DISPUTES OVER OR AGAINST REALITY?

Fine-graining the textures of post-truth politics

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What if...?

Imagine a (not-so-far) dystopian world where relativism was so prevalent that any consensus about facts and policy, and thus accountability, was virtually impossible. Now, add to that unlimited means and freedom of expression. Everyone could say absolutely anything without any filter or barrier. One of the consequences of the impossibility of distinguishing between reliable and fake information could be rampant levels of disconnection and apathy, which would certainly compromise a functional democracy. By the same token, debates would not make any sense as everyone would primarily follow their own beliefs rather than negotiating the expression of thoughts to a common ground of understanding problems and facts. Such a scenario would result, in practice, in the impossibility of democracy, due to absolute freedom of expression and lack of shared norms and a common ground of reality to stand on. The organisation of these societies would be based on a system that discouraged the idea of control and would thus be closer to an actual anarchy where no one would ever trust anyone who had any kind of expertise, particularly if it would mean contradicting previous beliefs. The absence of a value assigned to authoritative sources of information or to other symbolic control rules would ultimately translate into a state of institutionalised disorder, which would render virtually impossible any shared ground of perception, experience, or understanding.

The description of this imaginary situation also exposes one of the many paradoxes of democracy: are we all really equal? Here, that is to ask if uninformed and misinformed opinions should count the same as the ones from (more) informed citizens. If so, who gets to decide what is good or bad information and who is informed or misinformed in a world with outright relativism? And, more importantly, would such selection even be democratic? These considerations relate closely with what is known as the “elitist view of democracy” (e.g. Schubert, Dye and Zeigler 2015), which upholds fundamental differences between the common citizen and the elites in terms of capacity to rule and, at an elemental level, even to understand the democratic political processes. This could then lead to situations in which voters would prefer those political leaders who presented themselves as part of the people and displayed anti-system views of politics: in sum, those with a stated disparagement of traditional structures.

All this underlines the fact that, without mechanisms to ensure common basic references for the significance of and procedures for gathering and reporting information that relies on
fact-based, accurate reports rather than on fabricated and deceptive accounts of reality, the practice of democracy would become unsustainable. What would follow in that extreme situation is left to an exercise of our greater or lesser imagination, but the current state of affairs already provides some clues. An intensification of the present-day pervasiveness of social media platforms as information tools and of the rising levels of relativism in post-modern societies, both in terms of prevalence and toleration, could actually lead to the dystopian reality just described. It is not for nothing that the term *post-truth* has been put forward to describe the current era.

**Post-truth: what it is (and what it entails)**

*Post-truth era* (e.g. Keyes 2004; Levitin 2017; McIntyre 2018; Farkas and Schou 2020) is one of a number of expressions that have been used to characterise the current state of affairs; examples of other relevant terms include ‘post-truth order’ (Harsin 2015), ‘the misinformation age’ (e.g. O’Connor and Weatherall 2019), ‘post-factual democracies’ (e.g. Hendricks and Vestergaard 2019), ‘ersatz reality’ (Pomerantsev 2019), and ‘infocalypse’ (Schick 2020), among other close variations. The underlying meaning is very similar as these terms all draw attention to the idea that we live in a time in which facts seem to matter less than opinions and in which traditional authoritative sources seem to have lost most of their importance in the face of the democratisation of access to online publication tools, such as social media. The *Oxford Dictionary*’s word of the year in 2016 was *post-truth*, and for Dictionary.com, the word of the year in 2018 was *misinformation*. The first term highlights that objective facts have become less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief while the second term refers to the increasing prevalence of false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead. Public discourse is influenced by a plethora of information (including biased, fake, offensive, etc.) that, despite of the different status and credibility of sources, is usually treated as equivalent in online environments. Moreover, how content spreads has gone through drastic transformations with the rise of social media. It spreads faster than ever.

Attempts to distort the truth and facts are by no means a new phenomenon in history, including in the history of democracy, but coupled with rising relativism and technological development, they have become more sophisticated and harder to detect and are being undertaken by an unprecedented number of actors. The credibility of facts has been increasingly under pressure due not just to the pervasive relativism of our post-modern times but also to media environments that are increasingly being defined by the logics of social media and algorithms that give users more of their preferences, prioritise shocking and polarising content, and function as content accelerators. Conditions such as these propitiate and magnify the dissemination of propaganda, fake news, and disinformation in general. Additionally, technologies used to distort reality (e.g. deepfakes) are evolving at a fast pace and substantially faster than the capacity to understand and control their effects on politics and society.

