

A Democratic Crisis? Post-truth Discourses and their Limits

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1. Introduction

Western democracies are currently said to be under siege. ‘Fake news’ are flooding social media, ‘alternative facts’ are circulated by political elites and ‘post-truth’ sentiments roam throughout society. What was once deemed the normative foundations of democracy and freedom, namely reason and truth, have supposedly been shattered, leaving societies in a perpetual state of crisis. French president, Emmanuel Macron, captured this dystopian *zeitgeist* in spring 2018 when he appeared before the joint houses of the US Congress. “Without reason, without truth,” Macron said in his speech, “there is no real democracy because democracy is about true choices and rational decisions. The corruption of information is an attempt to corrode the very spirit of our democracies.”¹

Macron has not been alone in lamenting the contemporary devaluation of truth in Western liberal democracies. In recent years, a seemingly endless line of commentators from the academic, political, journalistic and commercial realm have argued that fake news and the post-truth era threaten democratic societies in substantive ways. Indeed, news outlets have been overflowed with articles and op-eds dedicated to the post-truth condition, while a steady flow of books have sought to pinpoint its origins and potential resolution.² This range of post-truth voices has not emerged as a homogeneous or singular movement, agreeing on how and why democracy has ended up in its current predicament. Different fields and perspectives have blamed different factors for causing the crisis: from technology and media over politicians and institutions to the democratic masses themselves. Still, across these post-truth discourses, we find a series of more or less unifying traits. For one thing, there is widespread agreement that grave societal dangers are upon us. The pillars of liberal democracies are supposedly crumbling and its structures buckling under pressure. The rational spirit of democracy is said to be under attack or even dying. Post-truth discourses indeed seem to share a set of underlying normative premises about what democracy is and ought to be –

¹ E. MACRON, ‘Address to the US Congress’ (2018, 25 April) *CNN*. <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1804/25/ctw.01.html>>

² S. FULLER, *Post-Truth: Knowledge As A Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2018); B. MCNAIR, *Fake News: Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism*, Routledge, London 2017.

namely a political system bound up with truth, reason and rationality. From this perspective, a decline of truth is necessarily equal to a decline of democracy itself.

This chapter presents the findings of a comprehensive investigation of contemporary post-truth discourses and their democratic underpinnings.³ Instead of asking whether democracy really *is* suffering from a post-truth crisis, we examine the increasingly ubiquitous discourses presenting this claim. How and in what ways are Western democracies articulated as being in a state of crisis? What normative ideas are contained in such discourses? And what kind of democratic imaginaries do they produce? By investigating these developing political narratives and ideas – what we have elsewhere labelled as a new *politics of falsehood*⁴ – it becomes possible to interrogate the very real democratic struggles they contain and foreclose. Based on the analysis presented in this chapter, we will suggest that a very particular idea about democracy has started to become hegemonic. As hinted at above, this is one premised on democracy being a truth-telling and rational project concerned with using facts as the foundation for consensus-based political decision-making. This kind of discourse is not neutral or innocent but reproduces and enhances already existing political developments taking place in the last thirty years. Most notably, contemporary post-truth discourses rely on ideas connected to what critical scholars, such as Chantal Mouffe, have labelled as *post-politics*: that is, a mode of politics that values individual rights, consensus and technocratic forms of governance over equality, participation and the rule of and by the people.⁵

The chapter is a critical response to what we perceive to be two major problems facing contemporary debates on the proclaimed post-truth condition of democracy, both in scholarly and public discussions. First, there is a strong tendency to reify the basic political concepts used in the debate, taking for granted the meaning of concepts such as ‘democracy’, ‘truth’ and ‘rationality’. This is an infeasible premise – both conceptually and historically – as the development of these terms tell a very different and contested story. Second, there has so far been an absence of critical perspectives and historical contextualisation of present-day developments in advanced capitalist states. Critical voices have largely been missing from the debates on fake news and post-truth, while those who *have* engaged in debates have tended to overtake dominant narratives claiming that democracy is indeed experiencing a rapid ‘truth crisis’, which must be solved by restoring rationality and consensus. This chapter hopes to outline a fundamentally different take on these

³ For a longer exposition of this research project and its core arguments, see J. FARKAS and J. SCHOU *Post-truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*, Routledge, New York 2019.

⁴ J. FARKAS and J. SCHOU, ‘Fake news as a floating signifier: Hegemony, antagonism and the politics of falsehood’ (2018) 25(3), *Javnost – The Public*, 298-314, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1463047>>

⁵ C. MOUFFE, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, Verso, London 2013; C. MOUFFE, *On the Political* Routledge, London 2005.

discussions on fake news, post-truth and democracy. Drawing on concepts from post-Marxist discourse theory, particularly as it has been developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,⁶ we want to suggest that attention is needed to the ways in which different discourses hegemonise contemporary debates. We cannot take any shared meaning of key political terms for granted. Instead of seeking to find supposedly ‘real’ or ‘neutral’ definitions of fake news and post-truth, we need to investigate how they are mobilised as part of political conflicts. If there are any overarching commonalities in how concepts such as democracy are mobilised – that is, common ideas about what democracy is and ought to be – then this is the outcome of political struggles for hegemony rather than a neutral starting point. Only through such a perspective can we begin to connect our contemporary democratic moment to wider historical developments taking place within advanced capitalist states.

1.1. Approach and method

This chapter presents a political analysis of contemporary post-truth discourses. It does so by building on what is known as discourse theory or the *Essex School of Discourse Analysis*.⁷ The founding principle of this school, developed in an on-going dialogue with Marxist, feminist and post-structuralist political philosophy since the 1980s, has been to reject essentialism and reified concepts like ‘Society’, ‘Economy’ and ‘Democracy.’ Society does not develop or exist as a closed totality with its own internal logics. Instead, the meaning of *all* political concepts is based on their relation to other signifiers (*moments*) within more or less coherent systems of meaning (*discourses*). All such discourses are necessarily contingent insofar as their existence cannot be attributed to any innate development or unfolding of history. At the same time, however, social reality cannot simply be changed through sheer imagination. Indeed, we are always-already placed within circumstances not of our own making. As Marx remarked in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”⁸ Discourse theorists account for this relation between change and stability – what they label as *political decisions* and *sedimentation* – by suggesting that social reality is always crisscrossed

⁶ E. LACLAU and C. MOUFFE, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso, London 2014; E. LACLAU, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*. Verso, London 1990.

⁷ E. LACLAU, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London 2005; D. HOWARTH, *Discourse*, Open University Press, Buckingham; D. HOWARTH, *Poststructuralism and After: Structure, Subjectivity and Power*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2013; D. HOWARTH, A. J. NORVAL, and Y. STAVRAKAKIS, *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2000; J. TORFING, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1999.

