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## A Genealogy for Post-Truth Democracies: Philosophy, Affects, Technology

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### Abstract

**How to make sense of post-truth? As the erosion of truth seems to be on the rise in contemporary societies, apparently threatening the deliberative function assigned to their public spheres and the health of democratic systems, it has become a necessity to deal with this controversial phenomenon. This paper provides a genealogy for post-truth, shedding light on its roots. It focus on three different dimensions of “post-truthfulness:” the philosophical dimension, which relates to the long theoretical debate about the possibility of truth, the conclusion of which is largely skeptical about a strong position on universally recognizable truths; the affective dimension, which takes into account the insights provided by contemporary literature on emotions; and the technological dimension, that is, the digital transformation of the public sphere. The convergence of these currents explains the rise of post-truth democracies. However, as the last section tries to demonstrate, a distinction between different types of truth is required, lest post-truth theories end up producing a nostalgia for something that never existed. After all, liberal democracies are themselves skeptical, their relationship with truth being unavoidably complex and ambiguous. Thus, distinguishing between post-truth and post-factualism can be useful for organizing the democratic conversation from a normative and practical standpoint.**

### Keywords

**Post-truth, democracy, affects, social networks, technology, communication.**

### 1. Introduction

“Facts are such horrid things!,” cries Lady Susan, the main character in the Jane Austen’s novel of the same title, when the intricate plot that she has devised to get married seems on the verge of being exposed. Much before the rise of post-truth, the English writer had created a perfect slogan for it. Because that is essentially what is it about: a systematic rejection, technologically enhanced, of those pieces of news that do not fit our beliefs. That is why we also talk about post-factualism, or the weakening of factual statements’ persuasive force. The latter is replaced by narratives and each moral tribe found itself inhabiting an isolated social world disconnected from others and alien to any sense of society as a whole. A *New Yorker* cartoon by David Sipress expressed this in a memorable way: a TV presenter that announces with a smile: “That was Brad with the Democratic weather. Now here’s Tammy with the Republican weather.” Arguably, post-truth looks somewhat like the classical lie. It is not easy to discern whether there is a genuine novelty at play or rather what we see is a new political

phenomenon conveniently sexed up by media pundits and hungry scholars. Politicians have always deceived the public, or tried to, and neither the strategic framing of issues nor the storytelling that present them as part of a wider narrative are unheard of –actually, they existed before they were given a name. Humpty Dumpty’s assertion is thus often quoted: words are less important than who is boss, namely, who is the one deciding what is the meaning of words. But post-truth is not exactly the classical lie, nor the framing or storytelling that spin doctors have been practicing for some time now. While there is a connection to them, post-truth brings something else.

Before any further argument is presented, though, the meaning of the terms I intend to employ should be clarified. Despite their similarity, “post-truth” and “post-factualism” can and should be distinguished from each other. *Post-factualism* designates the loss of fact’s persuasive strength in the public sphere, whereas *post-truth* suggests that the very notion of truth would have lost much of its meaning. The latter would be gradually replaced by the conviction that different “truths” coexist within the social body, so that nothing like a unique truth can be recognized or established. Most likely, the best synthesis for both postulates are the “alternative facts” invoked by Trump’s advisor Kellyanne Conway when endorsing the president’s claim that his inauguration had been attended by more people than Obama’s. A false statement is thus transformed into an alternative point of view supported by false facts. In other words: a falsity turned into truth by means of the emotional identification felt by Trump’s supporters.

In what follows, I will point towards three factors that help to explain the coming of post-truth: philosophy, affects, and technology. They are interrelated and exert influence on each other. Paradoxically, their impact on truth and the social perception of truth is reinforced in a democratic context. That is why this genealogical analysis leads, in the last section of the paper, to a meditation upon the ambiguous role of truth in liberal democracy.

## **2. The Roots of Post-truth**

To understand post-truth, I will make an exercise in genealogy, trying to isolate the factors that may have contributed to its rise. In the following subsections, I will highlight the influence of three kinds of factors: the questioning of truth that has been taking place in the philosophical realm for some time; the affective-cum-psychological tendency of human beings to confirm existing beliefs and make biased interpretations of reality; and the ability of ICTs to disseminate misinformation and falsities while making easier for people to find those who share their beliefs and/or political identities.

### **2.1. Philosophy**

“*Quid est veritas?*” Pontius Pilate’s words to Jesus of Nazareth, according to John 18:38, show that the problem of truth is as old as human civilization. Yet it also suggests that the question itself, the question about truth, is a sign of civilization –as it intimates that the concern for the truth has replaced the dominion of force. Although Pilate’s question has been interpreted in many ways, his playful attitude suggests not just skepticism about Jesus himself, who after all is introduced to him as the very embodiment of truth –it suggests skepticism about the *possibility* of truth. That is why it remains so relevant.

