

Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies

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Summary and Keywords

While the periodizing concept “post-truth” (PT) initially appeared in the United States as a key word of popular politics in the form “post-truth politics” or “post-truth society,” it quickly appeared in many languages. It is now the object of increasing scholarly attention and public debate. Its popular and academic treatments sometimes differ in respect to its meaning, but most associate it with communication forms such as fake or false news, rumors, hoaxes, and political lying. They also identify causes such as polarization and unethical politicians or unregulated social media; shoddy journalism; or simply the inevitable chaos ushered in by digital media technologies. PT is sometimes posited as a social and political condition whereby citizens or audiences and politicians no longer respect truth (e.g., climate science deniers or “birthers”) but simply accept as true what they believe or feel. However, more rigorously, PT is actually a breakdown of social trust, which encompasses what was formerly the major institutional truth-teller or publicist—the news media. What is accepted as popular truth is really a weak form of knowledge, opinion based on trust in those who supposedly know. Critical communication approaches locate its historical legacy in the earliest forms of political persuasion and questions of ethics and epistemology, such as those raised by Plato in the *Gorgias*. While there are timeless similarities, PT is a 21st-century phenomenon. It is not “after” truth but after a historical period where interlocking elite institutions were discoverers, producers, and gatekeepers of truth, accepted by social trust (the church, science, governments, the school, etc.). Critical scholars have identified a more complex historical set of factors, to which popular proposed solutions have been mostly blind. Modern origins of PT lie in the anxious elite negotiation of mass representative liberal democracy with proposals for organizing and deploying mass communication technologies. These elites consisted of pioneers in the influence or persuasion industries, closely associated with government and political practice and funding, and university research. These influence industries were increasingly accepted not just by business but also by (resource-rich) professional political actors. Their object was not policy education and argument to constituents but, increasingly strategically, emotion and attention management. PT can usefully be understood in the context of its historical emergence, through its popular forms and responses,

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such as rumors, conspiracies, hoaxes, fake news, fact-checking, and filter bubbles, as well as through its multiple effects—not the least of which the discourse of panic about it.

Keywords: fake news, fact-checking, rumor, disinformation, trust, attention economy, journalism, democracy, political communication, communication and critical studies

Post-truth (PT) is a periodizing concept (Green, 1995; Besserman, 1998) that refers to a historically particular public anxiety about public truth claims and authority to be a legitimate public truth-teller. However, the term is potentially misleading for at least two major reasons. First, it pertains to two different but related forms of truth: honesty, on the one hand, and factuality and knowledge (justified belief), on the other. Second, PT presents definitional problems similar to other grand periodizing concepts (e.g., modernity and modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism; industrial and postindustrial; traditional and post-traditional). It is sometimes interpreted as a time beyond, after or without truth, which could not be farther from the truth. Post-truth's historical and cultural aspect related to shifting power relations and strategies make it an especially fertile subject for critical communication study.

How can PT be empirically known? It can be recognized in constant discursive obsession with and accusation of dishonesty, especially lying, and by the public anxiety and distrust it generates. It lies in the frequency and volume of the increasing amounts of labor to produce and attempt to debunk or clarify inaccurate or deceptive statements, the proliferation of “fact-checking” and rumor or hoax debunking organizations, usually individual businesses or wings of news organizations; it lies in the market for them, too (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). It lies in numerous international surveys measuring distrust (of multiple institutions and actors). It lies in a culture saturated with artifice and promotionalism. It lies in the material impact of false or intentionally misleading claims and the emotionalized public opinion they generate, from demands to and then release of a president's full birth certificate, to rumors of a candidate's child sex slavery ring in a Washington, DC, pizza parlor, resulting in armed confrontation. It lies in the documentation of politics and business built around the deception of artificial intelligence (bots), whose armies present the mirage of popularity or of supporters who sear their targets with brands of repugnance and chimerical flaws. It also lies in the industry of political consulting (now heavily informed by cognitive science and big data analytics, corresponding to emotionally pinpointed, demographically microtargeted influence strategies and practices). These are a few of the ways that one empirically encounters what is being named as PT, though scholars are only beginning to provide the important critical analytical and theoretical work to explain how it is shot through with power relations and struggles.