Even though intents to deceive in politics are not especially new and have been around ever since there have been attempts to persuade others, the technological setup favours new actors to take advantage of these conditions. And the impact on democracy of such a combination of elements has already proved to be particularly unsettling. A non-exhaustive list of examples that have already occurred include unauthorised access to users’ private information to develop targeted misinformation campaigns or meddle in elections, computational propaganda, and fake political activism. Some of these campaigns aim at influencing and polarising opinions; a common strategy is to change the environment in which those opinions are formed, and decisions are made: hence, the relevance of the wide spread of misinformation.
What ‘post-truth era’ and other analogous terms thus describe is a time when (more than ever before) we are regularly exposed to all sorts of sensationalised, misleading, and false content, such as fake news, conspiracy theories, bogus claims, rumours, computational propaganda, disinformation campaigns assisted by trolls, targeted misinformation campaigns, fake political activism, synthetic media, et cetera. This kind of information environment downgrades the value of the truth and erodes authenticity and the integrity of reliable content and sources. There are disputes over the validity of almost everything (including proven scientific facts and the actual occurrence of events in history). But more than that, there is a constant battle to define reality that is often supported in this type of content.

The blurring of facts and fiction caused by the manipulation of discourses, images, and sounds is now carried out not only by humans directly but also through efficient artificial intelligence devices. Already materialised examples include fictitious videos with statements by political leaders that never happened or with details about an event that never took place (to influence domestic or foreign policy or to discredit an opponent, for example). AI-powered bots can now also compete with humans to influence agendas and decisions. These new, increasingly sophisticated technological tools have already proved their efficacy in creating climates of opinion, manipulating perceptions, stretching the boundaries of online behaviours and discourses, and falsifying reality. Just the knowledge that this type of technology exists and can be used is already enough to cast doubt on everything, including on what is real. In itself this also contributes to eroding the integrity of facts and, hence, the truth.

The traditional sources of information also have had their authority further undermined in this media environment. In fact, although it is not the only cause of deepening distrust, it has lowered considerably trust in what used to once be respected sources of factual information (e.g. Kavanagh and Rich 2018; Marietta and Barker 2019). Authoritative sources (in all areas of knowledge and expertise) have an important role as benchmarks for what is reality, for the identification of problems and solutions for those problems. Journalists, elected politicians, scientists, and other experts, for example, have taken this role in democracy and have framed issues and guided democratic debates. However, media and audience developments, in particular those related to social media platforms’ use for access to information, allow for calling everything into question by circulating large amounts of conflicting information.

On social media, the views and news postings of family, friends, and even acquaintances now have more potential to be influential than the statements of journalists or pundits (Bode and Vraga 2018). By prioritising individual opinions and content posted by the users’ friends and family over professional news outlets (with the justification that this is what people really want to see), some social media platforms have, in fact, contributed directly to this state of things. With such logic, principles, and procedures, they are reiterating distrust of authoritative, informational sources and thus also indirectly undermining the journalism industry’s business model. Journalism has historically an important role in the construction of the common ground for public debate. However, this role is influenced by commercial goals, as well as by media effects, such as agenda-setting, priming, and framing, all of which have often led to questioning the true mission and value of journalists. Uscinski (2014) posits that news has become a commodity bought and sold on the market; journalists report certain issues over others in response to ratings, polls, and audience demographics and not necessarily because audiences need to know them or need to be informed about them to ensure democratic values.

Mainstream news media outlets have also been accused of being too close to power and too remote from the citizens’ concerns (for example, the well-known attacks on journalism by populists, among others) (e.g. Bennett and Pfetsch 2018), which has caused some to predict the revival of local news sources (e.g. Fowler-Watt and Jukes 2019; Sullivan 2020) as a response to
this lack of proximity to citizens and as an effort to suppress fake news. Despite the social media logic and the fact that some politicians have exploited distrust of the media to actively undermine the role of journalism in democracy, it cannot be ignored that a commonly agreed set of facts (reported by independent journalism) was and continues to be the foundation of a functioning, healthy democracy. As Pickard (2019) explains, without a viable, strong news media system, democracy is reduced to an unattainable ideal. Additionally, downgrading authoritative informational sources paves the way for the spread of uninformed accounts and all kinds of misinformation (e.g. Bennett and Livingstone 2018).

