kazlauskaitė et al., 2022). However, celebrities are also sought-after allies as they can give a familiar and sympathetic face to a cause. Athletes, in particular, are often perceived as embodying strength, discipline and perseverance, with the far-right utilising these characteristics as they reflect commonly shared perceptions of key national(ist) virtues (Black, 2021; Kusz, 2007). When an athlete refuses to get vaccinated, even in cases where the refusal is not intended as a political statement, this nonconformity can be easily presented as an indicator of the athlete being an ally in the fight against the ‘leftist’ or ‘progressive’ cause.

In September 2015, Finland’s largest private TV-channel, *MTV*, organised a ‘refugee night’ where ‘successful’ migrants to Finland were invited to share their views concerning the ongoing refugee crisis. In the talk show, the MMA-fighter Makwan Amirkhani, himself a refugee from the Iranian Kurdish diaspora, said he understood, to some extent, the critical views against immigration among the Finnish population. Some of his quotes were quickly published in mainstream news articles that incorporated some of the most pertinent parts from Amirkhani’s interview in the two-hour-long broadcast. FF was quick to share a link to one of the shortest such articles, published by the tabloid *Ilta-lehti*, only adding the caption “Well done, Makwan!” before quoting him in verbatim:

In some ways, I understand the Finns, when your own people can’t make ends meet. It brings up the question of how carefully the right refugees should be selected [...] Even if it [the Alan Kurdi case] breaks the heart, we need to stay vigilant to ensure that no one is abusing the system, said Amirkhani.

Amirkhani, although known to many Finns for his generally sunny, humble and charitable disposition, became instantly championed as an alleged ally for anti-immigration and anti-refugee movements in FF and beyond—despite his explicit refusal to “be political or politicised”. For instance, the then Finns Party MP (currently MEP and vice chairperson) Laura Huhtasaari asked Amirkhani to become a member of the Finns party, which he refused publicly in a humorous tweet. Then Finland’s largest radical right countermedia outlet, *MV-lehti*, began actively covering Amirkhani’s life and exploits both via remediated and

original news-framed stories supportive of the anti-immigration movement, while sometimes opportunistically criticising the sportsman when such an approach better suited their purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary research on the ‘post-truth era’ commonly addresses the actors, arenas or agendas that advance disinformation or benefit from its spread. This body of research identifies right-wing populists, conspiracy theorists and far-right ethnopolitical entrepreneurs as the main culprits who, not only, have a vested interest in advancing their political agenda with disinformation content, but also actively seek to discredit the journalistic media and other epistemic authorities in the process. In this chapter, we have sought to complement this literature with a more nuanced approach to the post-truth tropes where the generation of fake news and explicit disinformation is only the tip of the iceberg.

Rather than putting resources into generating convincing disinformation from scratch to advance their political agenda, many successful actors rely on opportunistic strategies for attracting a large base of social media followers with relatable, affective content revolving around a specific set of themes, more specifically here, the ‘refugee crisis’. Even so, these followers are rarely voluminous enough to directly push forward a specific political agenda on the high political arena, even in cases where they can agree in broad strokes what that agenda is. Instead, many online groups, like *Close the Borders!*, tend to rely on followers to operate as *producers* (Bruns, 2008) or “digital foot soldiers” (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016, p. 306) to whom much of the content creation is crowdsourced. While this can be an efficient strategy for electrifying the most active followers, the content created by unsupervised *producers* on an unmoderated platform tends to be idiosyncratic and less engaging to their larger, less active audience. Only by comparing the number of likes for posts between *Close the Borders!*, who crowdsources the content creation, and *Finland First*, whose anonymous leadership takes care of the posting activity, we can see that the most liked *Finland First* content generates some ten times more likes than CB content, even though *Finland First* only has twice the number of followers.

