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# Online media impact on politics. Views on post-truth politics and post-postmodernism

## ABSTRACT

*Most of what is considered post-truth politics refers to known features of politics and political propaganda. These are old phenomena boosted by technology, and in particular by social media. To examine the background and genesis of post-truth politics, this article integrates in the analysis the impact of online media and the relativism of postmodernity, in which the truth is always a discursive construction, never a discovery. It also examines populism in the light of this approach. The analysis concludes that all these elements play a definite role in post-truth politics and that the so-called post-truth era is not simply a by-product of populism; relativism, the media and the uses of technology also play an important role.*

## KEYWORDS

post-truth politics  
postmodernism  
online media  
social media  
truth  
manipulation  
journalism  
populism

## INTRODUCTION

Post-truth 'relates to or denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). It includes situations in which fabricated untruths are masqueraded as truth and situations in which some

elements of truth are combined with hefty doses of exaggeration in order to cause stir. A common feature though, is the exacerbation of the tone and content of the message. The political debates that dominated the 2016 presidential election in the United States and the European Union referendum in the United Kingdom are usually presented as prime examples of post-truth politics. Its most distinctive feature is the primacy of emotions over facts and substantive, hard information. Language is selected to trigger emotional reactions; emotive, inflammatory, controversial sentences are used to involve emotionally and to provoke specific reactions. Appeals to emotions are central in political discussions and debates. The main objective of this kind of political communication is to convey credible interpretations of reality, not necessarily facts.

An interesting aspect of the notion of post-truth politics is that it highlights the little significance of the truth in politics, as well as the growing relativism in western societies. None of this is exactly new, though. This is also not the first time that the definitions of debate and knowledge have changed due to the media. Postman ([1985] 2005) for example, noted a similar process apropos of television in the 1980s. The novelty is the much faster pace of the impact of technology on politics and society.

This article intends to discuss the so-called post-truth politics by focusing on today's prominence of online media and by integrating in the debate the contributions of the literature on postmodernism and relativism, by Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty. With the objective of deconstructing the background and meaning of post-truth politics, it is divided into three main parts/arguments. First, it addresses the issue of manipulation of information and of the media to influence public opinion and achieve political goals. Second, it examines the main proposals of postmodernist theories and analyses how post-truth politics fits into this framework. Finally, it assesses the impact of online media on politics.

## **THE NEWNESS OF OLD: MANIPULATION, POLITICS AND MEDIA**

Recent changes in technology, media and politics can reshape reality at a faster pace than ever before. However, it is important to note that the core arguments put forward by the notion of 'post-truth politics' are not exactly a novelty in politics and media. Manufacturing and manipulating information to achieve political goals is nothing new in itself. In fact, it should be as old as politics. The same way that deception and dishonesty in politics is nothing new too: even if with different levels of success, there have been known cases in the history of every country in Europe and elsewhere. Hannah Arendt wrote extensively on it (see e.g., Arendt 1967 and 1972). Analysing deception and 'defactualization', Arendt described the 'deliberate denial of factual truth' and the 'capacity to change facts'. According to her, 'truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings' (Arendt 1972: 4).

With the exception of the media environment, which has some new key elements (the near ubiquity of social media and interactivity) the features of politics and political communication that are today known as post-truth do not represent new phenomena. Thinking about political propaganda, manipulation of information, politicians lying to win elections or to continue in government, image-building, conspiracy theories, spin, public relations, the use of emotions in political debates, we see that none of these strategies and tactics

are actually new; there are examples that illustrate these different situations in different moments in history and in different countries.

In 1928, Bernays writing on *Propaganda* ([1928] 2005) explained: 'the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society'. In his opinion, the masses were not competent enough to make wise political decisions. And before Bernays, Lippmann, in 1922, had already described, in his book *Public Opinion* ([1922] 1997), the 'manipulation of the irrational masses by experts' as an essential political feature in democratic societies to ensure social cohesion and to uphold democracy. And closely related to this view, is Lippmann's belief that the media were highly vulnerable to manipulation and that facts were usually arranged to induce specific interpretations of reality that served specific interests, public interests as well as private interests. Thinking about what post-truth politics is and means today, it is possible to identify similarities with Arendt's view of politics and Lippmann and Bernays's approach to political propaganda and democracy.