In this type of environment, misleading narratives frequently become the basis for debate and political opinion formation. Moreover, and according to Edelman (2001), public discourses of democracy tend to be populistic, as typical problem definitions and solutions do not usually encourage popular understanding or involvement in politics. The deepening distrust of all kinds of authorities relates closely to populism. Much has already been written about populism in recent years, and the purpose here is not to revisit this prolific literature; however, it makes sense to briefly ascertain how populism interacts with misinformation and post-truth environments.

In a book of essays about ‘backward phenomena’, Umberto Eco (2014) identifies cases of revolutionary and reactionary populism but sees an extraordinary resemblance between the two types: populism ‘is a method that plays on the visceral attraction of what are believed to be the most deeply entrenched opinions or prejudices of the masses’ (2014, 146). Such interpretation of populism opens the way to the acknowledgement of its varied (sometimes even contradictory) current forms and its fluid connection with ideology, but obliquely, it also underlines the appeal to emotions, such as the resurgence of old polemics that had been resolved long ago (e.g. the anti-Darwinian stance or the anti-vaxxer movement) and the open expression of attitudes that fall outside political correctness norms (e.g. racist, xenophobic, and misogynous attitudes). But most importantly, this links to the aforementioned decreasing trust in authorities, coupled with a mindset that encourages convincing others by any means, even if that entails bending the facts to extract a predetermined meaning.

This is close to what Frankfurt (2005) defines as ‘bullshit’, which in itself is slightly different from lying, according to him. ‘Bullshitters’ do not care about what is true and false in their assertions. They use ideas to suit their purposes. They seek to convey a certain image, and this goal justifies distorting reality and not being concerned about whether anything at all is true. While here any claims about truth and falsehood are completely irrelevant, the liar, by lying, at least acknowledges the existence of the truth. Green (2019) explored the connections between populism and the rhetoric of bullshit and identified different performative values in the use of this type of rhetoric in populism. The exclusivity of the populists’ claim to popular representation means that they overlook evidence and thus tend to bullshit whenever confronted with what is contradictory. Hendricks and Vestergaard (2019) clarify how isolated facts and news may be cherry-picked to support a populist argument and that if facts run counter the core narrative, they are left out or reasoned away as not valid (e.g. statistics are rejected whenever they contradict claims or agendas), and conspiracy theories are presented to explain that the facts are being manipulated.

Populism and conspiracy theories do seem to resonate well with each other. Haranovitch (2011) shows how a conspiracy theory is often populist: namely, when it suggests that actions were undertaken by an elite against the people. Actually, most conspiracy theories tend to fit populist narratives very well because they accuse elites and posit Manichean views in which political competitors are considered enemies of the people (Uscinski 2020). The ideas that political elites ignore the interests of the people in favour of their own and that the establishment is corrupt and inefficient are commonplaces in populism and in conspiracy theories.
forms of conspiracism even avoid the burden of explanation and simply impose their own reality through repetition (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019). Both the conspiracy and populist rhetoric appeal to a similar logic: the manipulation of misconceptions. And the fact that populist political leaders circumvent all kinds of mediation and prefer to communicate directly with the people means that their views can spread without any type of verification of the narratives put forward and then shared. Political motivations are thus accelerating the post-truth era. In fact, populism blends well with most of the noted ‘communication disorders’.

**Why this state of things?**

Even though political motivations have been at the core of the erosion of truth in our societies, the post-truth era is not simply a by-product of populism (Salgado 2018). It is impossible to attribute these developments to one single reason. Instead, a number of factors have contributed to the decline of the importance of the truth and to an increased emphasis on duelling fact perceptions driven by emotions and misinformation. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) see the post-truth era as a result of societal mega-trends, such as a decline in social capital, growing economic inequality, increased polarisation, declining trust in science, and an increasingly fractionated media landscape.

This is an era in which emotions seem increasingly to matter more than facts. Objective facts are often less influential in shaping opinions than appeals to emotions and beliefs (e.g. in different types of populist discourse, in which the resort to emotions, such as the exploitation of fear and resentment, always outweighs reasoned arguments). In this sense, we could say that post-truth politics is more a symptom of the current social and political status of the truth than it is their cause (Salgado 2018).