Critical Theoretical and Philosophical Precedents

Overall, while some themes and a tradition of critique toward authoritative truth claims from the Enlightenment to its critics in Marxism and postmodernism are consistent with many aspects of PT sociopolitical conditions and theory, they differ in major ways with regard to who or what is the subject and object of (dis-)trust in the authority to (re-)present truth and use it for political purposes. They also differ greatly in their explanations for shifts in dynamics of authority, trust, and truth-telling/-believing, PT being closely associated with cognitive scientific, technological, and ethical explanations.

Enlightenment thought, in both its rationalist and empiricist strands, critiqued powerful traditional institutions of truth-telling, which it viewed as highly superstitious, yet having a monopoly on means to enforce their theories and (rationally indefensible) truth claims. Their targets of critique ranged from the relationship of religious truth to theories of human potential for thinking and political practice associated with critiques of monarchy and aristocratic class systems (Bristow, 2017; Israel, 2001).

In its questioning and politicizing of representations of reality, the Marxist tradition of ideological critique also resonates with PT theory and the world that it describes. This tradition, which runs through influential theorists such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and Slavoj Žižek, among others, takes as a starting point Marx's idea that people become aware of class conflict in capitalism through its broad cultural forms—"legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic"—while those forms are also the stuff of great illusionists (Marx, 1978, p. 5; Williams, 1976, p. 156).

In addition, the Marxist critique of reason and Enlightenment issuing from the Frankfurt School, with a heavy emphasis on the role of entertainment culture and 20th-century media technology, anticipates some PT themes. Horkheimer and Adorno's influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment* posited that "culture industries" served the colonization of reason (including science) for capitalist exploitation, and anodyne mass media contents largely served a broad veil of socioeconomic deception, a point developed by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* (see also Edelman, 1988, 2001).

However, PT has a particularly political, informational, and rhetorical emphasis less central to these earlier critical theories. What is more, those previous accounts broadly viewed the category of masses (the majority of citizen-consumers, nonelite without great policy decision-making power) as passive to the realities reported and views offered by news media and political figures. Post-truth, in stark contrast, emphasizes discord, confusion, polarized views, and understanding, well- and misinformed competing convictions, and elite attempts to produce and manage these "truth markets" or competitions. In PT, the idea is not that lay citizens see the world falsely through the ideology of ruling-class thinkers, but that "popular" conceptions of reality have become confusing or suspicious because of the saturation of reality representation with games of expertly researched and thus exclusive strategic deception—of pan-partisan nature. This is an instrumentalization

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of representation, of reality given new media technologies of surveillance and emotional message targeting as never before. While there may be points of intersection, the overall driving questions, material conditions that surround them (not the least media technological and economic ones), and sets of power relations cannot be rigorously viewed as identical.

Jürgen Habermas's historical account of the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere (1989), despite the many criticisms of it, also has several key ideas that remain pertinent to theories and critiques of PT. The most important is his account of reason and public deliberation being gradually colonized by the state and staged in news media, offered for public opinion formation without deliberation by citizens who would identify the issues or problems in the first place. Habermas warned of professional political communication and polling that elites used to legitimate their hold on power through the production of public opinion. As with other precursors, from ideology critique to postmodern theory, the structural transformation of the public sphere is an important predecessor but does not capture the different historical facets of the PT condition and its analyses.

Postmodernism

Despite some claims that PT politics and society are the product of postmodern theory (McIntyre, 2018), PT only shares with it a general concern about knowledge, truth, and reality.

Regarding common themes, some aspects of Jean Baudrillard's critical theory resonate more strongly with PT, especially Baudrillard's notion, similar to Debord's "spectacle," that social life and subjectivity had become consumed by a techno-consumerist flood of images, simulations and hyper-reality, more real than reality (and having no necessary relationship to it) (1983). Baudrillard's position that "illusion is the fundamental rule" resonates with PT (2001). However, his theory of causation does not stress problems of competing trust, authority, bias, political polarization, algorithmically customized experiences with perceptual and epistemic repercussions and other topics at the heart of PT conditions and theory.