Accurate news media coverage and the use of the media to achieve political objectives are also old concerns. The instrumentalization of the media by political parties and politicians has been debated in a number of situations, including when it is deliberate (e.g. party-press and partisan media in general, or even in the case of community media and other models of media for social change); and the development of research on media effects (e.g. agenda-setting, framing, priming, for example) has highlighted how objectivity and impartiality are mainly ideals that should guide journalists, but difficult to achieve in practice.

The complexity of journalistic objectivity has long been acknowledged (Tuchman 1972). To deal with the issue, journalists are trained to disclose what lies beneath the news story (political influences, sponsorships, etc.), so that audiences can decide for themselves whether to accept their version of facts. However, this does not always happen and ensuring rigorously this procedure often means for journalists losing important sources of information (officials and others).

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) observed that, in the nineteenth century, journalists talked about realism, not objectivity. Over time, the intrinsic value of objective reporting was not abandoned, but journalists developed more awareness of the inevitable presence of subjectivity in their own work, which motivated the resource to professional routines applied to emulate the scientific method. Interestingly, this happened at a time when scientific disciplines were starting to question the notion of truth as something that could be verified altogether.

There is also a fundamental distinction between accuracy and truth in journalism: accuracy is related to objectivity and verification, and to the distinction between facts and opinion, but it is not the same as truth, as it is possible to report accurately an untruth. Lippmann ([1922] 1997) had already noted that news and truth were not the same. More recently, Umberto Eco (2016) explored the idea of the distinction between journalism and truth and analysed the limits of the truth in journalism in the novel *Numero Zero*.

In *Numero Zero*, Eco's main character created a new newspaper, *Domani*, which was a fake newspaper (ergo a fake news outlet), to gain advantages through threats of defamation. Eco questions journalism's most revered principles and explains how those principles and routines can be used to deceive, instead of being put at the service of truth. For example, quoting is presented

as an act of manipulation, because journalists take specific passages from the sources' statements to support their own view. Eco also draws attention to the fact that the rules and practice of journalistic writing carry a metalinguistic function, which on its own attributes credibility and truthfulness to news content. But these procedures can be used for purposes other than achieving and conveying the truth, as it was demonstrated with *Domani*.

Allan (2010) also focused on this issue, but to reject any possible convergence between propaganda and news. According to him, the propagandist deliberately intends to deceive, conceal the truth 'so as to direct public opinion in a particular way through manipulative tactics, devices and strategies' (Allan 2010: 23). The intent is different in principle, however deception might also be present in journalism unintentionally and indirectly (and sometimes even directly), when for example others attempt to manipulate the media agenda and content to achieve specific goals. And there are a number of cases throughout history proving that journalism is not invulnerable to pressure and manipulation.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) explain that journalists pursue a functional truth that involves not only getting the facts right, but also making sense of the facts. In some cases, this can include a type of journalism's self-reflectivity and metacommunication about manipulation, as other authors have pointed out (see e.g., Patterson 1993; Kerbel 1998). In any case, the search for the truth is always a process loaded with relativity, in Kovach and Rosenstiel's view (2007). This process develops over time between the initial story and the interaction between the public and journalists, as a conversation in which journalists should be aware and flag any misinformation, disinformation, or self-promoting information. This approach is strongly supported by the media uses-and-effects theories and reception studies that put the emphasis on the heterogeneity of audiences and explain how messages are received and perceived differently by different people. A relevant implication of this is that news consumers in general will most often see only what they can or want to see, regardless of fact-checking and objectivity procedures.