An important way to make the content creation more efficient—particularly for an online group like *Finland First*, whose moderators have to create all the content—is to make use of content that is already readily

available, such as mainstream news articles. Indeed, posts with direct links to journalistic output encompass about one third of all the articles within our dataset of 248 posts, and this figure approaches 50% of all content when we include countermedia articles that remediate mainstream articles. The obvious challenge with engaging audiences with mainstream—or mainstream originating—content is that the journalistic media tends to frame their output in a manner that impedes, rather than advances the political agenda of the radical right. On the other hand, when the online group remediates this content as only indicative of ‘the elite’s lies’, this may be enough to infuriate the audience, but not commonly enough to support collective action in the long run (Franks et al., 2013, p. 9).

There are several remediation practices that can help online groups with this challenge. For instance, by cherry picking content from online groups’ social media feed from the mainstream news cycle on a suitable theme—such as incidents of sexual violence perpetrated by refugees—the radical right encourages its audience to internalise the notion of rampant and violent throngs of foreign men seeking to rape autochthonous women.

The appropriation of celebrities, politicians, scientists and athletes through remediation practices as alleged allies—rather than only enemies and targets—has become a strategy used globally by far-right entrepreneurs and far-right social media platforms and outlets (Kazlauskaitė et al., 2022). The search for ‘unexpected allies’ further empowers the audience with the notion that they are not alone, but have powerful friends in high places, who can help them to emerge victorious in the ongoing war for defining who are the rightful heirs of their land.

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PART IV

Conclusion



Concluding Reflections on Europe in the Age of Post-truth Politics

Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Maximilian Conrad

In announcing their choice of the term ‘post-truth’ as the English ‘word of the year’ in 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries defined it on its webpage as “an adjective [...] ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’”. The dictionary underscored that the term was not invented in 2016, as it seems to have been coined in the early 1990s, but its use spiked dramatically in 2016, especially in the summer and autumn during the campaigns for the Brexit referendum in June and the US presidential elections in November. This catapulted the word from the periphery of political commentary to its centre, signifying what seemed to be a clear paradigm shift in European and American political discourses. In this context, the prefix ‘post’ has a specific meaning, the

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Oxford Dictionaries' webpage pointed out, as it refers not to a move in time from a specific situation or an event, unlike terms such as 'post-war' and 'post-match'. Rather, the reference is to "a time in which the specified concept [truth] has become unimportant or irrelevant" (Oxford Language, 2016).

Lies and deceit are, of course, nothing new in democratic politics, but changing attitudes to 'truth' and 'facts' in political discourses appear to characterise the era we are living in. Post-truth, Saul Newman writes in his contribution to this book, "seems to evoke a new condition in which the line between truth and falsehood becomes blurred and indistinct and where truth itself has lost its symbolic value". He sees this as "a new political and epistemological paradigm characterised by 'fake news', 'alternative facts', conspiracy theories and the deliberate propagation of misinformation", or a political situation where truth has become "mere opinion", drowned "out in a cacophony of competing perspectives and narratives" (Newman, 2022, pp. 13–14).¹ This does not mean that truth, as an ideal, has been totally discarded in politics, but rather that there are no longer any universally accepted arbiters who can distinguish between what is regarded true or false or, to quote Newman again, who can establish "a certain shared consensus around basic facts" (ibid., p. 15). When two contradictory truth-claims are presented in post-truth politics, it is up to the consumer of the information to decide which they choose to believe.

As suggested in the introduction to this volume, this change can be interpreted as a symptom of a deeper crisis in political communication where, on the one hand, a digital revolution has radically transformed the *arena* of public political debate and, on the other, certain political *actors* have used the new communication channels to spread dubious information to further their agenda. In the beginning, new digital platforms, social media in particular, were greeted as potential tools of democratising authoritarian societies, because they opened countless possibilities for individuals to express their opinions, to gather information, and to organise political action, without government interference or suppression. Thus, the use of social media during the Arab Spring has often been taken as an example of how the new communication technologies served

¹ Numbers in brackets refer to pages in this volume.