Nor is there across work labeled postmodern, with rare exceptions, anything like the contemporary influence of the cognitive or neurosciences in PT. For example, the neurophilosophical turn associated with Antonio Damasio and colleagues comes in the 1990s (Damasio's *Descartes' Error*, 1994), and has only more recently come to have interdisciplinary and increasingly broad public impact. Differences between PT and postmodern thought are more pronounced yet when considering PT as a condition.

A Post-Truth Condition?

Speaking of a PT condition echoes Lyotard's influential "report on knowledge," *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and recalls its consequent public intellectual and academic panic; however, Lyotard's focus was more on shifts regarding overarching narratives that jus-

tified knowledge claims (knowledge authorized by the Enlightenment's residual "grand narratives" of progress, science, Marxism, and so forth). Lyotard emphasized the collapse of these metanarratives associated with a modern period, and the proliferation of less ambitious, nontotalizing explanations and justifications for knowledge (*petits récits*).

In contrast, a PT condition is not simply about the fragmentation of justifying stories for truth claims, but one beset by suspicion of truth-tellers as dishonest. Post-truth especially refers to a sociopolitical condition perceived as rife than ever before with dishonesty and distrust, inaccuracies or false knowledge, all corresponding to a crisis of shared trusted adjudicating authorities. Systematic deception and lack of authority are furthermore reproduced by and contribute to a problem of distrust (Stoker, 2017, pp. 35–36). In sum, the public problems for which PT is shorthand are epistemic (false knowledge, competing truth claims); fiduciary (distrust of society-wide authoritative truth-tellers, trust in micro-truth-tellers); and ethicomoral (conscious disregard for factual evidence—bullshitting—or intentional, strategic falsehoods/lying—dishonesty), the latter of which is often bracketed or abstracted into institutional logics of political strategy (Harding, 2008).

Citizen-audiences are fragmented in liberal democracies (Napoli, 2011), where thanks especially to competing truths and truth-tellers or prevalent nondialogue between them, political polarization ensues (Doherty, Kiley, & Johnson, 2017). Contemporary liberal democracies are said to lack common authorities, discourses, and institutions that may effectively suture these competing knowledges and authorities and reform populations into national identities that necessarily supersede partisan and ideological particularities (McCoy & McEvers, 2017). It is not farfetched then to speak of PT as a potential twilight of the stable liberal democratic nation-state and institutions that held it together, which partly explains the heightened discourse of panic from some quarters of popular politics and academia (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

The Growth of Post-Truth in Popular and Academic Discourse

Post-truth appears to have first been used in academic and public discourse in the early 1990s, but its use increased 2,000% between 2015 and 2016 (Oxford Dictionaries, N.D.). Two popular American books from 2004 drew attention to the anxiety about public trust and knowledge to which PT now commonly refers. In *The Post-Truth Era*, Ralph Keyes argued mass dishonesty had arrived. The same year, in his book *When Presidents Lie* (2004), Eric Alterman coined the term "post-truth presidency," with reference to the Bush II presidency. The following year, 2005, the Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt published a best-selling book *On Bullshit*, the latter of which, unlike lying, he said, demonstrated a simple disregard for the factuality of one's truth claims. It was originally published as an essay in 1986 but attracted renewed interest in the new political and media context of the early 21st century. Like 2004, 2012 was a major year for reflections on the crisis of truth and facts. James Fallows wrote about the "Post-truth media," while Farhad Manjoo, later a *New York Times* technology columnist, announced the arrival of "post-fact

society” in *True Enough*.¹ All of these seminal popular works emphasized rampant lying as the primary driver of PT politics and society. However, critical communication scholars have identified other forces at work in the production of PT.²

There has been a recent outpouring of communication research on PT, almost entirely from quantitative methodological approaches, reflecting what some critical communication researchers describe as a neopositivist dominance in the field (Fuchs, 2017). These studies usually originate from well-funded quantitative and big-data-centered institutes and think tanks, government (e.g., the EU), or, alternately, from an experimental methodological individualist side, cross-fertilizing with cognitive science (cognitive biases, motivated reasoning, etc.). While the studies provide important empirical data, deeper theorization is scarce, critical theorization even scarcer (e.g., see Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; European Commission, 2018). These studies frequently end up reproducing a kind of panicked realism, nostalgia for the mass communication age, especially for journalistic gate-keeping, and result in prognostic guides for media literacy and journalistic fact-checking. The few critical communication treatments of PT point to more complex historical and structural explanations, and thus solutions.³