Contemporary journalism itself has also played a role in the eroding influence of fact-based truth (Goldstein 2007). Goldstein notes that telling the truth has been identified as one of the oldest frailties of journalism (e.g. the journalists' own biases, sources may lie, information may be misunderstood). Goldstein acknowledges that it is not possible to quantify whether journalists are getting better at telling the truth, but refuses to see journalism as an 'aspect of post-modern sensibility that accepts the impossibility of determining the truth' (Goldstein 2007: 6–9). According to him, more should be expected of journalism.

The way in which information is treated in news stories through news framing or the presentation of facts through the positions of the actors involved, for example, suggests some degree of relativism inherent to journalistic techniques and practices. Each actor has its own version of the facts and these are often contradictory versions. This means that in news stories, reality and facts are produced through discourse and representation that often leans towards the position of the most powerful (see e.g., the higher prevalence of official sources in the media coverage of politics).

The distinction between facts and fiction has also become increasingly blurred due to hybrid genres, such as docudramas that blend facts and fiction, reality TV, entertainment talk shows that discuss politics, as well as hybrid media formats and platforms, which have developed mainly due to the

Internet and social media. Today, audiences gain much of their understanding of current affairs from docudramas and fiction, and from social media, instead of hard news in legacy news media formats. This ultimately also contributes to growing relativism. Furthermore, the potential of information and communication technologies and the growing availability of user generated content in social media, citizen journalism, for example, also brought back to the core of the debate the issues of truth and trust in the media.

Developments in the media have contributed to the production and proliferation of all kinds of information, somehow further obscuring the border between news and propaganda. These developments have thus increased the scale of phenomena such as the dissemination of false and biased, manipulated information, including theories of conspiracy and populist discourses, quick spread of rumours; but have also promoted other, more sophisticated uses of technology, as for example digital data harvesting with the objective of launching target campaign messages to manipulate opinions and attitudes (including vote in elections, as the Cambridge Analytica and Facebook scandal has shown).

These are different examples of what could be called a discursive construction of facts (and ultimately of the truth) in news production and consumption, as well as in distribution (e.g. online news media, social media, algorithms), as we will see further ahead. The epistemic nature of facts and information has therefore become frailer and more contested. In this process, social media are playing a significant role, but they are mainly enhancing existing trends, not initiating structural shifts.

## **A POSTMODERN APPROACH TO POST-TRUTH POLITICS**

Changes in the status of the truth and an even greater suppleness of ethical values in politics can also be interpreted in the light of the relativism of the postmodernity era. Postmodernism has had a considerable impact on the arts, philosophy and social sciences since the mid twentieth century. What role does the truth have in the postmodernist approach?

A distinctive feature of postmodernism is related to the inexistence of definite meanings and absolute truths. Reality does not pre-exist its interpretation, which is developed in relation to the customs of a specific context and to the individual assessments that are influenced by personal experience and beliefs. 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 therefore subject to diverse interpretations and meanings.

In sum: no absolute and definite truths exist and values, knowledge, and ultimately reality are relative to discourse and interplay, which often gives rise to contradictory interpretations of reality and values coexisting alongside and sometimes clashing with each other. The difference between modernity and postmodernity 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.

This approach to reality and knowledge, and consequently to the truth, is reflected in the works of several influential thinkers, such as Rorty, Foucault and Lyotard. But postmodern reasoning was also influenced by pragmatism and by some of the most authoritative pragmatists, such as William James and Charles Sanders Peirce.

According to Rorty (1991), reality and knowledge are always relative to discourse and representation, and objectivity is regarded as intersubjectivity.

He argues for a pragmatist view of the truth, in which the truth is a property of our representations of the world. The truth can be interpreted in multiple ways and cannot be simply found in the world. Therefore, knowledge is not a matter of truth or falsity, but of acquiring habits of action (in the sense Peirce described: beliefs and meanings as vehicles of cognition, apud Thayer 1982: 44) to make sense of and to deal with reality.