as instruments in disrupting oppressive power, as they enabled opposition activists to organise their actions and to mobilise popular protest against their governments (Castells, 2015; Ghannam, 2011). Increasingly, however, observers regard social media as an obstacle to, rather than a facilitator of, critical debate (Persily & Tucker, 2020; Guess & Lyons, 2020; Karpf, 2021). Daily, people are bombarded with news and opinions from all directions, and the sheer abundance of information makes it difficult for most citizens to distinguish between fact and fiction, or valid information and deliberate or unintentional misinformation. The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point, where the public was, to quote Michailidou, Eike, and Trenz's chapter in this volume, faced with "an unprecedented 'infodemic' of mis- and disinformation, creating confusion and distrust and undermining an effective public health response" (Michailidou, 2022, p. 67). Declining trust in journalists, they argue, who traditionally have served as "the intermediaries of truth", has further exacerbated the situation. This has undermined the democratic functioning of the public sphere because deliberative democracy relies on "procedures that allow to establish information value and truth in a way that is consensual to a majority" (ibid., p. 67). The aim is not to ascertain one proclaimed truth, but rather to maintain what John Erik Fossum terms in his chapter as "corrective devices to counter fake news, disinformation, and manipulation", which include "public spheres and media; political parties and other channels that link citizens to the political system; and popularly elected bodies that translate citizen input into decision-making" (Fossum, 2022, p. 34).

The emergence of post-truth politics was, however, not merely an automatic consequence of a transformation in communication technologies as it has also been consciously endorsed by populist political actors, both through extensive dissemination of disinformation on social media platforms and the systematic discrediting of various epistemic authorities, including critical journalism. This has seriously weakened the "corrective devices" described above, as bogus information is spread without being filtered through professional media outlets or vetted by knowledgeable experts. Former President Trump's vilification of investigative journalists is well known, and his branding of them as the real "enemy of the people" has helped to delegitimise the mainstream media among his numerous and fervent supporters. "This is an important point in relation to the aspects of polarisation and fragmentation", Maximilian Conrad comments on Trump's statements on the media, "both of which are key

features of post-truth politics” (Conrad, 2022, p. 85). This critique of critical journalism is directly tied to the populist dichotomous vision of the world, where the alleged ‘authentic’ and ‘pure people’ (‘us’) are pitted against ‘the corrupt elites’ and ‘foreigners’ (‘them’), which includes journalists, academic specialists and immigrants. For populists on the right, elites are defined on moral rather than economic grounds, and for that reason wealthy politicians like Silvio Berlusconi, Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump present themselves as representatives of the ‘people’, while intellectuals and highbrow media persons are classified as morally suspect and politically biased others. Moreover, social media is an ideal conduit for populist messaging because it allows for direct contacts between the populist politicians and the ‘ordinary people’ they seek to court, without any mediation or editing. This facilitates informal communication, in “colloquial language, based on emotions rather than on reasoning, this being close to a populist discursive style” (Manucci, 2017, pp. 475–476).

One of the most important moments in the history of European populism is, without doubt, the Brexit referendum in 2016. Against all odds, the Leave campaign was successful in challenging the British political establishment and the overwhelming majority of experts, who advised against Britain’s exit from the EU, by rallying enough voters to the movement’s cause and thus securing narrow victory on election day. The campaign showed all the hallmarks of post-truth politics, Vittorio Orlando argues in his chapter in this volume, as it was organised by populist political actors, using social media, websites and popular tabloids as the primary arena for their communication. Many of the most effective campaign slogans were dubious, if not pure mis- or disinformation, including predictions of Turkey’s immanent entrance into the EU and the notorious claim that by exiting the EU the British national government would free up large sums of money to fund the National Health Service. Whether people believed this to be true or not was not the main issue, but rather how it fitted into the feeling that EU membership threatened British national sovereignty. The core of the Leave campaign’s messaging was that Britain needed to regain control of its affairs—under the banner “Take Back Control”, to quote Orlando, “a slogan implying that the British people were menaced due to European bureaucrats controlling them from above and immigrants threatening their freedom from below” (Orlando, 2022, p. 114). The Italian populist politician Matteo Salvini used similar tropes in his anti-immigration Tweets, as Guilia Evolvi demonstrates in her chapter, although his main term of