Critical scholarly attention to shifts in public knowledge or belief and trust have been developing since the turn of the millennium (though their citational practices show that they often developed unbeknownst of one another). John Hartley was perhaps first to have employed PT in the communication field, in his book *The Politics of Pictures* (1992a), and he also proposed the idea of journalism as a truth “regime” in *Tele-ology* (1992b). However, he necessarily refers to a specific mass broadcast era—certainly pre-Web 2.0 and in most places pre-Internet (1992a, p. 137). He nonetheless anticipates later PT theory by focusing on blurring of fact/fiction boundaries in popular media (namely, television). While a regime generates and polices boundaries between fact and fiction (not the least in journalistic professional codes; he cites the Australian Journalists Association), hierarchies of truth and regimes are contested. Publishing and TV, he argues, are “incommensurate regimes of truth” (1992b, p. 46).

Scholars in the 1990s had begun to discuss popular culture in the context of legitimate and illegitimate knowledges as well as trust in authority, dramatized by TV series such as the *X-Files* (Bellon, 1999; Lavery, Hague, & Cartwright, 1996). Working on the popular fascination with “conspiracy culture,” Dean (1998) was already speaking of American society as characterized by “fugitive truth” at the turn of the 21st century. A small group of scholars continued to pursue questions of popular knowledges and politics through Foucault’s concepts of truth regimes and subjugated knowledges, with particular emphasis on conspiracy theory and gossip (Birchall, 2006; Bratich, 2008) as well as through Stephen Colbert’s satirical coinage “truthiness,” what is *felt* to be true (Jones, 2009). However, thus far, the scholarly emphasis on truth, media and politics, dominant and subjugated knowledges and power did not identify a conjunctural shift with regard to public truth and trust and had not begun to explore in depth the multiple, converging mechanisms behind such a thesis.

The Bush II administration's propaganda apparatus and confusion around Iraq-al-Qaeda links and Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction was also a turning point for early PT scholarship. Scholars began to theorize cultural shifts issuing from causal synergies (Harsin, 2006; Jones, 2009). Jones saw truthiness as emblematic of a shift from a journalistic regime of truth, based on "truth in fact," to one where a mix of groups (citizens, politicians, journalists, satirists) creates "believable fictions." He drew on a notion of "truth in essence," which pervaded a range of popular media forms (see also Jones & Baym, 2010).⁴ These scholars stressed the waning of journalism's privileged institutional role as truth-teller or mediator; its role was contested and, by default, shared—which resulted in liberal democratic panic, in journalism, the political establishment, and academia.

Other scholars placed far more causal emphasis on digital technology and how especially right-wing political actors used it in tandem with populist emotional rhetorical styles and the attempt to discredit institutions and experts (Van Zoonen, 2012). Van Zoonen described a new "*i*-pistemology," where questions of knowledge are approached "from the basis of I (as in me, myself) and Identity, with the Internet as the great facilitator" (2012, p. 60). Harsin (2014, 2015, 2018) expanded the theory that truth regimes embedded in a digital capitalist attention/information economy were in such conflict or competition that "truth markets" (profit-seeking partisan information brokers, on the one hand; and rumor debunking and fact-checking businesses from Snopes.com to the *Washington Post*, on the other) were proposed within an emergent *regime of PT* (see also Mukherjee, 2017).

Post-truth Misinforms and Disinforms: Rumor Bombs, Fake News, and Lies

Post-truth appears through a repertoire of forms bearing political (mis-)use of false statements or a disregard for or misrecognition of facts, and a corresponding false belief or confusion (Andersen, 2017; Ingraham, 2016). While the larger cultural precondition, a widespread distrust of institutions that could be respected as truth-tellers across a wide ideological audience spectrum, will be explored more in-depth momentarily, one can first say that PT is associated with several major types of communication, statements or narratives, all of which are subclasses of deceptive communication: misinformation, fake news, rumor bombs, and lying. Disinformation, rumor bombs, and fake news have mass communication era antecedents in both war and security (gray propaganda) and commercial communication (advertising and public relations). All can be said to be forms of strategic communication and not mere accidental or innocent misstatements of facts.