Inspired by Foucault, postmodernism also sustains that knowledge is always influenced by considerations of power. Postmodernism is, to a great extent, a reaction to modernity's dominant discourses that, according to postmodernists such as Lyotard (*Postmodern Condition*, [1979] 1991), were largely controlled by the elites and therefore reflected mostly the elite's interests and values. Foucault ([1969] 2002) critically traced the history of modernity and analysed the link between power and knowledge, to conclude that power shapes knowledge and the accepted truths, as there is no absolute truth. Following the principles of social constructionism, the truth is a construction, in Foucault's view. He also rejected other types of universality (e.g. morality) and argued that cultural hegemony inevitably leads to exclusion and violence.

According to Foucault, power plays a crucial role in determining what is perceived as the truth and considered true in any given moment. The truth is the result of discourse, power relations and context. Foucault sees the truth as a struggle between competing systems of discourse, and what is true is ultimately determined by which system is dominant and not by which system is correct (1980: 132). This also means that there is no such thing as a value-free scientific language, in his view. There are seeds of this line of thought long before the mid-late twentieth century's postmodernism perspective in the works by pragmatist William James, for example, who only believed in relative truths. As William James explained in the beginning of the twentieth century, the truth always emerges from some kind of agreement between ideas and reality (1978: 42).

The post-factual relativism of postmodernism emerged as a reaction and response to the 'dogmas' of modernism, characterized by the predominance of the principles of science and objectivity, and by the trust that scientific methods could achieve universal truths about the world. In this perspective, reason can discern what is good and bad, what is right and wrong, and what is true and false. And language does not carry subjectivity in itself, it is rational and objective, in the sense that it presupposes a unique link between the objects of perception and the words used to name them, in other words, between signifier and signified.

According to Lyotard ([1979] 1991), stability and order were maintained in modern societies through what he called 'grand narratives' (meta-ideologies, meta-theories), and postmodernism is the reaction to these 'grand narratives'. That is why postmodernism offers understandings of the world that are situational, contingent and provisional. Knowledge does not lead to absolute truths; instead it is relational, functional and focused on a utilitarian approach. Consequently, postmodern politics deals with situations as fluid and influenced by trends. While theorizing postmodernism, Lyotard ([1979] 1991) included in the analysis elements that are key for understanding political changes, such as the ones related with the current debate about 'post-truth politics': technology and the control of information flows.

Regardless of the ongoing debate on whether it makes sense to presume a divide or a continuity between modernity and postmodernity, substantiated in

the fact that many elements of modernity still persist in current societies (see, e.g., Giddens 1990), there was an undeniable shift in western societies, which has resulted in a growing relativism in different aspects of life, including in politics. There are of course different degrees of relativism to acknowledge; in some cases it is discussed as being total (especially in theoretical discussions), but in other cases it only encompasses matters of morality and not matters of science, for example. In any case, in contemporary western societies, it is very likely to find situations in which the frontiers of what is knowledge and belief, and of what is truth and falsity are blurred. Not only ethics and moral became more relative to specific points of view, as also did the concept of truth and on some occasions even the discourses on scientific findings themselves (see e.g., Trump's position about global warming). There is more flexibility, which is also what Bauman means with 'liquid' times (2007).

Bauman identifies the differences between a previous era and our current era as the passage from solid (stable) to liquid (uncertain) times. The emphasis is no longer on the 'grand narratives' (Lyotard [1979] 1991), but on the pragmatism that results in fragmentation and diversity; and on the partiality of discourses about the truth and reality, which includes knowledge that becomes inevitably biased because it is a construction, and no longer a discovery.

This shift has implications for politics as well: more than dichotomies between right and wrong, and truth and falsehood, there are different interpretations. Even facts are interpreted and therefore they are a construction, in the same way that ethics and moral are also relative to personal opinion. The emphasis is then placed on subjectivism, individualism and difference. A tangible consequence of relativism is therefore individualism and self-centralization, which in turn encourages the perception of each one's understanding of facts as more valid than the views of others. This attitude, however, is not without risks for contemporary societies and politics, greater polarization and exclusion are just some of its most manifest, immediate effects.