The current changes to the status of the truth are partly explained by the relativism of the post-modern age that emerged as a response to the unified, definite meanings and universal truths of the modern age (see, e.g. Foucault [1969] 2002 or Lyotard [1979] 1991). Postmodernism questions these ideas and values of modernism and proposes a relativism of the truth (and facts) that lies deep in intersubjectivity and in upholding diversity as an aim in itself. ‘The difference between modernity and post-modernity lies precisely in the proposal of an ontology of reality versus a construction of reality, that is, if reality pre-exists to be discovered or if it is instead constructed through subjective discourse and interpretation’ (Salgado 2018, 321).

In the post-modern world, reality does not pre-exist its interpretation; reality is the negotiation of meaning in each individual that results from the interplay of different factors, including identity, personal experience and beliefs, and type of media exposure and use. Reality is thus developed in relation to a specific context and to individual features and assessments. Consequently, not only moral norms (good and bad, right and wrong, etc.) but also what is considered truth and untruth depends on the context and is subject to diverse, often competing interpretations and meanings. This ultimately means that there is no absolute or definite truth and that knowledge and values are constructed through discourse and experience (see, e.g. Rorty 1991).

Such an ethos spurs and gives rise to the co-existence of a wide range of (often contradictory) interpretations of reality and values, which ultimately make the entire search for the truth a meaningless process as there are several truths and not just one truth. In this respect, postmodernism perfectly accounts for the post-truth mindset. This approach to reality and knowledge affects the value of the truth and the perception of facts and also has a decisive impact on democratic politics. There have always been different ideological and partisan positions in democratic politics, but they would proceed from a shared basis in fact. A society in which there is no agreed body of facts renders democratic decision-making virtually impossible.
These are changes that are still unfolding in time, and, in some cases, elements of modernity subsist in post-modernity (see, e.g. Giddens 1990), but there is nevertheless a noticeable change in contemporary Western societies that adheres to growing levels of relativism in different aspects of life, including politics. We are now very likely to find cases in which knowledge and belief and truth and falsehood are completely blurred.

Before the so-called post-truth era, there was the belief that the truth was out there to be found and that there were mechanisms based on factual objectivity (e.g. scientific method, journalistic procedures) to assist those interested in that pursuit. Now, underpinned by technological advancements, the notions of relativism and subjectivity have been expanded to all domains, including facts and information. The growing relativism of the truth (and facts) in our societies could thus lead to situations in which there is no common understanding of basic facts as their meaning results from the negotiable expression of identities, experiences, opinions, and preferences. This shift in paradigm and the ensuing consequences for information could lead to information ecosystems in which diversity (diversity here does not necessarily mean plurality) is valued and enhanced, but quality does not need to be necessarily part of the equation, particularly if it is achieved at the expense of diversity.

Implications are also noted for moral and ethics standards because they are interpreted according to context and thus become relative to specific points of view. There is much more flexibility in the meaning that is attributed to virtually everything, which is also what Bauman (2007) refers to as ‘liquid’ times. This applies to discourses about scientific facts as well (e.g. global warming and climate change, vaccination) and to politics, which may pose important ethical dilemmas, particularly when it impacts not only on political discourses but also on ways of governing and political action in general.

Much of what is considered post-truth politics is thus explained by the post-modern cultural ethos, but it is also related to known features of politics and political propaganda that have been amplified by technology, in particular social media (Salgado 2018). The internet and the digital culture have caused and intensification and amplification of some of the main features of post-modernism, and the pace of change has accelerated significantly, which has led some scholars to suggest new terms to designate the era in which we currently live in (e.g. Nealon’s [2012] notion of post-post-modernism). In politics, several of post-truth’s most notable features are actually old attributes. There are important political precedents behind the post-truth era: lies, rumours, deceits, and manipulation tactics have been used to shape public opinion throughout history (Salgado 2005).

There is even a long-standing debate on whether deception is good or bad for politics. Particularly for those sceptical of democracy, deception is seen as an inherent part of politics; it is not only fully justifiable but also necessary (Robinson et al. 2018). But even the most enthusiastic democrat recognises, once in a while, the necessity of governments and political leaders lying and using deception in specific circumstances. Election campaigns (and other situations of political competition) are moments in democracy that are commonly noted for stretching the boundaries of truth and facts as political candidates usually go the extra mile to convince voters, but crises, in foreign affairs or domestic politics, are deemed to justify the use of deception by governments.