Not all truth statements can be equated. Producing a truthful account of what happened yesterday evening in a given location does not seem problematic, but there are propositions that cannot possibly be proven right. Among them, those that deal with the identification of moral virtues or the key questions of political philosophy. But even the truth about facts is not always easy to establish –a difficulty that says something about the wider problem of truth and, by extension, about post-truth.

Thomas Hobbes singled out the human use of language as the factor that better explains the disturbing instability of human communities. Although Hobbes accepts the Aristotelian

description of the human being as a *zoon politikon*, or social-cum-political animal, he is less interested in human *similarities* with other animal species than he is in explaining why human beings *cannot* behave as regularly and predictably as any other social species, like ants or elephants. We do not seem to live together as they do, and the reason is that we are endowed with language. Hobbes makes clear that language is not a reflection of reality, but a tool that can distort reality through lies, deceptions or misrepresentations. Therefore, as Hobbes argues in *De Cive*, the task of eloquence is less about ennobling the public sphere than it is about “making the *Good* and the *bad*, the *Useful* and the *useless*, the *Honourable* and the *dishonourable* appear greater or smaller than they really are, and making the *unjust* appear *Just*, as may seem to suit the speaker’s purpose” (Hobbes, 1998, p. 123).

Hobbes is not saying that truth does not exist: he emphasizes the unreliability of the means by which the truth is to be elucidated. It fell on Hume and Nietzsche to pave the way for the philosophical assault that took place in the twentieth century: an increasingly sophisticated questioning of the possibility of truth that ends up making it inaccessible to us. Let us think of Foucault, Rorty, Vatimo, Baudrillard: they all suggest in their own ways that truth depends on the perspective from which it is formulated, so that whatever is taken to be “true” derives from a process of social construction and does not relate to a reality that is independent from the observers. Such independent reality does not exist or, if it does, cannot be accessed by human beings. Naturally, factual truths belong to an altogether different category than moral, philosophical, or political “truths.” Such distinction notwithstanding, the related claims that truth is a social construction and objectivity remains unfeasible has undermined the belief that facts can be independently established. Just ask someone who has just graduated in journalism.

Yet perhaps it is in Wittgenstein (2009) where the impossibility of truth in connection to language has been more clearly exposed. Actually, his thesis can serve as philosophical grounds for the idea that there are as many “truths” as social groups or moral tribes. Whereas the young Wittgenstein had claimed that language possesses a discernible essence and is related to an objective reality, his *Philosophical Investigations* amount to an explicit rejection of such framework. On the contrary, so Wittgenstein, language is always part of a “way of living,” i.e. it is embedded in social practices that lend it meaning and content. Therefore, language is no longer an essence, but a set of activities that he calls “language games.” Is it not true that language is *spoken* and is thus also an *activity*? As a result, the justification of our practices is not found *outside* them but *in* them –much the same as the meaning of an expression is what we understand when we listen to it.

What about truth, then? Is it also a product of the agreements that take place within a linguistic community? Mostly, yes. What is true and false is that what human beings *say* that is true or false –an agreement they reach using the language they share. According to Wittgenstein, however, this is not an agreement on truth, but on the “way of living.” The latter *per se* is an implicit consensus on practices, traditions, behaviors, or assumptions that exist within a social group. As a consequence, there is no justification that can transcend the way of living that we share with others. Wherefrom different ways of living hold different “truths” that remain incommensurable. They are “final vocabularies,” in Rorty’s (1989) phrasing, coexisting with other final vocabularies. Thus, Rorty’s skepticism about the possibility of finding truth in a liberal society: “A liberal society is one which is content to call ‘true’ whatever the upshots of such encounters [between citizens] turns out to be” (Rorty, 1989, p. 52). From here to a post-truth society there seems to be but one step.

Unsurprisingly, some commentators have openly described post-modern philosophy as the harbinger of post-truth. Mathew D’Ancona, while praising the post-modern attempt to acknowledge the multiple voices that can be found in a pluralistic society, has also deplored how the emphasis on the social construction of meaning, irony and fragmentation has helped “to corrode the notion of truth” (D’Ancona, 2017, p. 92). If meaning is nowhere to be found,

who is to say what is true or false? Incommensurable *values* seem to have led to incommensurable *realities*, resulting in “tribal epistemologies” (Roberts, 2017). D’Ancona puts it this way:

Post-truth represents surrender to this analysis: a recognition by the producers and consumers of information that reality is now so elusive and our perspectives as individuals and groups so divergent that it is no longer meaningful to speak of, or seek, the truth (D’Ancona, 2017, p. 98).