⁸ K. MARX, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (in German)’ (1952) 8 *MEW*, p. 115.

with antagonism and hegemonic struggles. Different groups are competing to impose particular understandings of reality onto others in order to establish moral, intellectual and popular domination, consent and control. Social reality is open in principle (*contingency*), yet closed in practice (*hegemony*).⁹ The point of adopting a discourse-theoretical approach is to account for this closing of the social by deconstructing and systematically engaging with the formation of hegemonic discourse.¹⁰

If we accept these basic ideas, then certain arguments follow that directly impact our present investigation of post-truth discourses. It first of all becomes difficult to neatly separate the factual from the normative, as what is counted as factual is always embedded in particular historical circumstances and truth regimes.¹¹ All meaning is, at its core, the result of political decisions seeking to choose between competing alternatives. As Laclau suggests: “There are no facts without signification, and there is no signification without practical engagements that require norms governing our behaviour. So there are not two orders—the normative and the descriptive—but normative/descriptive complexes in which facts and values interpenetrate each other in an inextricable way.”¹²

Acknowledging the intimate relation between the factual and the normative means recognising that what is counted as true and truthful is in itself a deeply political activity, no matter whether this takes place within the domain of science, politics or anywhere else for that matter. Establishing a specific truth as dominant in the world relies on political struggles as well as the rejection of other potential truths. Building on these premises, this chapter unpacks how contemporary political debates articulate and construct the relation between truth, democracy and falsehood. How is the so-called post-truth crisis constructed by public voices at the current conjuncture? How is democracy envisioned to function as a political system? And what kind of remedies are offered to solve the on-going attack on Western democracies? Rather than seeking to deem whether democracy is *actually* facing a ‘truth crisis’, we are interested in interpreting and understanding how the *idea* of such a crisis is being constructed and what kind of performative impact it has. We are in this sense not interested in how new forms of false information circulates in

⁹ O. MARCHART, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2007.

¹⁰ E. LACLAU, *supra* n. 6.

¹¹ J. SCHOU, ‘Ernesto Laclau and Critical Media Studies: Marxism, Capitalism, and Critique’, (2016) 14(1), *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, 292-311, <<https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v14i1.740>>

¹² E. LACLAU, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, Verso, London, p. 128.

society, something we have explored in previous works.¹³ Rather, we seek to showcase how the notion of post-truth plays into already existing visions for democracy.

Methodologically, the chapter builds on a comprehensive empirical mapping of contemporary discourses in and around questions of fake news and the post-truth era. We rely on a broad set of empirical materials, ranging from scholarly texts, journalistic articles, books and commentaries from public intellectuals, speeches from political figures as well as documents from different governmental branches published between 2015 and 2018 in the Western, English-speaking world. In line with discourse theory's rejection of universal methods, we have opted for an exploratory mode of analysis suitable for tracing a continuously evolving political field.¹⁴ Since 2015, we have collected an archive of both academic and non-academic work. To systematise our data collection, we queried scholarly databases (such as Google Scholar) in August and September 2018 using the terms 'fake news', 'post-truth', 'post-factual' and 'post-factuality.' A similar technique was employed in the context of non-academic sources, which are central to the argument developed in this chapter, combining on-going collection with subsequent focused searches. In total, we established an archive of over 125 academic publications, primarily from international scholarly journals, and 350 non-academic pieces, linked primarily to *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *The Washington Post*, *Reuters*, *Buzzfeed* and *Time Magazine*. We have analysed this substantive corpus of data through an explorative, qualitative approach using discourse theory as a guiding framework. This analysis involved a three-step process, including: 1) close textual readings of the included material and production of inductive notes, 2) construction of codes capturing themes, explanations and proposed solutions as found in the empirical material, and 3) grouping of codes into larger topics and categories. Based on this approach, our focus has been to establish key threads across the studied material, mapping underlying premises that structure the semantic space at our current societal conjuncture. As this discursive space is continuously developing, the analysis presented should not be seen as exhaustive or final.¹⁵

¹³ J. FARKAS, J. SCHOU, and C. NEUMAYER, 'Platformed Antagonism: Racist discourses on fake Muslim Facebook pages' (2018a) 15(5) *Critical Discourse Studies*, 463-480. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1450276>>; J. FARKAS, J. SCHOU, and C. NEUMAYER, 'Cloaked Facebook Pages: Exploring Fake Islamist Propaganda in Social Media' (2018b) 20(5) *New Media & Society*, 1850-1867, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817707759>>; J. FARKAS & M. BASTOS, 'IRA Propaganda on Twitter: Stoking Antagonism and Tweeting Local News' (2018) *Proceedings of the 9th Annual International Conference on Social Media and Society*. <<https://doi.org/10.1145/3217804.3217929>>

¹⁴ J. TORFING, *supra* n. 7.

¹⁵ For an elaboration of the analytical approach of this research project, see J. FARKAS and J. SCHOU, *supra* nr. 3,

2. Mapping post-truth discourses

Having now presented the theoretical and methodological backdrop to this chapter, we turn to our analysis. This is structured in three main sections. First, we examine how democracy is articulated as being in a state of crisis within contemporary post-truth discourses. Second, we look into what actors and institutions are said to have caused this crisis, including justifications for why they are to blame. Third, we focus on the different solutions proposed to solve the post-truth crisis. Following our analysis, we discuss the implications of these increasingly hegemonic discourses. We do so by linking them to contemporary critical analyses of the historical development of liberal democracy in advanced capitalist states, particularly as proposed by the discourse theorist Chantal Mouffe.

2.1. What is wrong?

The idea that Western liberal democracies have entered a so-called post-truth era has become increasingly widespread and dominant. In this emergent political landscape – labelled as a “post-fact, post-truth, we’ve-had-enough-of-experts era”¹⁶ – the very foundations of truthfulness, facts and evidence have been put into question. Lies are said to be abundant and truth has become “whatever public opinion is persuaded by.”¹⁷ Across the political landscape, it is claimed, “emotional response prevails over factual evidence,”¹⁸ making truth “of secondary importance.”¹⁹ In this line of reasoning, citizens have become “passive consumers of bullshit”²⁰ who engage in and are victims of “wilful ignorance and distortions of reality.”²¹ Citizens are even said to be losing the basic ability to distinguish between true and false, causing a “political subordination of reality,”²² or even a “vanishing of reality”²³ with the potential of “bringing down democracy.”²⁴

Questions of democracy and participation are central to contemporary post-truth discourses. Often, it is presupposed that liberal democracy fundamentally revolves around truthfulness and reason: “Facts hold a sacred place in Western liberal democracies. Whenever democracy seems to be going awry, when voters are manipulated or politicians are ducking questions, we turn to facts

¹⁶ M. MCCARTNEY, ‘Evidence in a Post-Truth World’ (2016) 355 *British Medical Journal* 1. <<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.i6363>>

¹⁷ B. JAMESON, ‘God, Post-Truth’ (2018) 121(3) *Theology*, 186, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X17749145>>.

¹⁸ P. DAHLGREN, ‘Media, Knowledge and Trust: The Deepening Epistemic Crisis of Democracy’ (2018) 25(1-2), *Javnost -The Public* 25, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1418819>>.

¹⁹ THE ECONOMIST, ‘Post-Truth Politics: Art of the Lie’ (2016, 10 September) *The Economist*, <<https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21706525-politicians-have-always-lied-does-it-matter-if-they-leave-truth-behind-entirely-art?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/artofthelie>>.

²⁰ J. STUART, ‘“Bullshit Is a Greater Enemy than Lies’ – Lessons from Three New Books on the Post-Truth Era’ (2017, 22 May), *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/22/post-truth-era-trump-brex-it-lies-books>>.

²¹ THE LEARNING NETWORK, ‘On ‘The Age of Post-Truth Politics’ (2018, 6 September) *The New York Times*, <<https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/summer-reading-contest-winner-week-10-on-the-age-of-post-truth-politics/>>.

²² L. MCINTYRE, *Post-Truth*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2018.

²³ M. KAKUTANI, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, Tim Duggans Books, New York 2018, p. 77.