Consequently, one important question is whether increasing levels of individualism are sustainable in western politics and society. On the one hand, individualism represents freedom, because it is also a liberation from social control; but, on the other hand, it has implicit the risk of fragmentation (see e.g. Putman's *Bowling Alone* [2000]), which the Internet and mainly social media have further deepened. In an interview to newspaper *El País*, Bauman referred to the negative political effects of social media, because people only 'see reflections of their own face' (Querol 2016). According to him, the real dialogue is with difference, not with people who believe in the same things as we do. And with social media it is too easy to avoid controversy.

In an attempt to find an explanation for the people's support to the twentieth century totalitarianism (namely fascism and communism), Nisbet (1953) portrayed it as a response to the previous advance of individualism that ended up producing its own antithesis. The absence of a sense of community and solidarity resulted in the identification with mass movements and nationalism. In a time when individualism has become (again) so diffused and politics has often failed to meet people's expectations, the lack of a sense of belonging might be leading once more to its opposite, now embodied in populist approaches to politics. And there is also an important sense of uncertainty associated to relativism and individualism, which has been successfully exploited by populists. As Bauman (1997) saw postmodern society, security gave way to freedom, which has provoked a sense of constant uncertainty and has led to the exclusion of specific categories of outsiders from society.

Critics of postmodernism see its focus on ambiguity and relativism as a sign of decay and corruption in politics. But a different reading is also possible: because it enhances individual freedom, postmodernism might stimulate more citizen participation and more accountability, as people are more likely to question the actions of governments.

Diversity, plurality of meanings and interpretations are essential elements in postmodernity. Value judgements, especially those concerning truth and morality, vary between times and places, societies, social groups, social strata and between one person and another (Boudon apud Jarvie 2008). To that extent, relativism promotes democratic values in the same way that pluralism leads to relativism (Moore 2009). However, although postmodernism can be linked to the prevalence of plurality, it can – for the same reason – be seen as a cause of some types of contemporary populism (e.g. right-wing nationalism), which emerged as a reaction to what is perceived as an overwhelming diversity by some (embodied in multiculturalism, for example). It can also be interpreted as a response to the sense of loss of security, the absence of shared meanings, and the coexistence (with similar face value) of often-contradictory meanings and interpretations of facts that are key features of postmodernity.

In other words, important characteristics of postmodernism (plurality and dissimilitude, relativism, reaction against dominant discourses) could be deemed responsible for phenomena such as the ones associated to different forms of populism, which put forward a discourse and argue for a view of society and politics that is in many respects an antithesis of postmodernism's main features. This is reflected in some of the main elements of populist forms of discourse (often linked to post-truth politics): an over-simplification of issues (Manichaeism: good versus bad, the us versus them rhetoric, etc.; scapegoating and blame shifting tactics), anti-elitism and anti-establishment, the rejection of mediators replaced by those on speak on behalf of the people, the rejection of out-groups (of difference), or even the notions of an idealized nation and of a uniform version of the people (Salgado 2018).

In sum, postmodernism foundations provide a good insight into the prevailing relativism of contemporary western societies that in turn contributes to explaining on the one hand, some forms of populist discourse, and on the other hand, why fact-based evidence is not that relevant to an increasing number of people and factual information is seen as a matter of opinion so often. The idea of post-postmodernism is intended here to emphasize the amplification of some of these elements, mainly caused by the rapid development of the Internet and its impact on politics and society.

New terms, such as hypermodernism (Lipovetsky 2005), digimodernism (Kirby 2009), post-postmodernism (Nealon 2012), just to mention a few examples, have tried to signal the differences of today's society mainly caused by digital culture, discussing what comes after the postmodern. There are several different interpretations of post-postmodernism, including some that are more or less conflicting and that touch upon different aspects of postmodernism (e.g. relativism, resentment of capitalism), but in most of them there is an attempt to theorize the effects of the Internet. The purpose here is to stress the intensification and amplification of some of the main features of postmodernism, as Nealon's (2012) notion of post-postmodernism does, indicating a difference not in kind, but in intensity, that is, even more fragmentation, individualism, flexibility, relativism. And the pace of change has accelerated significantly.