That this philosophy can have practical applications has been argued by Lee McIntyre (2018), who has explored the links between the American alt-right and post-modern philosophy, the resulting hybrid having been named “right-wing postmodernism.” The campaigns against both evolutionary theory and climate change have used to their advantage that “impossibility of meaning” referred above. It makes sense: after scientific studies and post-modern philosophy had undermined the authority of science by denying the existence of an objective, external reality, while denouncing scientific theories about the latter as products of a given “ideology,” it became difficult to convince the public –or at least a significant chunk of it– that some truths are truer than others. What right-wing postmodernism does, suggests McIntyre (2018: 133), is to use doubts about truth, objectivity, and power to assert “that *all* truth claims are politicized.” The epistemic authority of science is thus deeply questioned. Even the godfather of science studies, Bruno Latour himself, has acknowledged that post-truth has a lot to do with sociology’s emphasis on the lack of scientific certainty that is inherent in the construction of facts (see Latour, 2004).

There was never a golden age of truth. The latter cannot exist, especially in a democracy where different *interpretations* of factual reality are meant to enter into conflict and where the contact between different conceptions of the good will rarely be frictionless. Still, philosophical discourses on truth have had an impact on Western culture, casting a doubt on the very possibility of truth and hence contributing to the rise of post-truth. Pilate’s question resonates more than ever.

## 2.2. Affects

Affective factors matter in how reality is perceived. This insight has proven to be politically relevant during the last years and post-truth may well be its most prominent expression. By affects I am referring to a wide range of psychological and emotional factors that constrain human rationality –or, putting it differently, stands in the way of an idealized use of reason. According to this ideal description, human beings gather information and weigh the different choices that stand before them in a deliberative, rational manner. In this sense, we might be said to be “sovereign” decision-makers. But if decisions do not, or do not always or just rarely, follow this path, then we might not be so sovereign after all. Hence the idea that we are “post-sovereign subjects,” i.e. individuals susceptible to influences and distortions when perceiving reality and deciding about it (see Coole, 2005). The fact that we can be described in this way is of the utmost political importance.

This is not exactly new. In a pioneering article published in the early eighties, economist Herbert Simon (1985) had already called into question the optimistic premises of rational-choice theory. He suggested that human rationality should be seen as “bounded,” i.e. limited by a number of constraints. Particularly interesting for our topic is the fact that people have “narrow capacities for simultaneous attention to different pieces of information,” so that “of all the things we know, or can see or hear around us, only a tiny fraction influences our behavior over any short interval of time” (Simon, 1985, p. 301). Simon suggests that the narrowness of our attention span accounts for a great deal of human “unreason” and in fact that is why

we must distinguish between the “real” situation and the situation as perceived by the political actors when we try to apply the rationality principle to make predictions of behavior. People are, at best, rational in terms of what they are aware of, and they can be aware of only tiny, disjointed facets of reality (Simon, 1985, p. 302).

Let us think of someone who makes a decision or expresses a judgement that seems *not* to make sense if all aspects of the decision or the situation being judged are taken into consideration. What we might see as irrational or unreasonable may make sense to this person *once their viewpoint* is accounted for. But I will not review the extensive literature on human cognitive biases, which can be traced back as far as the fifties and has flourished as of late in the field of behavioral economics (see Kahneman & Tversky, 2000). These theories do not describe new *features* of human behavior; rather, they provide new *explanations* and thus also introduce a new *vocabulary* when discussing human beings. I will limit myself to a brief account of two theories that are especially relevant to our topic. As far as post-truth is concerned, what interests me is how these theories explain human *perception* of outer reality –including factual and normative claims, news, political statements and events, and so on.

Motivated reasoning theory suggests that human cognition is not a process directed by an abstract, disembodied reason, but one that is influenced by our emotions (see Marcus *et al.*, 2007). Our cognition is “hot,” or, properly speaking, “affected.” When we look at the world, our gaze is tinted by what we feel. Information is automatically evaluated according to our emotional predispositions: a “cold” deliberation is not viable, since we cannot simply disconnect our implicit attitudes. Therefore, contrary information is either rejected outright or more slowly processed. McIntyre puts it this way:

When we feel psychic discomfort, we are *motivated* to find a non-ego-threatening way to reduce it, which can lead to the irrational tendency to accommodate our beliefs to our feelings, rather than the other way around (McIntyre, 2018, p. 45).

Our self is so averse to disorganization that we can talk of a “totalitarian ego” that defends its main beliefs and avoids costly decision-making processes (Greenwald, 2002). As Kahneman (2011) has famously suggested, people seem to decide in two ways: one is quick, cheap, and emotional; the other slow, rational, demanding. In order to make use of the second system, we have to make a conscious effort. We have to counteract a “confirmation bias” that may even be *physiologically* pleasurable, as the body releases dopamine when we come across a view we are in agreement with. That’s why facts do not easily change our minds (see Kolbert, 2017). In other words, we strive unconsciously to confirm what we already believe in.