reference was Europe rather than the Italian nation. “Europe is Christian”, Salvini proclaims, which makes Muslim immigration a dangerous assault on Europe and European values—according to him, ‘they’, the Muslim immigrants, do not belong to ‘our’ community, the Christian Europeans and therefore they must be prevented from entering Italy and Europe (Evolvi, 2022).

The power of populist discourses is not determined by its veracity—or lack thereof—but rather by how they fit into a convincing political narrative. As Anna Björk points out, “national sovereignty is a prominent reference point within the multilateral system” (Björk, 2022, p. 183) and radical populists on the right have been effective in playing the nationality card in their political campaigns. The public sphere is supposed to be, Newman argues, “the shared space for rational dialogue and debate upon which democratic institutions and practices rest” (Newman, 2022, p. 15), but it is also a space where people search for meaning in their lives. For many, that search leads them to familiar places, including imagined national and religious communities. This should not come as a surprise, because national sentiments and religious beliefs have long been central elements in European identity formation and have been consciously cultivated by states and religious institutions, and they still have strong resonance in people’s minds. By presenting immigration as an existential crisis, where ‘aliens’ undermine the values and the cultural characteristics of the nation, the populists “rarely discuss the actual politics (of immigration) in terms of any (more or less) specific policy goals or outcomes”, as Bauvois and Pyrhönen argue in their analysis of the mediating tactics of the Finnish populist right. “With such an approach to politics, any arguments for incremental policy changes appear first and foremost as diversions, minutiae that distract the audience and discussants from perceiving ‘the reality of the total war’” (Bauvois & Pyrhönen, 2022, p. 229s).

The authors of this volume are in general agreement on the detrimental effects that post-truth politics can have on European democracies, as it has disrupted the rules and norms that are necessary for a functioning democratic public sphere. This does not mean that democracy is necessarily doomed, in part because the challenges posed by the post-truth era have triggered resistance among various governmental agencies and international organisations. It is therefore not clear what the future holds, but recent experience from COVID-19 seems to point in opposite directions. On the one hand, through an organised onslaught, a small group of

populist activists have been fairly successful in stoking some people's fears of vaccines and their opposition to various mitigation measures, casting doubt on the scientific information provided by health experts. On the other hand, some commentators have predicted that the pandemic spells the end of the post-truth era. "It would seem plausible to think", Saul Newman writes, "that when their lives are on the line, people turn once again to scientific authority and expertise; that they are more likely to believe medical officers and epidemiologists than populist politicians and leaders who try to spin the crisis to their advantage" (Newman, 2022, p. 14). As the post-truth conditions remain, with the arena for spreading fake news and for organised misinformation campaigns intact and countless political actors willing to use that arena for their advantage, it is probably premature to declare the total demise of post-truth politics any time soon. At the same time, as support for populist political parties has stagnated or even declined in recent European elections, one can hope that the tide has been stemmed at least for the time being.

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INDEX

A

activism, 63, 93, 223, 230

actor(s), 31–33, 39, 40, 43, 44, 47, 48, 50, 62, 67, 81, 86, 88, 90, 91, 95, 103, 104, 106–112, 115–121, 132, 134, 140, 143, 144, 151, 152, 154–159, 161, 163, 164, 166–169, 178, 179, 185, 187, 193, 200, 202, 203, 206, 216, 225, 226, 231, 234, 235, 238, 248–250, 252

Alternative for Germany (AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland*), 6, 81, 86, 87, 91–96, 134, 167

arena(s), 4, 5, 7, 62, 104, 105, 107, 109–112, 115, 116, 120, 132, 200, 225, 227, 238, 248, 250, 252