Deliberate misstatement (disinformation) is hard to prove definitively, yet one can assume that many ambiguous, misleading, or partly false political statements are deliberate, given the fact that this genre of communication is highly professionalized and mediatized (Serazio, 2017). These strategic misstatements or innocent misstatements that attract receptive audiences then generate a political economic response by journalism and new

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businesses in fact-checking and rumor debunking (supported by advertising or, less often, donors), which is why they may be understood literally as truth *markets* (Harsin, 2015).

Post-truth is thus not simply about lies and false beliefs but also, perhaps even especially, about confusion amid a surfeit of information and influential appeals, the difficulty in discerning one from the other, the constant selective use and presentation of information and appeals for strategic political (and business) ends, and the incessant public disputes about what is (in-)accurate and (dis-)honest. Some inaccurate statements of fact are made innocently, if unethically and cavalierly (i.e., what is called bullshit, without regard for knowledge of true or false [Frankfurt, 2005]). But a great deal of it is deliberate, strategically aimed at disinforming as a way to manage opponents and/or govern by capturing attention.

Analytically speaking, the forms PT takes are often not well distinguished. *Lies, rumors, fake news, spin, propaganda* are used synonymously. Much of what is perceived as PT communication is a form of two general categories of communication (in lieu of simple information, which never appears without a communication context): disinformation and misinformation. Stahl (2010) explains a common distinction between misinformation and disinformation (though some tend to interchange the two).

Misinformation, on the one hand, is the spreading of inaccurate or false information while *mistakenly* thinking one is sharing accurate information (in reality, the person or organization spreading it is misinformed). On the other hand, disinformation is seen as *deliberately* spreading false or inaccurate information. In practice, the two are closely linked. One can spread a false statement that one took to be true, which was originally produced to misinform. Disinformers may produce misinformers. In terms of ethics, intention and effect, misinform corresponds to inaccuracy, a false statement, but not a falsehood. If the recipient of misinformation believes it, takes it as fact or true, then he or she is misinformed but not manipulated for strategic ends of the misinformers. Disinformation, however, is closer to lying, as both are dishonest. The producer of disinformation knowingly utters falsehoods, not just false statements. In between, perhaps, is the bullshitter, who, according to Frankfurt's influential account, makes statements that may be false; the point is that he/she does not care (2005).

Rumor Bombs

While deliberate rumors (just like lies) in politics are ancient, the fact that they have become core issues with clear effects in public culture appears new, if not unprecedented. No US president before Obama felt forced to release his long-form birth certificate in response to constantly weaponized rumors that he was not born in the United States; the rumor was used to "bomb" the news agenda and preoccupy Obama's communication professionals to respond defensively. The fact that majorities do not believe it is all the more proof of its efficacy (Dimock, July 15, 2008). Influential in the history of rumor scholarship, Shibutani (1966) argued that rumors were "improvised news," a non-professional form of news-telling in conditions of information scarcity. However, in 21st-century media

and politics, rumors flourish in the opposite condition: information overload (Andrejevic, 2013), fragmentation of attention, and decline of culture-wide authorities or truth-tellers (Harsin, 2006, 2014, 2015). Political rumors were thriving in contemporary conditions marked by a public knowledge (epistemic) and trust (fiduciary) crisis. Yet, they were not traditional rumors. Rumor bombs correspond to fake news and strategic political communication developments, which helped distinguish them from simple rumors and as a counterpart to other contemporary communication bombs (google bombs and twitter bombs, for example, which were various ways of “bombing” the field of attention). Rumor bombs referred to the core definition of rumor as a statement whose veracity is unknown or unprovable and to communication bombs as longtime forms of information warfare migrating from military to politics as “war by other means” (Caplow, 1947). Iraq-al-Qaeda links, John Kerry lied about Vietnam, Obama is a Muslim, and former French President François Hollande was supported by over 700 mosques—all are rumor bombs professionally operationalized in popular political struggles (Conason, 2004; Kessler, 2014; Harsin, 2018A).