Yet how to explain the human tendency to ignore facts, either rejecting them outright or interpreting them in a way that protects our preexisting beliefs? The new theorists of moral sentiments may have an answer. According to them, morality is a product of natural selection: a psychological adaptation that facilitates the cooperation among potentially selfish individuals, thus fostering a relationship from which they profit more than if they were to act separately. The rub is that the same mechanisms that lead to *in-group* cooperation hinder *out-group* cooperation, as they separate human groups in different “moral tribes” that stand against each other (see Haidt, 2012; Greene, 2013). But if our moral positions are conditioned in this way, it will be hard to avoid people clustering in communities of meaning and feeling that are not open to rational deliberation and thus tend to produce their own “truths.” As a result, the *content* of the beliefs matters less than the *feelings* attached to them. Beliefs can be seen as a pretext –a post-hoc rationalization. Post-truth can thus be seen as an unconscious strategy of reception: a way of sorting factual information and normative arguments according to feelings that mostly account for our tribal affiliation. In McIntyre’s words: “post-truth is not so much a claim that truth *does not exist* as that *facts are subordinate to our political point of view*” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 11).

Ideology itself can be contemplated under this light –the light of affects. It offers a conceptual and emotional community that provides individuals with psychological comfort and a cognitive map for navigating the complexities of the world. As Žižek (1989) suggests, ideology “captures” a subject that is marked by a “lack” that leads to treasure fantasies of wholeness. What ideology promises is an enjoyment conditional upon the integration in the community. Arguably, then, ideologies provide comforting emotions. In turn, they exert a pressure for conformity that reinforces the idea that we are not as sovereign as we thought, but rather social citizens that try to be attuned to what our peers believe in (see Sinclair, 2012).

### 2.3. Technology

Post-truth refers to the process whereby truth is searched for in the public sphere, as well as to the influence that such process exerts on the private beliefs of citizens. Therefore, the analysis of this phenomenon must incorporate the digitization of the public sphere. Despite the enthusiasm elicited by the latter at the outset, it has become increasingly hard to maintain that it has improved public conversation. A decade after the launch of the smartphone, it rather seems that the public debate is more aggressive and cacophonous. As Mark Thompson (2016) suggested in his study of mediated political language, there is a trend towards the decline of “rhetorical rationalism” as a means of public persuasion, steadily replaced by an “authentic” language that prioritise the emotional register, personal experience and the suspicion towards elites. As the “Gutenberg Parenthesis” (Sauerberg, 2009) comes to an end, digital technologies foster the transit from “mass communication” to “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2009). The outcome is a disorderly and emotionalized public sphere, a transformation that can be attributed to the structural change brought about by new communication technologies. In this environment, post-truth thrives.

This idea is supported by the so-called “silo effect” that describes how Internet users tend to inhabit networked communities where all members belong to the same moral tribe (see Sunstein, 2008; Reese *et al.*, 2007). As we befriend those to whom we feel closer, our digital contacts in social media tend to be those who think like us or with whom we share a good number of preferences. A whole vocabulary has been developed in order to conceptualize this phenomenon: as “selective exposure” to the news takes place, “echo chambers” are created where all voices resemble ours, an effect reinforced by algorithms that favour some contents over others, the so-called “filter bubble” (see Pariser, 2012). Furthermore, in providing each individual with a platform for broadcasting their opinions in contact with other opinions, social networks foster people’s narcissism, turning opinions into fetishes invested with high emotional value. Unwilling to engage in truly deliberative processes, an expressive use of social networks prevails: instead of seeking out *the* truth, people defend *their* truths. Often, they do so in an aggressive manner –thus Han’s (2013) conclusion that we now live in a “swarm democracy” where reactive crowds fill the common space with noise and respect among participants is lost on account of the suppression of moral distance. Which, as Pörksen (2018) suggests, has to do with the paradoxical *shrinking* of the public space: despite the objective enlargement of the latter’s in the digital age, we now found ourselves confronted with the whole range of political ideas –an uneasy coexistence that acquires a claustrophobic quality. Arguably, this can be related to much-discussed “identity politics” (see Kenny, 2004).

Nevertheless, social networks are not the only explanation. The profusion of news outlets, blogs and the like creates an overwhelming amount of choices for those who take an interest in political issues, fragmenting the audiences and creating seemingly disorganized public spheres. Digitization seems to have completed what cable networks started a few decades ago (see Wu, 2012): a process of audience compartmentalization that deprives citizens of a shared social world. At the same time, the new structure of public opinion strengthens the logic that is inherent to the media subsystem, as Niklas Luhmann (1996) described it in pre-Internet times: in order to call the attention of the public, news outlets must offer the

new, the dramatic, the sensational. In a crowded market, such attention is even more difficult to catch and thus the hyperbolic and the melodramatic are played out as ordinary stylistic devices for gathering people's attention.