²⁴ M. KAKUTANI, ‘The Death of Truth: How We Gave up on Facts and Ended up with Trump’ (2018, 14 July) *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/14/the-death-of-truth-how-we-gave-up-on-facts-and-ended-up-with-trump>>.

for salvation. But they seem to be losing their ability to support consensus.”²⁵ The notion that lies are flourishing, truth is destabilised and Western democracies threatened has become seemingly ubiquitous: “Facts and reliable information are essential for the functioning of democracy.”²⁶ Indeed, as summarised by Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, the spread of lies and fake news undermines core democratic values: “Given the daunting mix of institutional decline, public sphere disruptions, and the growing attacks on journalism and enlightenment values, it may be that we have entered a ‘post-truth’ order [...]. If so, democracies based on norms of debate, deliberation, compromise and reason will not fare well.”²⁷ The idea that what is under siege are the ‘enlightenment values’ that underlie liberal democracies is widespread, too. Indeed, it has served as a substantial part of the discursive landscape. What we are witnessing, it is claimed, is the rapid collapse of the fundamental ideals that underpin democracy: “This is not a battle between liberals and conservatives. It is a battle between two ways of perceiving the world, two fundamentally different approaches to reality: and as between those two, you *do* have to choose. Are you content for the central value of the Enlightenment, of free societies and of democratic discourse, to be trashed by charlatans – or not? [...] The truth is out there, if only we demand it.”²⁸

Portraying truth as something that is ‘out there’ – beyond dispute – runs throughout post-truth discourses. As stated by *The Economist*: “Helped by new technology, a deluge of facts and a public much less given to trust than once it was, some politicians are getting away with a new depth and pervasiveness of falsehood. If this continues, the power of truth as a tool for solving society’s problems could be lastingly reduced.”²⁹ Writing for *The Guardian*, Hadley Freeman similarly argues: “We live in a blog culture where it’s pitched as a triumph of democracy that everyone can claim authority, which means anyone who says that, actually, there is an objective truth is condemned. Feelings rather than facts are what matter, these purveyors of bullshit claim.”³⁰

These discourses, arguing that democracy’s capacity to function is mainly dependent on reason and consensus, often articulate the decline of truth as having an almost larger-than-life agency of its own. This manifests itself through a highly naturalised or medicalised vocabulary.

²⁵ W. DAVIES, ‘The age of post-truth politics’ (2016, 24 August) *The New York Times*, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html>>-

²⁶ K. VINER, ‘How Technology Disrupted the Truth’ (2016, 12 July) *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth?CMP=soc_568>.

²⁷ W. L. BENNETT and S. LIVINGSTON, ‘The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions’ (2018) 33(2) *European Journal of Communication*, 122–39, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>>.

²⁸ M. D’ANCONA, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, Ebury Press, London 2017, pp. 5–6, original emphasis.

²⁹ THE ECONOMIST, ‘The Post-Truth World: Yes, I’d Lie to You Dishonesty’ (2016, 10 September) *The Economist*, <<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2016/09/10/yes-id-lie-to-you>>.

³⁰ H. FREEMAN, ‘From Deliciously Ella to Donald Trump’ (2018, 14 January) *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/14/difference-bullshitting-lying-donald-trump>>.

Thus, numerous voices have argued that fake news is “spreading and replicating like a virus”³¹, behaving like a “wildfire on social media”³² or “killing people’s minds”, as stated by Apple CEO, Tim Cook.³³ It has a viral nature, representing nothing less than a new form of “epidemic”³⁴ or “epidemics.”³⁵ In this narrative, fake news has become “a plague on the Web”³⁶ posing “a serious security threat to our societies”, as argued by Commissioner for the Security Union in EU, Sir Julian King.³⁷ In taking on this viral nature, circulated through digital networks and technologies, fake news supposedly traverse borders and operate at all scales. The post-truth condition has become a “global problem”³⁸, the “equivalent of a public-health crisis.”³⁹ In this viral vocabulary, democracies are said to be in a state where “a large share of the populace is living in an epistemic space that has abandoned conventional criteria of evidence.”⁴⁰ This “fake news epidemic”⁴¹ has proven “alarmingly resistant to treatment. Indeed, the treatment has often strengthened the disease.”⁴² Instead of stopping the plague and putting out the wildfires, societies amplify and worsen the critical post-truth condition: “we’ve entered a post-truth world – there’s no going back now.”⁴³ Unless radical measures are taken, “this cannot end well.”⁴⁴ Indeed, according to some, “[i]t’s no exaggeration to say that relying on emotions and personal opinions over facts will very likely destroy our political system.”⁴⁵

³¹ J. PARSONS, ‘How to Stop ‘Fake News’: Psychologists Believe We Can Be ‘inoculated’ against Misinformation’ (2017, 23 January) *The Daily Mirror*, <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/science/how-stop-fake-news-psychologists-9675939>>.

³² M. FOX, ‘Fake News: Lies spread faster on social media than truth does’ (2018, 8 March) *NBC News*, <<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/fake-news-lies-spread-faster-social-media-truth-does-n854896>>.

³³ A. HEATH, ‘Fake News Is Killing People’s Minds, Says Apple Boss Tim Cook’ (2017, 10 February) *The Telegraph*, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2017/02/10/fake-news-killing-peoples-minds-says-apple-boss-tim-cook/>>.

³⁴ M. AMRITA, ‘Understanding the Plague of Fake News and How to Combat it’ (2017, 12 December) *Medium*, <<https://medium.com/melissa-persauds-portfolio/understanding-the-plague-of-fake-news-and-how-to-combat-it-862d4920e61b>>.

³⁵ C. SHAO et al., ‘The Spread of Fake News by Social Bots’ 2017 *ArXiv*, <<https://arxiv.org/abs/1707.07592v2>>.

³⁶ B. STELTER, ‘The Plague of Fake News Is Getting Worse -- Here’s How to Protect Yourself’ (2016, 1 November) *CNN Media*, <<http://money.cnn.com/2016/10/30/media/facebook-fake-news-plague/index.html>>.

³⁷ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Tackling online disinformation: Commission proposes an EU-wide Code of Practice*. European Commission, Brussels 2018. <http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-3370_en.htm>

³⁸ K. CONNOLLY et al., ‘Fake news: an insidious trend that’s fast becoming a global problem’ (2016, December) *The Guardian*. <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/02/fake-news-facebook-us-election-around-the-world>>

³⁹ K. STEINMETZ, ‘How Your Brain Tricks You Into Believing Fake News’ (2018, 9 August) *Time Magazine*, <<http://time.com/5362183/the-real-fake-news-crisis/>>.

⁴⁰ S. LEWANDOWSKY, U. K.H. ECKER and J. COOK, ‘Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the ‘Post-Truth’ Era’ (2017) 6(4) *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 360, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008>>.

⁴¹ J. HOROWITZ, ‘For Pope Francis, Fake News Goes Back to the Garden of Eden’ (2018, 24 January) *The New York Times* <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/24/us/politics/pope-francis-fake-news.html>>.

⁴² M. D’ANCONA, *supra* n. 26.

⁴³ M. NORMAN, ‘Whoever Wins the US Presidential Election, We’ve Entered a Post-Truth World – There’s No Going Back Now’ (2016, 8 November) *The Independent*, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/us-election-2016-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-who-wins-post-truth-world-no-going-back-a7404826.html>>.

⁴⁴ N. ENFIELD, ‘We’re in a post-truth world with eroding trust and accountability. It can’t end well’ (2017, 16 November) *The Guardian*. <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/17/were-in-a-post-truth-world-with-eroding-trust-and-accountability-it-cant-end-well>>

⁴⁵ G. TSIPURSKY, ‘Towards a Post-Lies Future: Fighting "Alternative Facts" and ‘Post-Truth’ Politics’ (2017) *The Humanist* 13.