Arendt, Hannah, 14, 15, 26

authoritarianism, 6, 18, 21, 27, 33–37, 39, 60, 63, 227, 233, 248

authority, 3, 4, 7, 14, 19–21, 24, 58, 59, 63, 79, 152, 158, 160, 168, 224, 228, 235, 252

B

Bolsonaro, Jair, 15

Brazil, 15

Brexit, v, 1, 2, 7, 13, 44, 60, 63, 103–107, 109, 113, 116, 118–120, 131, 202, 250

Brexit discourse, 104

Britain, 108, 109, 114, 115, 250

C

campaign(s), 60, 61, 68, 87, 89, 92, 104–120, 131, 152–154, 156–169, 183, 247, 250–252

Christianity, 135, 136, 144

'Close the Borders!', 8, 224, 226, 229, 236, 238

CNN, 85

communication, 4, 5, 7, 23, 59, 60, 62, 68, 83, 87, 103, 112, 116,

119, 134, 137, 140, 143, 152,
154, 155, 158–160, 162,
165–168, 178, 179, 185–189,
194, 200, 203, 216, 248–250

conceptual history, 184

content, 110

contestation, 44, 56, 57, 59, 157,
166–168

countermedia, 203–206, 216, 227,
231, 233, 237, 239

COVID-19, 2, 6, 14, 15, 61, 64, 67,
81, 93, 95, 106, 134, 183, 186,
249, 251

D

deliberation, vi, 5, 16, 27, 216

deliberative democracy, 66, 249

democracy, 33–36, 87–89, 93, 105,
186, 201

Christian democracy, 36, 37

illiberal democracy, vi, 33, 35–37

liberal democracy, 16, 37, 80, 82

Derrida, J., 17, 21

DiEM25, 60

digital media, 4, 5, 54, 60, 62, 63,
82, 134, 186

discourse(s), 14, 15, 17–22, 24,
26–28, 40, 48, 54, 65, 79, 82,
103–109, 113, 114, 116, 118,
120, 121, 129–132, 135–137,
140, 143–145, 151, 152, 154,
157–160, 163, 165, 166, 168,
178, 189–191, 193, 247, 248,
251

disinformation campaign, 157, 186

disintegration, vi, 1, 6, 7, 103–105,
107, 108, 120, 121

disruption, 17, 22, 27, 54, 59, 69,
216

distrust, 205

E

EEA agreement, 43, 45–47, 49

elite, 3, 18, 25, 37, 38, 62, 81,
84–88, 92, 95, 119, 180, 186,
191, 200, 203, 204, 206, 227,
228, 230, 239, 250

emotion, 4, 7, 13, 16, 80, 106, 112,
119, 130–133, 140, 141,
143–145, 157, 168, 200, 224,
226, 234, 247, 250

enlightenment, 18, 28

epistemic crisis, 4, 20, 89

EU agency for fundamental rights,
178, 186, 187

EU disintegration, 116

EU Fundamental Rights Agency, 7,
187

EU institution, 187

EU politicisation, 116

Europe, v, vi, 2, 5, 6, 60, 109, 134,
136, 137, 140, 144, 153, 159,
163, 177, 181, 189, 204, 223,
233, 250, 251

European Commission, 65, 155, 186

European Economic Area, 6

European identity, 137, 251

European integration, v, vi, 1, 2, 63,
104, 106, 108, 109, 117–119,
121

Europeanisation, 42, 44

European Union (EU), v, 1, 2, 6, 7,
33, 43–50, 55, 59, 64–69,
103–106, 108–110, 113–121,
153–155, 157, 164, 165, 167,
169, 178, 185, 187–189,
191–193, 236, 250