Moreover, as Beckett and Deuze (2016) have argued, our lives are increasingly lived *in* rather than *with* media, a circumstance that increases the role that emotion plays in how news are produced and consumed. In their view, emphasizing emotion "redefines the classic idea of journalistic objectivity –indeed, it is reshaping the idea of news itself" (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 2). There are reasons to think that such emotionalization of news may have undermined the prestige of truth, or at least the citizen's belief in it. In those media outlets that have tried to stick to the separation between information and opinion, the problem has been a tendency to present both "sides" of any dispute as if both had the same credibility or weight (see Thompson, 2016). Ironically, legacy journalism has thus given voice to the fringes –as the debate on climate change demonstrates. By giving the impression that all views are equally legitimate, it is also suggested that no truth whatsoever can ever be discerned in politically contentious liberal societies. To each, their truth.

All these trends converge in the post-truth phenomenon. The most perfect expression of the technological facilitation of post-truth is provided by so-called "fake news," that is, deliberately false news created and distributed in order to contaminate the public debate (let us leave aside those that are manufactured for fun, which are the preserve of trolls). Such news *feel* right, as they appeal to partisans willing to confirm their beliefs. The basic foundation of post-truth is here at play: we do not see in order to believe; we believe and thus we see. And the same goes for rumors, which are experiencing an unwelcome spring that can have deadly consequences –dozens have been lynched in India after being falsely accused via WhatsApp of rape or abduction– and conspiracy theories. Rumors and falsities are then easier to disseminate in the new technological context: they gain traction because they fit the previous beliefs of those who receive and spread them (see Sunstein, 2008). The aforementioned silo effect helps to explain this dynamic, as it facilitates the unfolding of social cascades that multiply the reach of misinformation. Digital communities thus reinforce the confirmation bias, push us to conform with our peers, and increase polarization between moral tribes. And vice versa: as people tend to consume information confirming their beliefs while ignoring or rejecting contrary information, a media environment where this is easily done fosters the creation of echo chambers. Therefore, digitization changes the *reach and range* of false news, biased information, and fringed views. They can travel farther than before, sharing space with the mainstream and actually blurring the boundaries that used to separate them.

However, some reservations are in order. On the one hand, there is the argument that "selective exposure" has never been greater, so that people have never been so isolated from channels of communication that run contrary to their beliefs. This idea is intuitively dubious: were people having greater access to plural sources of information when they just purchased one newspaper or listened to one radio station or watched one TV channel? Arguably not. They were equally reluctant to consume contrary news and equally adept at re-codifying disfavoured pieces of information (see Sartori, 2005). The media environment was just simpler. People who consume news online are *more* exposed to contrary views, since it is almost impossible not to encounter them in view of the fast circulation of news links and posts on the Internet. As James Webster (2014) suggested, the idea that the public is now massively fragmented lacks empirical support, especially in a media environment where we frequently recur to "media meshing" in order to overcome the lack of time –we tweet as we watch television, for instance, and often we tweet *about* what we see on television. The balkanization of the public is not what it seems –data tells a different story.

As a study conducted by Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) about the consumption of political news online in the US demonstrates, the audience for news websites is highly concentrated:

while big outlets tend to be politically centrist, politically extreme sites get little traffic. Moreover, users who often visit ideologically diverse sites and ideological loyalties are only a bit more pronounced than those in television –segmentation is far less marked than in face-to-face encounters, be them in the neighborhood or on social media platforms. Yet the evidence about whether these social networks are more inclined toward ideological extremes is mixed. Overall, as Webster emphasizes, there is little evidence that people’s political ideologies segregate them into “echo chambers” where only like-minded speech is to be found. On the contrary

although people who pay attention to the news can and do encounter a healthy dose of information from ideologically agreeable sources, they also come into regular contact with crosscutting stories, images, and commentaries (Webster, 2014, p. 111).

However, it would be wildly optimistic to believe that such encounters lead to a more enlightened public. Indeed, they should allay our fears about a deep divide between moral tribes, or at least about a deep divide *caused* by patterns of online news consumption, yet data do not say what people *do* with contrary information (anyone familiar with academic literature on media effects will recognize the nature of this limitation). Could it not be that people simply *reject* or *criticize* such news and opinions? Could they not even derive a satisfaction from there, insofar as the most sophisticated (and active) news consumers do not only scrutinize what *politicians* say but also how *media* report what politicians do and say?

In his work on “political fans,” Cornell Sandvoss (2013) has argued that people who are deeply engaged with politics, as it is manifest in the intensity with which they follow specialized blogs, do precisely that. By forming communities of political enthusiasts, they select and interpret the texts they read. Yet their content is less relevant than the interpretation made of it: not only are texts inherently polysemic and allows for different interpretations, political fans sometimes seek out texts of which they can make an oppositional or humorous reading. Therefore: “What is significant here is that such texts are as instantly ‘normalised’ by corresponding to their expectations and pre-existing views of the media outlets behind such texts” (Sandvoss, 2013, p. 277). In turn, processes of textual selection can contribute to the formation of communicative bubbles in which political fans engage only with texts that affirm their “horizon of expectation.” This opens the door for the kind of fragmentation that Webster, as we have seen, contests –on the ground that the number of intensely engaged citizens does not abound.