2.2. Who did it?

In post-truth discourses, a series of actors and developments are seen as primary causes of the sudden rupture in the rational fabric of democracy. In particular, we find that three actors are targeted as main drivers of contemporary changes – namely social media, journalism and the democratic masses.

The first key signifier linked to the rise of the post-truth condition is *social media*, understood as a more or less homogenous technological actor. Once hailed as an empowering democratic force, uniting the world through global connectedness and engagement, social media has increasingly been recast as a destabilising entity: “[O]ne might say that if the internet ushered in a more diverse and decentralised public sphere of global reach and accessibility, it has also created the pathways down which fake news and other malicious forms of content can spread.”⁴⁶ The transformation from technological hero to villain has been rapid. Less than a decade ago, social media platforms were said to give “genuine cause for hope” by enabling “dissent from official government and/or corporate-interest propaganda.”⁴⁷ Scholars and journalists highlighted decentralised protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the so-called Iranian “Twitter revolution”⁴⁸ as examples of how and why social media could empower individuals and collectives to circumvent elite interests and change society for the better through bottom-up initiatives.

In contrast to these optimistic accounts, social media is now increasingly (re)cast as a corrosive force that “effectively sways voters, suppresses rivals, sows confusion, defames opposition, and spreads fake news.”⁴⁹ Instead of supporting democracy, it now represents one of its greatest threats: “popular platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are powerhouses that enable misinformation to spread on a massive scale.”⁵⁰ Across post-truth discourses, social media are thus said to have “disrupted the truth,”⁵¹ giving rise to a dangerous “political culture of distrust that undermines shared assumptions about social reality.”⁵² The epicentres of the negative turn in public discourse came in the wake of the 2016 US Presidential elections when it was revealed that a data

⁴⁶ B. MCNAIR, *supra* nr. 2, p. 59.

⁴⁷ M. BOLER and S. NEMORIN, ‘Dissent, Truthiness, and Skepticism in the Global Media Landscape: Twenty-First Century Propaganda in Times of War’ In J. Auerbach & R. Castronovo (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 411.

⁴⁸ THE WASHINGTON TIMES, ‘EDITORIAL: Iran’s Twitter revolution’ (2009, 16 June) *The Washington Times*, <<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution/>>; M. CASTELLS, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2012.

⁴⁹ M. BOLER, and E. DAVIS, ‘The affective politics of the “post-truth” era: Feeling rules and networked subjects’ (2018) 27 *Emotion, Space and Society* 75, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.03.002>>.

⁵⁰ H. WEBB and M. JIROTKA, ‘Nuance, Societal Dynamics, and Responsibility in Addressing Misinformation in the Post-Truth Era: Commentary on Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook’ (2017) 6(4) *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6, 414–17, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.10.001>>.

⁵¹ K. VINER, *supra* nr. 26.

⁵² P. DAHLGREN, *supra* n. 18, p. 26.

analytics firm, *Cambridge Analytica*, used social media data on millions of Americans to target them with political ads. Additionally, it became clear that a Russian firm, *the Internet Research Agency*, had used thousands of fake social media accounts to infiltrate US debates. Negative sentiment towards social media quickly extended far beyond these specific cases and into the realm of politics in general, establishing a direct link between the rise of social media and the post-truth era.

Whereas previous forms of mass communication, curated by journalists or other gatekeepers, ensured an informed public sphere, social media give users the “impetus to participate digitally, through user-generated content, liking, and sharing” with little to no emphasis on factuality.⁵³ This leads, according to post-truth discourses, to a threatening situation in which users increasingly engage in debates “without even thinking twice, let alone checking to determine if it is true.”⁵⁴ As a result, we have entered a post-truth era in which “fear, rumour and gossip can spread alarmingly fast with feelings and emotions often carrying more weight than facts and evidence.”⁵⁵

Notions of ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’ are central to this discursive link between social media and post-truth.⁵⁶ These terms capture ways in which “people gather with like-minded and thereby collectively screen out information and views that do not sit well with the group consensus.”⁵⁷ On social media, algorithmic selection of content is said to entrench political polarisation and create “positive feedback loops” that “fuels the spread of fake news.”⁵⁸ Increasingly, we are witnessing the “replacement of verification with social media algorithms that tell us what we want to hear.”⁵⁹ Each user has become “trapped in a filter bubble” that forms “large-scale alternative realities.”⁶⁰ Within these realities, citizens are only presented with information they agree with. “We”, in other words, “become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions” as formulated by US President, Barack Obama in his farewell address.⁶¹ This is said to pose a fundamental threat to democracy not only

⁵³ J. HARSIN, ‘Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies’ (2015) 8(2) *Communication, Culture and Critique* 8 330, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12097>>.

⁵⁴ THE ECONOMIST, *supra* nr. 29.

⁵⁵ E. SPEED and R. MANNION, ‘The Rise of Post-Truth Populism in Pluralist Liberal Democracies : Challenges for Health Policy’ (2017) 6(5) *Kerman University of Medical Sciences*, 249-51, <<https://doi.org/10.15171/jhpm.2017.19>>.

⁵⁶ J. BALL, ‘How can we fight back against fake news and post-truth politics?’ (2017, 16 May) *NewStatesman*; S. LEWANDOWSKY, J. COOK and U.K.H. ECKER, ‘Letting the Gorilla Emerge From the Mist: Getting Past Post-Truth’ (2017) 6(4) *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 418–24, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.11.002>>; C. LAYBATS and L. TREDINNICK, ‘Post Truth, Information, and Emotion’ (2016= 33(4) *Business Information Review*, 204–6, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382116680741>>.

⁵⁷ P. DAHLGREN, *supra* n. 18, p. 25.

⁵⁸ P. R. BERTHON and L. F. PITT, ‘Brands, Truthiness and Post-Fact: Managing Brands in a Post-Rational World’ (2018) 38(2) *Journal of Macromarketing* 218. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146718755869>>

⁵⁹ M. D’ANCONA, *supra* n. 26.

⁶⁰ I. KALPOKAS, ‘On Guilt and Post-Truth Escapism’ (2018) 13 *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718794752>>.

⁶¹ B. OBAMA, ‘President Obama Farewell Address: Full Text’ (2018, 11 January) *CNN Politics*, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/10/politics/president-obama-farewell-speech/index.html>>.

because such bubbles drive political polarisation, but also because they make citizens vulnerable “to lines of deliberate attack from those trying to deceive or discourage us: we believe we’re in groups of like-minded people, and this leaves us open to be exploited by malicious actors.”⁶²

The notion of ‘malicious actors’ is also central to post-truth discourses. These are often linked to concepts such as ‘(social) bots’ and ‘trolls’, referring respectively to software-driven social media accounts and deceptive online behaviour thriving on ambivalence and antagonism.⁶³ These create a digital landscape in which “[o]rdinary people experience [...] propaganda posts as something shared by their own trusted friends, perhaps with comments or angry reactions, shaping their own opinions and assumptions.”⁶⁴ Once part of the “dark corners of the Internet”, social media has increasingly become “so poisoned by incivility that trolling can rightly be said to be the new normal.”⁶⁵ Combined with bots that increase “the circulation of false information as they automatically retweet posts without verifying the facts”, trolling has effectively made social media vehicles of post-truth.⁶⁶ Citizens are said to be flooded with “fake sites, bots, trolls – things that regenerate themselves, reinforcing opinions with certain algorithms”, as said by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel.⁶⁷ According to post-truth discourses, in other words, the rise of post-truth is fuelled by social media that has become “tools of very ugly kinds of politics.”⁶⁸

The second set of actors intimately connected to the post-truth era in contemporary discourses is the field of journalism, more specifically journalism’s role as an autonomous practice, professional institution and societal gatekeeper of knowledge: “The fragmentation of news sources has created an atomised world in which lies, rumour and gossip spread with alarming speed.”⁶⁹ While a strong connection between journalism and post-truth is found across contemporary discourses, specific details and explanations often diverge considerably. On the one hand, a number of voices emphasise that post-truth represents the *result* of declining societal trust in journalism. On the other hand, some argue that post-truth is instead what *creates* journalism’s decline. From the first perspective, the catalyst of post-truth is said to be declining trust in journalism since the late 20th century. In this understanding, post-truth politics is largely sparked by an “increasingly

⁶² J. BALL, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, Biteback Publishing, London 2017.