Euroscptic actors, 120

Euroscptic discourse, 114

Euroscpticism, 63, 107–110, 113

extreme right, 91, 157

F

Facebook, 63, 93, 94, 110, 115, 135, 154, 159, 160, 162, 204, 224, 229–232, 235

fake news, 6, 13, 26, 31–36, 38–42, 44, 45, 47, 49, 50, 53–55, 57, 58, 61, 63–65, 68, 69, 80, 82, 84, 85, 90, 151, 152, 155, 200–202, 204, 206, 208, 210, 212–216, 238, 248, 249

Farage, Nigel, 113, 115

Finland, 7, 201, 202, 204–207, 223, 224, 233, 234

Finland First, 8, 224, 226, 229–231, 233, 235, 238

Finns Party, 204, 206, 207, 210, 212, 230

Five Star Movement, 60

Foucault, M., 20–25, 27, 28

Fox News, 58

fragmentation, 54, 61, 64, 82, 85, 180, 249

France, 232

freedom, 3, 15, 18, 20, 26–28, 60, 66, 67, 86, 87, 91, 114, 167, 168, 213, 250

Freedom House, 44, 45

freedom of expression, 64, 65, 67, 203–205, 208, 210, 213, 215

freedom of speech, 60, 202

Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), 86, 167

G

gender, 18, 203, 207, 209, 212

gender equality, 63, 139

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), 66

Giuliani, Rudy, 13

Global Compact for Safe and Orderly Migration, 7

globalisation, 32, 41–43, 45, 50, 119

Grundfunk, 6, 87, 88, 92, 94, 96

H

Habermas, J., 15, 16, 132, 144

hate speech, 65, 67, 131, 133, 201–203, 216

human rights, 178, 180, 182, 185–191, 193, 194

human rights communication, 188

I

identity, 16, 21, 62, 84, 131, 137, 203

identity politics, 116, 120

immigration, vi, 7, 8, 37, 63, 108, 113–120, 129, 132, 134, 151, 157, 160, 162, 168, 181, 182, 187, 189, 190, 193, 200–202, 204–206, 209, 210, 212–216, 224, 225, 227, 230, 232, 233, 237, 238, 250

information disorder, 2, 3, 65

Instagram, 60, 154

institution, 6, 14, 15, 17, 20–23, 26, 27, 34, 36, 43, 46, 54–57, 59, 60, 62, 69, 80, 82–84, 86, 89, 92, 95, 106–108, 113, 114, 116, 120, 155–157, 183, 186–188, 193, 205, 215, 216, 225, 231, 251

International Organisation for Migration, 180

Islam, 129, 131, 134–136, 138, 139, 142, 144, 230, 233

M

manipulation, 6, 14, 31–36, 38–42, 44, 45, 47–50, 61, 67, 93, 106, 134, 249

media freedom, 67, 82, 89

#metoo, 63

migration, vi, 7, 113, 117, 118, 129, 130, 136–141, 144, 151–154, 156–169, 177–186, 188–194
 migration campaigns, 157
 migration discourses, 157
 mis(dis)information, vi, 1, 2, 4–7, 31–36, 38, 40–42, 44, 45, 47, 49, 50, 55, 66, 67, 82, 90, 107, 112, 130–134, 137, 139, 143–145, 151, 152, 154–157, 168, 178, 179, 183, 185–188, 190, 193, 201, 215, 216, 224, 225, 228, 238, 249, 250
 Mouffe, Chantal, 16, 132, 144
 MSNBC, 85

N

narrative, 143–145, 153, 156–158, 160, 163, 165, 178, 179, 181, 185, 188, 193, 194, 206, 216, 226–228, 232, 234, 248, 251
 National Health Service (NHS), 105, 113, 115–117, 250
 national identity, 137, 142
 nationalism, v, 131, 133, 134, 137, 233
 Nordic countries, 224, 227
 Norway, 33, 43, 45, 46
 Norwegian Public Broadcaster (NRK), 64

O

O’Flaherty, Michael, 187, 189
 Orbán, Viktor, 36, 37, 191, 233, 234, 250
 Oxford dictionary, 247, 248