Post-truth politics is related to, but goes beyond the impact of the Internet and social media in politics (further analysed in the next section). Even though these are key, mainly because they enable direct communication channels without the involvement of the traditional structures of mediation (gatekeepers in journalism, but also other institutions of representative democracy), the analysis of what post-truth politics is and means must be also related with the prevailing relativism in western societies, that is, the notion that what the truth is depends on the context. Including relativism (a consequence of the postmodern attitude of distrust towards universalism) in the analysis as a broader frame allows a better understanding of the issues that are usually related with post-truth politics.

In what we could call a broader context of postmodern relativism, factual information is often seen as a matter of opinion and subject of political debate, in which mere opinions – not backed by scientific knowledge and verification – are presented as facts. This post-factual relativism fits well with several contemporary political campaigns and emotionally biased political discourses (e.g. Brexit campaign, Donald Trump's positions on immigration) and has become much more pronounced with the development of social media.

## **ONLINE MEDIA AND POLITICS**

With the Internet and particularly social media, mainstream political institutions and news media have lost an important part of their status in political reality construction, due to the multiplication of content producers. Because of this, the Internet was initially perceived as a democratization tool (e.g. Arab Spring, or the true embodiment of Habermas's public sphere), but its most recent effects on politics and society have been showing that the impact is complex and that sometimes has negative consequences for democracy.

There are situations in which social media might in fact erode democracy (see, e.g., Bauman 2016; Sunstein 2017). By selecting and manipulating information, social media can deepen fragmentation and polarization of public opinion, a process that Prior (2007) had already noted in television audiences. Chadwick et al. (2018) found that sharing tabloid news on social media was a significant predictor of democratically dysfunctional misinformation and disinformation behaviours. And this is an era in which emotions seem to matter more than facts for many people (in different types of populist discourse and arguments, in which the resort to emotions, such as the exploitation of fear and resentment, outweighs reasoned arguments). That is to say, objective facts are often less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and beliefs. 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 its cause.

This does not mean that the truth does not exist anymore; it just draws attention to the fact that consensus about what the truth is more difficult to achieve when different interpretations are treated as having a similar value. Throughout history, there have always been conflicting versions (truths) on a variety of subjects, but an important aspect that distinguishes the present time is the weaker authority of mainstream politics and mainstream media (the 'establishment') to determine the main interpretation of facts. A greater amount of political and social actors (including those that had been excluded from mainstream politics and media) can now bypass the traditional structures of power and deliver their messages directly to citizens (disintermediation).

However, this also means that misinformation, rumours, conspiracy theories can be widely spread without any journalistic verification.

Bias has always been present in the media, but in the past the authority's bias tended to be prevalent over the others. Today, there is a more or less widespread anti-elite climate, which includes the mainstream media due to their close proximity to power. And there is often a suspicion of the 'truths' that originate from the authorities. It is also a confidence crisis, because there is today less trust in the traditional political actors and institutions (e.g. Warren 1999). Together with this time's own relativism and the proliferation of content producers and disseminators, the weakening position of traditional gatekeepers has also played an important part in making consensus on what constitutes the truth more difficult to be achieved.

In the past, most people ended up having access to the same facts and to similar interpretations of those facts, because there were less media outlets and the flow of information was easier to control. With the Internet and social media many more competing views can come to light, including alternative versions of the truth, challenging the authorities' version.

As noted, technology has made it possible for more messages (including deliberately fake, misleading and inaccurate information) to spread faster and with more reach than ever before. This is magnified by technological development, but it is also explained by collective and mass behaviour theories from sociology and social psychology which have, for some time now, focused on understanding why gossip, rumours, riots, mass hysteria, moral panics usually spread so quickly.

Networks, such as social networking sites, aggregate individual behaviour, thus producing collective outcomes (Easley and Kleinberg 2010), and in a network it is not only possible, but also easier to influence each other's behaviours and decisions. This explains why information (true and false) spreads swiftly and has often offline impact too. However, more than a radical change caused strictly by social media, evidence suggests a continuum: structural changes have been taking place in the media environment even before the explosion of social media use.