⁶³ H. WEBB and M. JIROTKA, *supra* nr. 50; N. VASU, B. ANG and S. JAYAKUMAR, ‘Fake News: National Security in the Post-Truth Era’ (2018) *Nanyang Technological University*; J. HANNAN, ‘Trolling Ourselves to Death? Social Media and Post-Truth Politics’ (2018) 33(2) *European Journal of Communication*, 214–26, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760323>>; M. KAKUTANI, *supra* nr. 23.

⁶⁴ M. HAIGH, T. HAIGH, and N. I. KOZAK, ‘Stopping Fake News: The Work Practices of Peer-to-Peer Counter Propaganda’ (2018) 19(4) *Journalism Studies*, 2062–87, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1316681>>.

⁶⁵ J. HANNAN, *supra* nr. 63.

⁶⁶ K. SHU et al., ‘Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective’ (2017) 19(1) *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter* 31, <<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1145/3137597.3137600>>.

⁶⁷ K. CONNOLLY et al, *supra* nr. 38.

⁶⁸ S. SISMONDO, ‘Post-Truth?’ (2017) 47(1) *Social Studies of Science* 4, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312717692076>>.

⁶⁹ THE ECONOMIST, *supra* nr. 19.

privatised and fragmented public news that began with the ‘sound bite’ and ‘photo opportunity’ to bypass public discussion in the regime of the 24-h news cycle.”⁷⁰ The rise of post-truth does thus not only designate an increase in fake news and lies online, but, more substantially, a decline of quality and integrity within the journalistic field: “We have a bad news problem, not a fake news problem”, as formulated by the founder of the fact-checking website, Snopes.⁷¹ News organisations have increasingly engaged in “horse-race election coverage, the daily twists of the stock market — and not enough deal consistently and seriously with issues that affect people’s lives.”⁷² Slowly, but steadily, journalism’s pursuit of “truth and justice” has been replaced by a “carnival of gossip and spectacle.”⁷³ Accordingly, this line of reasoning suggests, the spread of false information online can be “traced to growing legitimacy problems in many democracies.”⁷⁴ Citizens no longer trust journalistic sources and seek out alternative (fake) ones. Some authors do, however, also emphasise that the “plague of fake news” amplifies existing “threats to the integrity of journalism.”⁷⁵ For example, social media is said to contribute negatively by enabling “fake election news to outperform real news,”⁷⁶ causing financial distress to news organisations, while supporting malicious actors. Accordingly, “the fake news phenomenon both embodies and intensifies” the crisis of journalism and post-truth conditions.⁷⁷

The third prominent cause of the post-truth conditions found in contemporary discourses hones in on the democratic people or masses. Writing for *Huffington Post*, Masur captures this position in arguing that “[t]he most important thing in a functional society is a well-informed public. What we have now is not only uninformed but misinformed masses. That’s something that should scare us all.”⁷⁸ Whereas citizens were once able to stay informed about public affairs, they now get overwhelmed by the massive “barrage of misinformation that comes our way these days.”⁷⁹ This links directly to the role of social media and journalism, as the public now only hears “what it

⁷⁰ M. PETERS, ‘Post-truth and fake news Responses to the Editorial ‘Education in a post-truth world’ (2017) 49(6) *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 564, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1288782>>.

⁷¹ D. MIKKELSEN, ‘We Have a Bad News Problem, Not a Fake News Problem’ (2016, 17 November) Snopes, <<https://www.snopes.com/news/2016/11/17/we-have-a-bad-news-problem-not-a-fake-news-problem/>>.

⁷² M. ZIMDARS, ‘My ‘Fake News List’ Went Viral. But Made-up Stories Are Only Part of the Problem’ (2016, 18 November) *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/18/my-fake-news-list-went-viral-but-made-up-stories-are-only-part-of-the-problem/?utm_term=.b037b313a4fb>.

⁷³ N. FENTON & D. FREEDMAN, ‘Fake democracy, bad news’ (2018) 54 *Socialist Register* 1. <http://research.gold.ac.uk/22330/1/Fenton-Fake_democracy.pdf>

⁷⁴ W. L. BENNETT and S. LIVINGSTON, *supra* n. 27.

⁷⁵ W. Y. WANG, ‘“Liar, Liar Pants on Fire”: A New Benchmark Dataset for Fake News Detection’ (2017) 1 *Proceedings of the 55th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics* <<https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/P17-2067>>.

⁷⁶ S. LEVIN, ‘Facebook Promised to Tackle Fake News. But the Evidence Shows It’s Not Working’ (2017, 16 May) *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/16/facebook-fake-news-tools-not-working>>.

⁷⁷ B. MCNAIR, *supra* nr. 2.

⁷⁸ M. MASUR, ‘Bernie Sanders Could Replace President Trump With Little-Known Loophole’ (2016, 14 November) *The Huffington Post*, <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bernie-sanders-could-replace-president-trump-with-little_us_5829f25fe4b02b1f5257a6b7>.

⁷⁹ H. BERGHEL, ‘Alt-News and Post-Truths in the “Fake News” Era’ (2017) 50(4) *Computer* 114, <<https://doi.org/10.1109/MC.2017.104>>.

wants to hear, because many people get their news exclusively from sources whose bias they agree with.”⁸⁰ Some argue that especially younger citizens are to blame, as the “social media generation may not be equipped—or sufficiently interested—to actually understand what news is, and how it differs from other kinds of information.”⁸¹ Others point to the exact opposite conclusion, arguing that so-called millennials “know more than anybody that context is key, and the same story told from different perspectives can hold many different meanings. [...] By understanding communication as something individualized, they can process information efficiently and improve its accuracy.”⁸² Yet others point to “rightwing social network users” as being primary consumers and disseminators of “[l]ow-quality, extremist, sensationalist and conspiratorial news.”⁸³ At the moment, then, there are a number of both different and connected ideas about the relationship between citizens and the post-truth era. Some argue that the problem for citizens is not necessarily a biased selection of sources or abandonment of truth-telling, but instead the amounts of sources available that causes a crisis: “citizens are encircled by millions of channels, newspapers, websites, blogs and social media feeds creating an information – or misinformation – overload.”⁸⁴ Mobilising the concept of *infoglut*, Dahlgren similarly argues that “challenges of acquiring knowledge in a media environment... ushers in an uncertain epistemic future” for democracy.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, others argue that the answer lies in our brains, which “Tricks You Into Believing Fake News.”⁸⁶ Playing off the charges against social media and journalism, the problem with citizens remains that they are either too easy to deceit, live in their own secluded realities or simply do not care about the truth any longer.

2.3. What is to be done?

A large part of contemporary discourses on post-truth and democracy has not just been about diagnosing what is wrong with the state of democracy. It has also been concerned with prescribing solutions and remedies. In this regard, a large set of different policy initiatives, both implemented and proposed, can be highlighted. In France, new legal means are put in place to combat the spread

⁸⁰ K. HIGGINS, ‘Post-Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed’ (2016) 540(7631) *Nature* 6, <<https://doi.org/10.1038/540009a>>.