P

pandemic, 2, 14, 15, 17, 61, 67, 69, 81, 89–91, 93, 95, 106, 134, 249, 252

parrhesia, 20, 24–26
 pathology, 6, 33–35, 38, 42, 44, 47, 49
 PEGIDA, 91
 Peterson, Jordan, 18
 Plato, 21, 25
 Poland, 60
 polarisation, 27, 58, 60, 61, 64, 66, 82, 85, 93, 109, 131, 199, 200, 204, 205, 249
 politicisation, vi, 7, 43, 117, 179, 182, 183
 populism, vi, 2, 4–7, 17, 26, 27, 32, 33, 37–39, 43, 63, 81, 83, 84, 86, 119, 206, 215, 250
 postfactual, 3, 79. *See also* post-truth politics
 postmodernism, 6, 18, 19
 post-truth discourse, 6, 15, 19, 23, 25–27
 post-truth era, 2, 14, 55, 69, 80, 238, 251, 252
 post-truth politics, v, vi, 6, 7, 65, 79–85, 88, 95, 96, 103, 104, 107, 112, 119–121, 130, 131, 133, 135, 137, 139, 140, 143–145, 154, 156, 159, 248–252
 post-truth populism, 6, 18, 80–86, 89, 95
 post-truth tropes, 224, 225, 234, 238
 press freedom, 60
 public sphere, vi, 4–7, 15–17, 20, 25–28, 34, 54–64, 66, 68–70, 82, 83, 89, 130–134, 143–145, 206, 249, 251

Q

Querdenken movement, 90, 91

R

racism, 17, 63, 131, 133
 radicalisation, 54, 61, 89
 radical right, 8, 20, 24, 178, 182,
 183, 223–225, 228–230,
 232–235, 237, 239
 Rawls, J., 17
 refugee crisis, 7, 115, 118, 120, 223,
 224, 226, 229, 231, 234, 237,
 238
 refugee(s), 63, 114, 118, 119, 141,
 162, 190, 223, 228–230, 233,
 237, 239
 religion, 7, 129–133, 135–140,
 143–145, 202, 203
 remediation, 224, 225, 227, 229,
 231–235, 239
 right-wing populism, 6, 15, 16
 Rodrik, D., 41
 Russia, 2, 107, 138, 186, 236

S

Salvini, Matteo, 7, 129–131,
 133–145, 250
 Salvini's communication, 130
 Salvini's emotional narratives, 144
 Salvini's Facebook, 138
 Salvini's tweet, 7, 131, 133,
 135–145, 237, 250
 Schengen, 181, 236
 sovereignty, 24, 37, 49, 63, 104, 111,
 113–115, 117, 119, 120, 163,
 179, 181–183, 192, 193, 203,
 250, 251

T

Thunberg, Greta, 63

Trump, Donald, 2, 3, 13–15, 26, 80,
 84, 85, 95, 105, 130, 131, 181,
 216, 249, 250
 trust, 4, 6, 7, 32, 34, 43, 44, 49,
 54–60, 64, 82, 86, 134, 143,
 155, 161, 162, 169, 201,
 204–206, 209, 210, 212–216,
 249
 truth decay, 2, 3
 truth discourse, 23
 truth(s), 3, 4, 7, 14–28, 40, 55–59,
 62–64, 69, 79, 80, 83–85, 88,
 105, 134, 152, 156, 158–160,
 164, 166, 168, 224, 228, 248,
 249
 Turkey, 114–117, 119, 250
 Twitter, 110, 130, 134–137, 140,
 143, 166

U

UN Compact for Safe and Orderly
 Migration, 178
 UN global compact for a safe and
 orderly migration, 189
 United Kingdom, 1, 86, 87, 103,
 114, 118, 181
 United Kingdom Independence Party
 (UKIP), 108, 110
 US Presidential election, v, 2, 247

V

Vote Leave, 13, 108–110

Y

YouTube, 60, 230