The alarm about fake news also deserves some commentary. The latter designates the diffusion of deliberately false misinformation with the aim of contaminating the public conversation and/or the formation of political preferences. Now, if we take into account that around half of news consumers get their information from social networks, *and half of them in turn do not remember where they read what they read*, it seems that there are grounds for democratic concern. Absolute numbers suggest it too: according to the US Senate research on the Russian meddling in US elections, up to 126 million Americans were exposed to fake news on Facebook, while 129 real events were created on the same platform. All the same, those same numbers look differently when put into context. Watts and Rothschild (2017) have retorted that, notwithstanding the impact that fake news aim to, their real influence is not dramatic. Some numbers: whereas fake Russian accounts paid for 3,000 ads on Facebook, amounting to more than 100,000 dollars, this sum corresponds to 0.1% of Facebook’s ad revenue *in a day*. Likewise, although BuzzFeed calculations indicated that the 20 most relevant fake news in 2016 had generated 8,711,000 “user actions” on Facebook, like sharing or commenting or reacting, between August 1<sup>st</sup> and election day, some perspective is needed –as Facebook had 1,500 million active users during that interval, if each of them is assigned with one daily “action,” it turns out that during the 100 days that preceded the election, those 20 top fake news produced 0,006 of the total number of user actions. The needle in the haystack.



Admittedly, the resonance of a particular fake can be greater than this, especially during the short intervals that correspond to electoral processes or one-day political events. And, predictably enough, the impact of fake news is correlated with the degree of political engagement, so that those who already consume them are more willing to disseminate them. In order to claim that a massive number of citizens change their political preferences after having had contact with fake news, as was claimed by Andrew Wiley from Cambridge Analytica in connection to the Brexit vote, a much more detailed qualitative research is however needed –one that might be able to demonstrate that the isolated effect of fake news can induce that particular, strong effect. Such research has not, to my knowledge, been conducted yet.

To a large extent, the alarm elicited by fake news should be interpreted as one facet of a wider process: the disappointment with the public sphere as it really is after the massive democratization made possible by digital technologies. Although surveys had been showing for decades that mass publics are rather disinformed, their “latent” state had created the contrary impression in those who were willing to believe in the essential soundness of electoral bodies. Hence the utopian hopes awakened by the advent of digital technologies; and also, the ensuing shock. Yet there is nothing surprising in the state of public opinion, which gives credit to Walter Lippman’s (2009) reservations about the citizen’s attitude towards information. The greater inclusivity of the contemporary public sphere increases the natural cacophony of the democratic debate. Moreover, news outlets have attracted people who would have not been classical readers in the golden age of legacy journalism. Actually, the launching of the smartphone has turned politics into a branch of the entertainment industry, as almost everyone is connected to the news –albeit mostly in a superficial manner. In this context, technology both enables and multiplies the effects associated to a mass public debate where rumors and fakes have more reach and circulate more rapidly, while at the same time like-minded people can connect more easily. Strictly speaking, none of this is new. But these communicative distortions, most of which are inherent to communication, are technologically enhanced in the digital media landscape. In this context, post-truth can prosper.

### **3. Democracy and Truth in the Post-Truth Age**

So far, a genealogy of post-truth has been presented: an approximation to the factors that may explain its current rise. Yet what to make of post-truth? What does it mean for democracy? Can it be stopped, or its influence curtailed?

Ultimately, the ambiguities of post-truth reflect those of truth itself, and the same goes for the relation it maintains with democracy. Both Cass Sunstein (2008) and Harry Frankfurt (2005) have emphasized how those who propagate rumors or lies are not interested in truth. But not all rumors or lies are propagated in a deliberate manner –those who spread fake news online, for one, usually believe that they are endorsing a true statement. Moreover, it is not easy to distinguish between truth and its opposites, no matter how easy it seems sometimes. In other words, discussing post-truth and post-factualism requires a clear understanding of what is or can be “true” and what is the place the latter has in a democratic polity. The problem is that no such clear understanding truly exists.

How liberal is the notion that there exists something like *the* truth, to be discovered through the public exchange of views? History, a cemetery of once cherished truths, suggests otherwise: that truth is rarely “final.” Liberal theory just acknowledges that when describing –from Mill to Rawls– the public sphere as the site where people can freely discuss public matters in the quest for truth, but at the same time portrays such truth as elusive and provisional. The contradiction is visible; truth occupies an ambiguous place in liberal societies. On the one hand, its existence is taken for granted, as there would be no point in searching for something that does not exist. On the other, its fragility and provisionality are emphasized, in order to avoid both complacency and the risk of “naturalizing” some values or

beliefs that should always remain open for discussion. Let us then say that democracies are inherently skeptical, while they also retain faith in their ability to accumulate “truths” that allow for a degree of material and moral progress. As a result, democracies are always on the edge: they can foster the idea that truth is just there to be found if we employ the right means; and they also can fall into the dangerous trap of relativism by stressing how rare truth is. It is quite a conundrum.

