

Expert testimony by Johan Farkas
Cognitive Intrusions: Opening Symposium
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Dear Members of the Hybrid CoE,

My name is Johan Farkas and I am a PhD Student at Malmö University, Sweden. I am also author of the book, *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*, written with my colleague Jannick Schou. Today, I would like to share a few reflections based on my research and pose to you the following question:

- How can we combat political manipulation and misinformation while making our societies more democratic in the process?

Let us begin by taking a critical look at one of the dominant narratives of our time, namely that we live in a post-truth era. According to numerous scholars, journalists, and policymakers, democracy is in a crisis caused primarily by fake news and related phenomena. Rational and factual evidence has been cast aside, as political mobs roam social media, using new platforms as weapons in a battle against truth-based politics.

At the core of these narratives lies a very particular mythos intended to capture not only the current state of democracy, but also potential ways of solving and overcoming this crisis of truth.

Numerous voices have proclaimed that fake news is comparable to a dangerous, infectious disease or even plague, proliferating with alarming speed from body to body through interpersonal contact. This trend was already prominent before COVID-19 but exploded in its wake.

These medical analogies for fake news are not mere metaphors or representations. They constitute the rhetorical backbone of a dominant democratic imaginary, guiding the way in which we currently talk about the future of democracy.

In my research, I try not only to pull apart the inner dynamics of this imaginary, but also to suggest that the “cure” it ordains is in many ways a poison. Indeed, the post-truth imaginary often turns out to be deeply anti-democratic in scope, focused on limiting free speech, increasing corporate surveillance, and establishing more centralised forms of governance, rather than restoring genuinely political institutions, popular participation, and the voice of the democratic people.

To give some examples: Against the backdrop of COVID-19, a host of countries imposed free speech restrictions in the name of stopping fake news and related phenomena. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 83 governments implemented emergency measures to restrict free speech and peaceful protests. This included new laws and decrees criminalising fake news about government actions in diverse countries, from Hungary to Thailand, or from Ethiopia to Bolivia. These developments came concurrently with the World Health Organization urging governments to fight the ‘infodemic’ and researchers recommending to criminally prosecute people for spreading the misinformation virus. As such, these solutions came as logical extensions of prevalent ideas about fake news being a disease that needs to be eradicated.

Already before COVID-19, free speech restrictions had become a prominent state solution to fake news across the globe. On all inhabited continents, we find laws criminalising the creation or spreading of fake news as well as new forms of corporate and state surveillance of public debate. As can be seen from these many legal measures, the fake news debate has led to drastic solutions, not only to guard democracy against supposed enemies of disinformation, but perhaps also to reform the very structures of democracy itself.

The fundamental problem, of course, with these solutions is not only that they one-sidedly equate democracy with truth and fake news to a “virus,” but also that they fail to capture the history of liberal democracies. As human rights groups and free speech advocates have pointed out time and again, banning fake news will not save democracy, but can easily make a society less democratic by silencing political opposition and critical voices.

Building on critical scholarship, I want to suggest that the current democratic crisis is neither sudden nor linked to issues of factuality alone. More fundamentally, what is at stake is a crisis of democracy caused by an increasingly pervasive dismantlement of proper democratic institutions and popular sovereignty. Developments such as declining voter participation or the election of populist leaders cannot simply be explained by irrationality and misinformation but must be taken seriously as demands for breaking with the status quo in times of growing inequality, increasing concentration of legislative power, and profound economic instability. Lamenting apathy or populism as simply the result of a post-truth era risks not only neglecting the democratic tradition, but also entrenching the very crisis it is trying to solve. To protect democracy, anti-democratic measures are often currently being prescribed.

If we want to strengthen democracy, I strongly believe that we need to strengthen the democratic tradition. This could involve strengthening egalitarian access to education, journalism, and political decision-making, limiting corporate influence in politics, and dismantling the current monopolistic and surveillance-based state of digital media environments. To engage with such structural reforms, however, would first require that we abandon the simplistic narratives that continue to dominate and limit our understanding of the past, present, and future of democracy as a form of co-habitation.

So, with that, I would like return to the question I posed at the beginning: How can we combat political manipulation and misinformation while making our societies more democratic in the process?