The ubiquity of digital media gave rise to new contents, new formats, new genres and new media uses, which have been transforming the media landscape and influencing politics. However, some of these trends were already perceptible before social media (e.g. audience fragmentation, new genres). More than the replacement of old by new media, what there is today is a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017), in which older and newer media logics blend. According to Chadwick, the older media continue to have a central role in politics, but political actors and journalists have also adopted media practices associated with the Internet (2017: 65).

In addition to shifting patterns of media use and new hybrid forms of mediality (Chadwick 2017), there is also a prior surrounding atmosphere of mistrust towards politics manifested, for example, in news coverage filled with drama, negativity and interpretation; talk shows that blend entertainment and humour with politics; political satire movies and TV series (e.g. *Yes, Minister* [1980–1984]; more recently, *Veep* [2012– 2017]); genres that mix reality and fiction, like reality TV. In an 'expanded conception of the political', the media perform a political role, not only in their coverage of official politics, but also in the ways they represent everyday social reality (Coleman 2010). All of these representations of politics contribute to create a frame of mind that inevitably lies behind the evaluations that are made of politics and politicians.

Never before have citizens had access to so much information through such a variety of sources and channels. But, too much information without any filters can lead to a situation in which people do not have any basis for knowing what is relevant and what is irrelevant. An important and related aspect has to do with the influence of social media in the selection of information people are exposed to. In the past, it was more difficult to cherry-pick the information. Today, technological development has enabled processes of information customization and filtering through algorithms (e.g. Facebook news feed). This means that Facebook users are exposed to versions of the world that tend to confirm their own way of thinking (echo-chambers), which reinforces beliefs, prejudices and eventually furthers polarization.

People who get their information only online are less likely to find information that challenges or refutes their own views, and facts that counter false news shared by users outside of their network of friends. Extant research has shown that confirmation biases do affect attitudes towards political facts and even towards scientific matters (Munro and Ditto 1997). People tend to be exposed to information that confirms their beliefs and they seldom question news that fit their preconceptions (Garrett 2009). This behaviour is not restricted to specific groups: everyone has biases that influence the way they interpret the news.

Nevertheless, this behaviour is more pronounced now that news consumption is changing and is increasingly concentrated (and mediated) by social network sites, such as Facebook (Shearer and Gottfried 2017). In addition, Nelson and Taneja (2018) found that visits to fake news sites originated from social network sites at a much higher rate than visits to real news sites, confirming the primary role social media play in spreading fake news. Other forms of legitimization of fake news include political elites passing them to their followers using social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) or even mainstream media coverage.

There are also fake news websites and groups set up with the purpose of disseminating fake information to influence public opinion or specific groups. These look like real news and are made to be widely shared on social networks. Much like Umberto Eco's *Domani*, for many users these are credible news stories because they look like real news stories. This is enabled by the fact that Facebook has become one of the most important sources for reading news and accessing information for a growing number of people. Some authors argue that the Internet has not only increased the amount of false information, but it has also reinforced the authority of this kind of information due to the network format of social media (see Garrett 2011).

The use of online media to deliberately disseminate controversial content and highly charged political discourse is closely related to the notion of post-truth politics. The same holds true for spreading manipulated, fake information as a deliberate strategy to gain advantage in political conflicts. The resort to distorted information to reinforce beliefs and polarize opinions is linked to populist strategies; but they actually end up feeding each other. And all of this is propelled by the distrust of facts presented by the authorities and the growing use of social media (that function as network), including as source of information.

The paradox here is that there is much more information available, but a growing number of people has access to less diverse information and more fake news, due to the way the data is organized and disseminated through algorithms in social media websites, search engines, feed aggregators,

automated news production (filter bubbles). Furthermore, trying to obtain more advertising revenue, more clicks and likes, shares and comments on social media, the news media coverage highlights certain aspects of reality to the detriment of others considered less catchy, while news audiences try to navigate the flood of information and tend to seek confirmation bias in their selection of both news outlets and news topics. As Meyrowitz (1985) sharply noted while analysing the impact of electronic media on social behaviour: changes in media transform decisively how we make sense of information.