The work of spin doctors and other political communication professionals is specifically related to conveying favourable interpretations of events to the media and the public (e.g. Louw 2010; Salgado 2014). Shaping the information environment and preparing the climate of opinion for the announcement of decisions often mean resorting to tactics that are not transparent and based on authenticity, or even to deception. The use of these tactics entails the selection and framing of information that is presented in ways that are meant to be, first and foremost,
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While politicians produce strategically advantageous interpretations of reality, citizens’ perceptions are also shaped by their choice of medium (Logan 2004) and political preferences (e.g. Bartels 2002; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Hochschild and Einstein 2015). Biased political communication with the purpose of promoting a specific position – that is to say, hypes and propaganda – acts upon the individuals’ pre-existent political preferences (e.g. political interest and sophistication, ideology, partisan attachment) and psychological mechanisms that are known to affect perceptions and attitudes. It is, for example, the case of selective attention, prior-belief bias, affective bias, and motivated reasoning processes. By choosing content that confirms their beliefs while avoiding and denying what is divergent and conflicting, individuals tend to expose themselves to, process, and evaluate information in a biased manner. Selective attention is a well-known mechanism in cognitive psychology that basically explains that because individuals cannot focus on everything all the time, they focus on what matters the most to them (e.g. Graf and Aday 2008). Motivated reasoning basically means that people’s goals and predispositions influence how they interpret information (Kunda 1990; Petersen et al. 2013; Stanley et al. 2020). Perceptual biases are shortcuts that individuals use to make sense of the world. Because they are shortcuts, they only provide a partial understanding and may thus be misleading. For example, politically motivated reasoning makes individuals view politics through the narrow lenses of ideology and partisanship. In a polarised context (among others), people are likely to see their choices as right and good and to evaluate the choices that are different from theirs as wrong and bad. On the demand side, these shortcuts influence information exposure when individuals seek information that supports their beliefs and preference, while on the supply side, resources are devoted to shaping the information environment.

And what now?

In his essays, Eco (2014) suggests that history got tired of leaping forward and has been trying to catch its breath, contemplating the ‘splendours of tradition’. This could be an interesting image of the consequences of introducing dramatic changes in the media too quickly into society. In fact, most accelerated disruptions that have occurred throughout history have immediately triggered opposite, strong reactions against them. This becomes the perfect breeding ground for the rise of polarised views, which tend to rely on relativism and misinformation to assert the value of their positions. As Lewandowsky et al. explain, ‘the framing of the current post-truth malaise as “misinformation” that can be corrected or debunked fails to capture the full scope of the problem’ (2017, 4).

The use of online media to spread fake information as a deliberate strategy to gain advantage in political conflicts or to reinforce beliefs and polarise opinions is closely related to post-truth politics. The same holds true for disseminating emotional, confrontational, highly charged political discourse. All this is propelled by the distrust of facts presented by authorities and a growing structural relativism that leads to facts being treated as matters of opinion. The immediate outcome is that it becomes more difficult to share and rely on common understandings of reality.

Given that new forms of producing, spreading, and organising information and of connecting individuals have precipitated much of what is now known as the post-truth era, not to mention that (for commercial reasons) online platforms are organised in ways that favour convincing and appealing. Notwithstanding the excesses that tend to occur due to loose interpretations of what the limits should be, such strategies are considered part of the normal functioning of democracy in today’s societies. Robinson et al. (2018) refer to ‘organised political communication’ and to the use of deception by lying, omission, distortion, or misdirection.
sensationalist, misleading, and polarising information, it seems natural (and pressing) to reflect on the effects of the particulars of these media landscapes on democracy in order to devise possible ways forward.

We have just started to experience the disruptive social and political effects of the internet and of the social media platforms in particular. While the internet has made spreading any idea easier than ever before, different forms of harmful content and misinformation have become rather common in online environments. Sophisticated computer algorithms curate the information available in specific, purposeful ways, but they also collect and analyse data about users that is then exploited in various ways to influence those same users.

Consequently, social media platforms have been facing growing pressure from governments and from users to address the problems, in particular those related to hate speech and fake news. Censorship and surveillance of online environments have been put forward as possible means to tackle these problems, but this type of solution is not generally supported in democratic countries as it would resemble the practice of an authoritarian state and would collide with the fundamental right of freedom of expression in particular. Nevertheless, action must be taken to ensure that the internet and social media platforms are compatible with all the other democratic values.

References

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