⁸¹ N. RICHARDSON, ‘Fake News and Journalism Education’ (2017) 27(1) *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 5, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1326365X17702268>>.

⁸² K. MOORE, ‘How Do We Navigate A ‘Post-Truth’ World? Follow The Millennials’ (2017, 7 September) *Forbes*, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/karlmoore/2017/09/07/how-do-we-navigate-a-post-truth-world-follow-the-millennials/#1622be0b7072>>.

⁸³ A. HERN, ‘Fake News Sharing in US Is a Rightwing Thing, Says Study’ (2018, 6 February) *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/06/sharing-fake-news-us-rightwing-study-trump-university-of-oxford>>.

⁸⁴ H. TAŞ, ‘The 15 July abortive coup and post-truth politics in Turkey’ (2018) 18(1) *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea* 3, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2018.1452374>>.

⁸⁵ P. DAHLGREN, *supra* nr. 18; M. ANDREJEVIC, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know*, Routledge, New York 2013.

⁸⁶ K. STEINMETZ, *supra* nr. 39.

of fake news.⁸⁷ In Germany, a controversial law came into effect on 1 January 2018, known as the Network Enforcement Act (*NetzDG*), requiring online platforms to remove hate speech within 24 hours.⁸⁸ Both laws attracted criticism from multiple sides, including human rights groups arguing that they risk violating freedom of speech.⁸⁹ In addition to legislation, specialized units and task forces have been launched, including the European Union’s *EastStratcom Task Force*, serving to “address and respond to disinformation activities by external actors”, particularly from Russia.⁹⁰ In the Czech Republic, the government created a similar unit, dubbed as a “fake news police”, also with the purpose of countering disinformation.⁹¹ The same applies to the UK, where a security unit was established to contest and actively intervene in cases of fake news.⁹² Finally, European research-based initiatives have also been launched, such as the *Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis*, funded by the European Union to “support to a European community that will jointly fight disinformation!”⁹³ While these geo-political interventions deserve detailed analyses in their own right, the following section seeks to outline wider discursively constructed visions for solving the post-truth condition rather than specific interventions.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, one of the general themes emerging throughout contemporary discourses is that the institutions that once safeguarded and produced truth, reason and rationality should be re-established. This goes particularly for the fields of politics, science, and journalism. Writing for the *European Council on Foreign Relations*, Sebastian Dullien & Jeremy Shapiro thus argue: “It is time to recognize that the integrity of information about current events and persons of public interest is part of the critical infrastructure of liberal democracy. If that infrastructure is compromised, the stability of the political system (and of liberal democracy itself) is threatened. Attacks on information integrity are therefore national security problems. And national security problems require a distinct response from domestic issues.”⁹⁴

⁸⁷ J. MCAULEY, ‘France weighs a law to rein in “fake news”, raising fears for freedom of speech’ (2018, 10 January) *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/france-weighs-a-law-to-rein-in-fake-news-raising-fears-for-freedom-of-speech/2018/01/10/78256962-f558-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042_story.html>.

⁸⁸ P. OLTERMAN, ‘Tough new German law puts tech firms and free speech in spotlight’ (2018, 5 January) *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/05/tough-new-german-law-puts-tech-firms-and-free-speech-in-spotlight>>.

⁸⁹ HUMANS RIGHTS WATCH, ‘Germany: Flawed Social Media Law’ (2018, 14 February), *Human Rights Watch*, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/14/germany-flawed-social-media-law>>; MCAULEY, *supra* nr. 87.

⁹⁰ EAST STRACOM, ‘Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force’ (2018, 5 December), <https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/eastern-europe/2116/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en>

⁹¹ A. FAIOLA, ‘As Cold War turns to Information War, a new fake news police combats disinformation’ (2017, January) *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/as-cold-war-turns-to-information-war-a-new-fake-news-police/2017/01/18/9bf49ff6-d80e-11e6-a0e6-d502d6751bc8_story.html>

⁹² P. WALKER, ‘New national security unit set up to tackle fake news in UK’ (2018, 23 January) *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jan/23/new-national-security-unit-will-tackle-spread-of-fake-news-in-uk>>.

⁹³ SOMA Observatory, ‘Who Leads this Effort?’ (n.d.), <<http://www.disinfoobservatory.org/#somaproject>>

⁹⁴ S. DULLIEN and J. SHAPIRO, ‘How to avoid a post-truth world’ (2017, 16 January) *European Council of Foreign Relations*, <https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_to_avoid_a_post_truth_world>

Similar sentiments have been attached to science, as numerous voices have argued for the need to reclaim the truth-telling capacity of this field by ensuring “that researchers and technologists have a seat at the table when important decisions are made.”⁹⁵ This has also made scholars call for the development of new “strategies to counter a current flood of deception and misinformation.”⁹⁶ Indeed, for some, “[a]n understanding of the nature of science is absolutely fundamental to combat post-truth, which is the antithesis of science.”⁹⁷ Finally, journalism has also been called upon, as proclaimed saviour and watchdog of democracy, truth and critical thinking. As McNair puts it, the declining truth-telling capacity of the journalistic field is (seemingly) equal to the breakdown of liberal democracy: “If the crisis of trust in journalistic elites and the loss of authority of elites in other spheres such as politics and academia are not addressed in the coming years, it is quite possible that the entire structure of liberal democracy which has driven global evolution forward since 1945 will collapse in the face of rising authoritarianism and ‘post-truth’ cultural movements such as that embodied by the alt-right in the United States or in Putin’s Kremlin, or will be eroded to the point where it is unrecognizable as the generally progressive, if messy and imperfect polity we see (still).”⁹⁸

Rather than simply arguing for the re-establishment of the authority of politics, science and journalism, others have also proposed more tangible ideas as to how truth should be reclaimed. Amongst these is a very strong notion that technology can provide the solution to existing problems. Indeed, ‘technological solutionism’⁹⁹ is in many ways deeply ingrained in post-truth discourses. In this narrative, technology is portrayed in a double fashion as both a poison and a cure: “Technology helped fake news. Now technology needs to stop it.”¹⁰⁰ While the post-truth era was in large part caused by the rise of new technologies, the solution might still be more technology. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, natural-language processing and similar developing tools could, some suggest, be a way of mitigating the onslaught of fake news and misinformation.¹⁰¹ Although new technologies certainly have flaws, “computers may be the only

⁹⁵ J. L. VERNON, ‘Science in the Post-Truth Era’ (2017) 105(1) *American Scientist*, 2, <<https://www.americanscientist.org/article/science-in-the-post-truth-era>>.

⁹⁶ R. STRUMINGER, J. WINKING, and A. ROSS, ‘How Will Science Survive In The Age of Alternative Facts?’ (2017, 20 July) *Huffington Post*, <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-will-science-survive-in-the-age-of-alt-facts_us_596fa33be4b0110cb3cb427f>.

⁹⁷ L. ACKLAND, ‘Post-Truth and the Rejection of Science’ (2017, August) *Australasian Science*, <<http://www.australasianscience.com.au/article/issue-mayjune-2017/post-truth-and-rejection-science.html>>.

⁹⁸ B. MCNAIR, *supra* nr. 2,

⁹⁹ E. MOROZOV, *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solutionism, and the Urge to Fix Problems That Don’t Exist*, Penguin Books, London 2013.