Reliable information about facts, issues and political actors is essential for any (consolidated and new) democracy to function (Milner 2002; Prior 2007; Salgado 2014; Aelst et al. 2017). But when facts are treated as a matter of opinion and media audiences are increasingly fragmented, polarized and radical, it becomes more difficult to create informed publics that share common understandings of reality and agree on what the public interest should be. Public discourse is influenced by a plethora of information (including fake, offensive, etc.) that, despite of the different credibility of sources, is usually treated as equivalent. This creates different dynamics of power, but that are not necessarily more plural.

## **CONCLUSION**

It would be a mistake to think that attempts to manipulate in politics using emotions and the dissemination of fake information to gain political advantages are new phenomena caused by online media. The newness of these phenomena is the easiness that the information is widely spread. We could say, a feature of politics and society that has been exacerbated by technology. A broader context marked by relativism and a widespread mistrust of traditional institutions at all levels facilitated the acceptance of alternative, and often fake information.

Post-truth politics and its causes and impact are understood best taking into account these different elements. The so-called post-truth era is not simply a by-product of populism and populism is not simply a consequence of distrust towards politicians and politics in general. The media also play an important role. However, the media and technology are not isolated from society: they shape society and politics and they are shaped by society and politics. Technology and the uses of technology are adjusted to the social and political settings in which they are integrated and operate.

Different aspects of the media push forward post-truth politics and relativism. Without being exhaustive, for example, in content production: more content producers, but also news stories construction and interpretive journalism, new genres and new formats; in distribution: new channels without mediation, social media as networks, algorithms and other forms of curating the information; and in consumption: fragmentation, polarization, social media as main source of information for many people.

Many of those engaged in political discourse – for example, in different manifestations of populism – increasingly challenge facts as mere opinions and use emotions to convince. The online media environment is particularly suited for this type of political communication. The epistemic status of information is therefore increasingly challenged by a growing structural relativism that has found its greater expression online, due to the features of this type of media that increase the number of content producers and allow a quick spread of information without the mediation of the traditional gatekeepers.

Not that postmodernism itself fully explains post-truth politics, but it has laid the foundations for its development and greater success. In postmodernism, the truth (and information) becomes site of ideological struggle. Because different meanings can be ascribed to the same text or fact, meaning is always a potential site of interpretation and possibly of dissent as well. The notion of post-postmodernism intends to stress the amplification of these aspects of reality.

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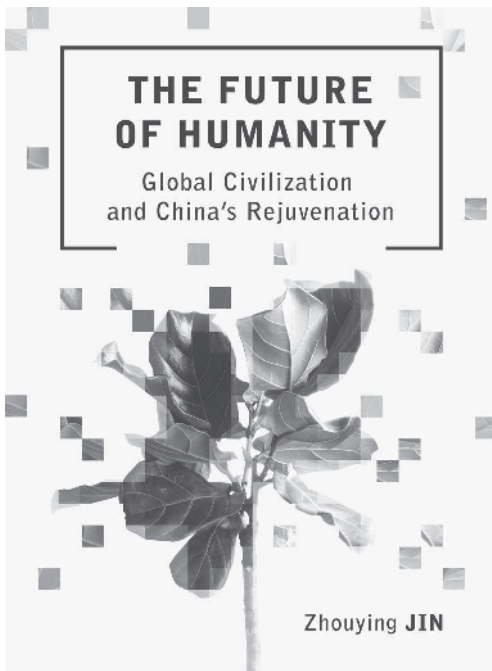
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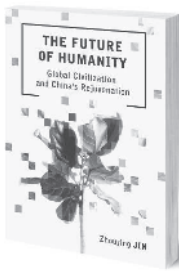
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