Much depends on the *kind* of truth we focus on. Instead of talking about *the* truth, or the epistemological possibility of attaining it, any discussion must depart from the recognition that not all statements possess the same character and thus the word “true” does not apply to them in the same manner. To that end, a distinction might be established between revealed truths (that belong to the realm of faith), factual truths (which try to record what happened), scientific truths (theories that aim to explain axiomatically how reality works), and moral truths (normative prescriptions about the most desirable organization of social life or individual behavior). Now, revealed truths cannot be falsified and scientific ones have their own validation system –despite which a scientific theory is never exactly “true” but rather a robust explanation that cannot be disproven. Focusing for our purposes on the distinction between factual and moral truths, we have already seen that Hannah Arendt (2006) stressed how important it is for a democracy to transmit the latter –a function that she attributed to the free press and which in her eyes was thus exercised *outside the political realm*. She distinguished carefully between *facts* and *opinions*, the latter falling squarely into the political realm. As we have seen, the problem with post-truth is *precisely* that facts become opinions, or subject to opinions. The boundary that Arendt saw as essential for democracy –a conviction nurtured by her study of totalitarianism– seems to be eroding.

Some thinkers, though, believe that truth is politically irrelevant. Richard Rorty, a very nuanced philosopher that belongs to the pragmatist tradition, is a case in point. The debate that he and analytical philosopher Pascal Engel maintained back in 2002 is very helpful to understand what is at stake as far as post-truth is concerned (Rorty & Engel, 2007). Rorty does not believe that truth has the importance usually attributed to it –in his view, social utility trumps truthfulness. Truth might be better described as a device that we use for speaking about statements, not a term that designates an objective world that transcends the approval we express to our audience and our own community. In other words, he attempts to debunk the “myth” of truth. He even goes on to reject “the idea that some discourses, some parts of culture, are in closer contact with the world, or fit the world better, than other discourses” (Rorty & Engel, 2007, p. 36).

This means that discriminations between discourses *cannot* be made by reference to their ability to produce correspondence to reality. The latter is no standard –haven’t we for centuries believed in all kind of strange things that bore no relation to reality? If such beliefs served to sustain stable orders or to reduce violence, what difference does it make whether they were “true” or not? Moreover, how can we *know* whether something is true or not? We simply can’t:

We do not have any way to establish the truth of a belief or the rightness of an action except by reference to the justifications we offer for thinking what we think or doing what we do (Rorty & Engel, 2007, p. 44).

This statement depends, obviously, on the former: since there is no discourse or mode of enquiry that can claim a greater correspondence to reality, that is, *since there is no truth*, that what is or is not “true” is meaningless as far as making judgements about beliefs, actions, or rules is concerned. Ultimately, then, “A person is sincere when she says what she thinks she is justified in believing” (Rorty & Engel, 2007, p. 42). So much for truth’s virtues.

The problems brought about by this conception of truth are manifold. How could a person be persuaded about the wrongness of their claims if all that counts is that they are

sincere about what they say? How can such a person change their mind? Let us imagine that this person endorse some fake news about the state of the economy, or a distorted piece of history that serves to support an ethno-nationalistic demand, or that they systematically misrepresents the real number of migrants living in their country because such numbers *feel* right –and let us imagine that such distortions lead in the aggregate to a disastrous result for their society. The idea that there is no truth seems no longer innocuous in such a case. Pascal Engel responds to Rorty that truth *is* a “norm of inquiry” as well as a “norm of objectivity for our statements and beliefs.” Whereas Rorty thinks that justification is always “relative to an audience,” Engel points out that the contrast should be between the reasons we have to believe or justify a statement and the way things are “in reality.” As a matter of fact, the majority of us act *as if* truth existed –even Rorty is making a claim that he believes to be true.

This belief possesses in turn an instrumental value –it organizes public debate. In fact, post-truth does not designate a society where nobody believes in truth, but rather one where people tend to believe in *their own* truth. Those who cling to their own beliefs are no post-modernists, and that is one of the dangers of pluralism: it further complicates the balance between relativism and skepticism that democracies try to keep. Rorty’s views, in fact, can be seen as a political answer to a pluralistic society where agreement between different worldviews seems unfeasible and thus a *modus vivendi* between different people must be found. Interestingly, Rorty makes sense *politically* rather than *epistemologically*. Paradoxically as it may seem, post-truth might be seen as the final outcome of pluralism, as that is what happens when societies become overexposed to the debate between different “truths” that cannot be reconciled. On the other hand, as was suggested earlier, the contact with other worldviews is now even more intense, as they have become more conspicuous due to digitization –the ensuing moral suffocation leading to a retreat to each own’s moral tribe. Despite the references made to Orwell’s *1984*, post-truth is almost the opposite from the totalitarian distortion of truth: the latter represents a state monopoly, the former flourishes in the “marketplace of ideas.” Under this light, post-truth is a feature of a “hyperdemocracy” (see Welch, 2013).