¹⁰⁰ J. COOK, ‘Technology helped fake news. Now technology needs to stop it’ (2017, 17 November) *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, <<https://thebulletin.org/2017/11/technology-helped-fake-news-now-technology-needs-to-stop-it/>>

¹⁰¹ E. GENT, ‘Sock Puppet Accounts Unmasked by the Way They Write and Post’ (2017, 6 April) *NewScientist*, <<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2127107-sock-puppet-accounts-unmasked-by-the-way-they-write-and-post/>>.

things capable of keeping up with the sheer volume.”¹⁰² From a policy perspective, *The European Commission* has similarly argued for technological measures in order to make “detection and analysis of online disinformation more accurate and timely.”¹⁰³ This includes the use of “artificial intelligence... for verifying, identifying and tagging disinformation”, “[c]ognitive algorithms that handle contextually-relevant information” and “[i]nnovative technologies, such as blockchain”, which can “enable transparency and traceability, and promote trust in news displayed on the Internet.”¹⁰⁴ Social media companies have largely co-opted this rhetoric, presenting themselves as leading actors in the fight against fake news through “improvements in machine learning and artificial intelligence, which can proactively identify suspicious behavior at a scale that was not possible before”¹⁰⁵

Going one step further than simply arguing for technological fact-checking, Lewandowsky and colleagues propose what they label as *technocognition*. This encompasses “an inter-disciplinary approach to the design of information architectures that incorporates principles borrowed from behavioral economics to ‘nudge’ [...] against the spread of misinformation” with the purpose of building “bridges between the socially-defined epistemic islands that define the post-truth era.”¹⁰⁶ From this perspective, it is not only false information itself that needs to be corrected but also the citizens currently living alternative epistemic bubbles or realities. As citizens have moved beyond the realm of facts, they need to be pushed back into society. This requires technological solutions that can get them “nudged out of their filter bubbles,”¹⁰⁷ altering their “minds by making them more responsive to genuine evidence.”¹⁰⁸

3. Discussion: The dangers of post-truth discourses

Based on the analysis presented above, we can begin to see how a certain set of ideas have become increasingly hegemonic in contemporary debates on truth, democracy and politics. Centred on notions of fake news and post-truth, voices from across institutional fields have in large part come to promote an overarching ideal of democracy that places truth, reason and rationality at its core. It is these elements that are under attack, it is claimed, and it is consequently these elements that

¹⁰² E. GENT, ‘Post-Truth: Technology Is a Big Part of the Problem, But It’s Also a Solution’ (2017, 27 December) *SingularityHub*, <<https://singularityhub.com/2016/12/27/post-truth-technology-is-a-big-part-of-the-problem-but-its-also-a-solution/>>.

¹⁰³ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach*, European Commission, Brussels 2018, p. 15, <<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/communication-tackling-online-disinformation-european-approach>>.

¹⁰⁴ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *supra* nr. 103, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ FACEBOOK, ‘Russian Ads Released by Congress’ (2018, 19 May). *Facebook.com*. <<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/05/russian-ads-released-by-congress/>>

¹⁰⁶ S. LEWANDOWSKY, U. K.H. ECKER and J. COOK, *supra* nr. 40, p. 362.

¹⁰⁷ S. LEWANDOWSKY, U. K.H. ECKER and J. COOK, *supra* nr. 40, p. 364.

¹⁰⁸ N. LEVY, ‘Nudges in a Post-Truth World’ (2017) *Journal of Medical Ethics* 498, <<https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2017-104153>>.

should be protected. In this section, we want to critically reflect on how and in what ways this democratic imaginary, currently underpinning post-truth discourses, relates to wider changes in Western democracies. Doing so, we want to shift gears slightly, moving from an analysis of contemporary discourses to a discussion of their potential implications and shortcomings.

Since the early 1990s, a number of critical political philosophers and sociologists have started to question the development of Western (liberal) democracies. Under labels such as *post-politics* and *post-democracy*, diverse scholars such as Chantal Mouffe¹⁰⁹, Jacques Rancière¹¹⁰, Colin Crouch¹¹¹, and Wolfgang Streeck¹¹² have pointed out how fundamental transformations have taken place to liberal democracy since the 1970s and 1980s. In conjunction with wider developments in the political economy of advanced capitalist states, largely sparked by the economic crisis of the 1970s and the failures of Keynesianism, Western democracies have increasingly been hollowed-out. More concretely, public deliberation, democratic inclusion and participation have been replaced by technocratic solutions, individual obligations and market-based modes of governance. This neoliberal offensive, taking place since the 1980s, has had serious repercussions for democracy.¹¹³ Indeed, Ian Bruff names this as the rise of *authoritarian neoliberalism*: that is, a mode of politics that no longer relies on democratic compromise and popular sovereignty, but increasingly works through coercion, non-democratic legal mechanisms and (if necessary) outright violence.¹¹⁴ There are many ways of understanding and unpacking these developments. For the present purpose, we want particularly to focus on this *de-democraticisation* of democracy as it has been analysed by Mouffe. Her starting point is to place contemporary liberal democracies within their wider political history. She does so by suggestion that liberal democracy has to be understood as a contingent compromise between two seemingly opposite political philosophical traditions. She names this *the democratic paradox*: “liberal democracy is an articulation that combines two different traditions: liberalism, with its emphasis on individual liberty and universal rights; and democracy, which privileges the idea of equality and ‘rule by the people’, i.e. popular sovereignty.”¹¹⁵

According to Mouffe, the political development in the last thirty years has forcefully tipped the balance between the poles of this compromise, so that the liberal component has started to

¹⁰⁹ C. MOUFFE, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London 2018; C. MOUFFE, *The Return of the Political*, Verso, London 1993.

¹¹⁰ J. RANCIERE, *Disagreement: Politics And Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, London 1999.

¹¹¹ C. CROUCH, *Post-democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2004.

¹¹² W. STREECK, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*, Verso, London 2016.

¹¹³ N. OLSEN, *The Sovereign Consumer: A New Intellectual History of Neoliberalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland 2018; T. BIEBRICHER, ‘Neoliberalism and democracy’ (2015) 22(2) *Constellations*, 255–266.

¹¹⁴ I. BRUFF, ‘The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism’ (2014) 26(1) *Rethinking Marxism*, 113–129, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2013.843250>>.

¹¹⁵ C. MOUFFE, *supra* nr. 5, 2013, p. 29.

overtake the democratic. Indeed, as part of the increasingly widespread adoption of neoliberal policies, the liberal part of liberal democracy has come to dominate or even cancel out its democratic counterpart. This means, Mouffe argues, that many of the political achievements linked to the democratic tradition have been rolled back. Ideas that were formerly seen as integral to the political order have been “dismissed as ‘archaic’.”¹¹⁶ This has, on the one hand, meant that the contemporary liberal hegemony has been progressively more neutralised and sedimented, appearing as the *only* possible way of organising democracy.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, this neutralisation serves to consolidate a “post-political trend [...] [that] deprives democratic citizens of an agonistic debate where they can make their voices heard and choose between real alternatives.”¹¹⁸ This post-political zeitgeist is, according to Mouffe, based on two fundamental assumptions, namely a *rationalist* and an *individualist* understanding of democracy and politics. Post-politics tends, first of all, to reduce democracy and political participation to the individual. In taking the individual as its starting point, collective identities and political projects are either reduced to ‘aggregated’ collectives (made up of supposedly rational beings) *or* simply seen as the starting point for ‘deliberative’ modes of communication. Secondly, individualism is coupled with “the rationalist belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason.”¹¹⁹ For Mouffe, it is precisely this combination of individualism and reason, alongside institutional and economic changes, that constitutes the backbone for a post-political climate in which conflicting voices of the democratic people have been systematically dismantled.

To our mind, Mouffe’s discussion of post-politics – and the wider field of literature this connects to – is important for our present analysis of post-truth discourses. It is so in two main regards: First, it gives us significant clues as to the underlying *causes* of contemporary discourses. Indeed, one of the points that Mouffe has made time and again is precisely that the rise of populism and right-wing demagogues represents a *response* to the increasingly post-political condition of democracy. These kinds of political groupings often represent – or claim to represent – genuine alternatives to the established order, as well as the reclaiming of popular sovereignty (the people). In a similar sense, it seems legitimate to speculate whether current political conflicts over truth and democracy represent a similar trajectory: could it not be that the (supposed) denial of truth and authority comes from a desire to move *beyond* a post-political condition? Those who are blamed for

¹¹⁶ C. MOUFFE, *supra* nr. 5, 2013, p. 124.

¹¹⁷ C. MOUFFE, *The Democratic Paradox*. Verso, London 2000, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ C. MOUFFE, *supra* nr. 5, 2013, p. 119.

¹¹⁹ C. MOUFFE, *supra* nr. 5, 2005, p. 11.

spreading post-truth sentiments often represent otherwise denied and silenced voices (however problematic these might be). Secondly, and more substantially, Mouffe's discussion is helpful because it helps pinpoint the underlying ideals that have driven, and continue to drive, contemporary processes of de-democratisation. It seems that it is in many ways precisely these ideas that are currently being mobilised in contemporary post-truth discourses. Indeed, these hegemonic discourses often presuppose the notion that democracy more or less exclusively needs to be grounded in reason, rationality and consensus. They moreover presuppose that these concepts are stable and that, given the right conditions, it is possible to establish a rational and 'objectively truthful' mode of governance. Yet, along with Mouffe, we want to insist these ideas are far from neutral: they represent only one part of the political history of liberal democracy.

In this sense, it seems to us that current discussions on the post-truth era of democracy have in many ways internalised the post-political language of individualism, rationalism and consensus that has flourished since the 1980s. What needs to be established, according to these, are not spaces for popular sovereignty and political participation, but instead more rigid forms of truth-based governance and technocratic policing. Consequently, the plea for re-grounding democracy in truth seems to be a plea for further entrenching post-political sentiments. All too often, protecting democracy has come to mean safeguarding and expanding its liberal underpinnings, neglecting or even suppressing the democratic tradition. Contemporary discourses thus end up reproducing the very set of problems that might have caused a crisis of democracy in the first place: as a supposed remedy for the post-political condition, more post-politics is ordained.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has engaged with contemporary political discourses on post-truth and democracy currently dominating Western democracies. Through an analysis of both academic and non-academic sources – ranging from media commentaries, research articles, books and governmental policies – we have sought to showcase how a new hegemonic discourse is currently being formed. This discourse is, we argue, both contentious and consensual. It is, on the one hand, made up of conflicting ideas about the current state of democracy, while nonetheless, on the other hand, being underpinned by a series of homogenous ideological premises. To put it in very condensed terms, these premises present democracy as bound up with truth, rational decision-making and consensus. As a consequence, post-truth discourses portray the rise of so-called fake news and alternative facts as a direct threat to the very core of liberal democracy. As we have argued in the discussion,

however, these increasingly hegemonic discourses reproduce and repurpose a post-political vocabulary mobilised by political elites since the 1970s and 1980s. In so doing, these discourses tend to smuggle in an implicit model of democracy that emphasises rationalism, reason and truth, while neglecting or even suppressing popular sovereignty, difference and equality.

By pointing to the articulation of this new hegemonic discourse, this chapter contributes to our understanding of the present political climate and conjecture of democracy. It adds to the few accounts provided so far by critical scholars concerning democracy and the post-truth era.¹²⁰ It does so, not least, by highlighting how a contemporary *politics of falsehood* is becoming increasingly dominant, depending on a specific, and often limited, normative ideal of democratic participation.¹²¹ Furthermore, the chapter critically problematises the all too widespread tendency to take notions like truth, democracy and fake news for granted. It documents how these terms are deeply politically charged and constructed. They are not merely descriptions of the world, but discursive weapons used to intervene and shape social reality. This also means that future research would do good to take the constructed and contested nature of such labels into account. Doing so does not mean denying the very real problems posed by disinformation, propaganda and online politics,¹²² it means taking seriously the foundational role of discourses in understanding and shaping politics.

From the arguments presented in this chapter, no easy solutions can or should be deduced. The history of democracy is not driven by any necessary movement towards more egalitarian or inclusive societies. Instead, democracy remains a frail and in many ways contradictory compromise that must be continuously deepened and defended. One way of deepening democracy might be to start reclaiming the democratic tradition by insisting on the need to establish inclusive and participatory spaces of politics over technocratic and technological solutions. Rather than rallying behind calls for reason and consensus, it is high time to realise that democracy is *not* just (and never has been) about truth alone. More substantially, it is about the *voice of the people* and what they, collectively, deem appropriate. As a consequence, there might be value in pursuing the building of a new left populist movement, as recently suggested by Mouffe, concerned with bringing back the

¹²⁰ N. FENTON & D. FREEDMAN, *supra* n. 73; N. FENTON, 'Fake Democracy: The Limits of Public Sphere Theory' (2018) 25(1–2) *Javnost – The Public*, 28–34. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1418821>>; R. MEJIA, K. BECKERMANN, and C. Sullivan, 'White lies: A racial history of the (post)truth' (2018) 15(2) *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 109–126. <<http://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2018.1456668>>

¹²¹ J. FARKAS and J. SCHOU, *supra* nr. 4.

¹²² J. FARKAS, J. SCHOU, and C. NEUMAYER, *supra* nr. 13; J. FARKAS and C. NEUMAYER, 'Disguised propaganda from digital to social media' (2018) In J. Hunsinger, L. Klastrup & M. M. Allen (Eds.), *The International Handbook of Internet Research* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer. <http://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1202-4_33-1>

voice of the *demos*.¹²³ While critiques of Mouffe have rightly highlighted that any such attempt to re-politicise democracy should carefully avoid falling into the trap of “fetishising the moment of the political,”¹²⁴ valuing autonomy and conflict above and beyond the wellbeing of people,¹²⁵ it seems increasingly clear that the status quo no longer holds. Thus, while Mouffe’s ideas cannot be seen as a clear-cut plan for how to move forward,¹²⁶ they still provide a productive starting point for critically thinking through our present historical moment and develop genuine democratic alternatives. Contemporary democracy might very well be facing a deep-seated crisis. Whether truth-based post-politics represents a viable option, however, is much more dubious. What needs to take place at the current conjuncture is not the cancellation or shutting down of political conflict, either by policing what is deemed as false or algorithmically sorting the voices who have access to the public sphere. Instead, we need genuine political alternatives and open discussions. Only then might we become capable of reinvigorating liberal democracies and deal with the entrenched political issues that continue to haunt our present age.

¹²³ C. MOUFFE, *supra* nr. 117.

¹²⁴ Y. STAVRAKAKIS, ‘Challenges of Re-politicisation Mouffe’s Agonism and Artistic Practices’ (2012) 26(5) *Third Text*, 551-565, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2013.843250>>.

¹²⁵ S. WHITE, ‘Response to Chantal Mouffe’, in W. Williams (ed.) *Religion and Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, Manchester: Manchester University Press

¹²⁶ J. SCHOU ‘Hvordan skabes et alternativ? Om det radikale demokratis mulighedsbetingelser’ (2017) 3(20) *Politik* , 138-153, <<https://doi.org/10.7146/politik.v20i3.97158>>