At the same time, though, ambivalence is inherent to human communication. In fact, the latter is always “valenced”:

We interpret complex and polysemic messages in ways that make sense to us and reinforce our identities. We speak in ways that highlight our virtues and values. *Human communication, especially in the public sphere, tends to be valenced communication* (Neumann, 2016, p. 46; his emphasis).

As communication processes are deeply imbued with the identities and interests of different social groups, polysemic conflict is likely if not inevitable. Humans naturally seek to reinforce their identities and ideals in the public sphere –polarization is thus no anomaly but rather “the natural condition” of democratic societies. Let us recall the observation that Sandvoss makes about political enthusiasts: although they may search for texts that reinforce their views, those who don’t are *read* in a way that ends up reinforcing them all the same.

What should concern us, then, is the factual grounds of democratic opinions. Normative arguments cannot be completely disentangled from factual statements, but they cannot be automatically deduced from them either. The reason is that they are less objectively *discovered* than intersubjectively *constructed* through dialogue, as much as through non-intentional processes of social change. That is why the clearest distinction should be made between facts and opinions, no matter how useless this can be when the perception of facts is affectively saturated. Furthermore, this separation should be supplemented with the enlightening distinction that the late Arendt (1978) proposes between “truth” and “meaning.” On the one hand, truth is “what we are *compelled to admit* by the nature either of our senses or of our brain” (Arendt, 1978, p. 61; my emphasis); the task of knowledge is to produce it (and the

opposite of the factual, Arendt points out, is the deliberate lie). On the other, when we *think* we search instead for *meaning*: the dialogue of the I with itself devotes itself to interpretation. And whereas the factual *can* be established, matters of meaning cannot possibly be settled: “What science and the quest for knowledge are after is *irrefutable* truth, that is, propositions human beings are not free to reject –they are compelling” (Arendt, 1978, p. 59). Yet *the good* and *the true* are ultimately unattainable –otherwise the human search for cognition would come to an end. Truth and meaning, in sum, are different things –and thinking is not concerned with the truth, since it has given up the “urge to know.”

As it happens, the idea that something like “post-meaning” may exist is preposterous – there is no such thing, because we know that there is no single meaning but a multiplicity of possible meanings. The latter are not so much *extracted* as they are *elucidated*, yet there is no overarching authority that can decide upon their plausibility or validity. Democratic societies, in turn, have public “opinions”: their citizens are expected to emit a judgement upon whose quality no test is performed. Sartori (2005) insisted on the undemanding nature of democracy: informed citizens are not expected, although they are welcomed. The democratic public sphere is thus a site where factual statements, meanings, and opinions overlap. Yet the lack of control about who says what and for what reasons, in combination with the relaxed attitude that the majority of people hold towards matters of meaning, and with the conversational distortions created by political competition –all this leads to the primacy of opinion over factual truth and meaning. Most of the time, opinions are disengaged from true facts, although they tend to be factually justified in the eyes of their holders. Thus, philosopher Bernard Williams view that “the merits of the market as a means of spreading true belief have been exaggerated” (Williams, 2004: 216). He adds:

No liberal democracy can afford to be too discouraging of expressive, disorderly, and even prejudicial speech, or too fussy about who publishes it or how, and it cannot force people to think about public or political matters. At the same time, the basic rights of liberal society and democratic freedoms themselves depend on the development and protection of methods for discovering and transmitting the truth, and this requires that public debate embodies in some form an approximation to an idealized market. Squaring this circle must be a prime aim of institutional invention in liberal states (Williams, 2004, p. 218–219).

What post-truth shows is that a change in the structure of societal communication can make things worse as far as the discovery and transmission of truth is concerned –at least for the time being. Nevertheless, we cannot expect too much from democracy: our efforts must be directed towards the restoration of facts as the foundation for the free exchange of opinions and the normative debate about the good. From those who truly engage in the search for meaning, this caution is surely unnecessary: they already know that established facts are compelling and must be respected.

Arguably, this is a banal conclusion. It does not provide any advice about how to fix this, but it does suggest that it is the spread of deliberate lies that should worry us –if we are able to identify them. Therefore, perhaps we should rather talk of post-factualism, as this term seems to express more accurately the tribulations of truth in the contemporary public sphere. If facts are only accepted as long as they *feel* right, the challenge is to displace the conversation towards the conflicting *interpretation* of uncontested facts –shielding the latter when we have them. It is not much, and still we do not quite know how to do it. Facts, certainly, are horrid things.

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