Rumor bombs normally differ from fake news in the sense that rumors may turn out to be true. Fake news is false news, though its core propositions may be contextualized by facts (for example, Hillary Clinton is a real person, and Comet Ping Pong is a real pizzeria in Washington, DC, neither fact of which makes true the associated false claim that she ran a child sex slavery ring in the basement of the said pizzeria). Furthermore, rumor bombs tend to use deliberately ambiguous or strategically polysemic claims to generate not just belief but conflict and disagreement or debate. For example, what does “links” mean in the claim there were Iraq-al-Qaeda “links” or “ties”? The claim may be more influential when “links” is not defined and left to the audience’s imagination. A rumor bomb may be accompanied by a story, attempting to provide evidence for the core claim. That evidence usually is not fake; it is just an example of poor reasoning: Obama’s name is not Christian; he has been photographed in what appears to be Muslim clothing; therefore, Obama is Muslim. The conflict and disagreement that rumor bombs produce in turn produces confusion or disorientation—a structure of feeling deep in the core of PT.

Fake News

Fake news is a term of American origin, whose first use appears briefly in 1992 with regard to video news releases, news segments produced by public relations then broadcast by television news as content journalists had produced through reporting procedures (Rampton, 2005). It seems to have had no regular public use before 1999, at which point it became associated with self-identified comedy news shows, such as the *Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live*’s Weekend Update, and *The Colbert Report*, which had origins in satirical “news” publications such as *The Onion* in the United States (Harsin, 2018A). By 2015, it took on a globalizing negative twist of connotations associated with PT, bound up with geopolitical propaganda and artificial intelligence (AI), or “bots” (Chen, 2015; Riotta, 2017). In an even more recent globalizing trend, “fake news” has become a popular ad hominem for discrediting any unfavorable news coverage or criticisms from opponents. Fake news was deemed such an important recent cultural form of PT that it was named and then recognized as a 2017 word of the year by *Collins Dictionary* (following PT as the

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Oxford Dictionary's 2016 word of the year), in an infotaining development of dictionaries to self-promote by breaking a “word of the year” that generates discussion and profits (Flood, 2017). Fake news is, like rumor bombs, a sub-category of disinformation, alternately called “false news” and “junk news.” Unlike rumor bombs, fake news is not usually a mix of interpretive ambiguity and fact, but it includes core false statements (things that did not happen, that do not even exist), and therefore are sometimes wrongly referred to as lies.

Consider also the difference between fake news and lies. One may assume that fake/false news is at base mere lies. But a lie is, technically, a deliberately false *statement* (Mahon, 2016). A lie is not a series of statements, but fake news suggests a story, an article, all statements contained in which are unlikely to all be false, as lies or inaccuracies. Fake news is often characterized by a core falsehood surrounded by factual statements or details. Reuters Digital News annual report for 2017 notes that

“definitions of ‘fake news’ are fraught with difficulty and respondents frequently mix up three categories: (1) news that is ‘invented’ to make money or discredit others; (2) news that has a basis in fact but is ‘spun’ to suit a particular agenda; and (3) news that people don’t feel comfortable about or don’t agree with.”

Meanwhile, the Oxford Institute for the Study of Computational Propaganda defines fake news as “misleading, deceptive or incorrect information, purporting to be real news about politics, economics or culture” (Hazard Owen, 2018).

Though many definitions of fake news attribute an intent to deceive for political ends, some fake news producers have intent to deceive *only* to make money through the attention and circulation the fake news receives, even while it can have expected political effects (belief, confusion, agenda-setting). Those effects, through exploitation by more strategic partisans who aim to spread disinformation, may have a secondary level of effects, political ones—and the secondary agent may have no interest in financial profit. Conversely, some fake news producers originally aim to deceive only for political ends. Either way, news organizations, which legitimate the fake news by making it real news that titillates large audiences, will profit from it. American CBS news executive Warren Moonves underlined this point when speaking about Trump’s 2016 rumor-bombing candidacy: “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS” (Bond, 2016; Pickard, 2017).

Fake news is usually the presentation of new events where the event is presented as a discovery of something hitherto hidden (Obama’s fake birth certificate allegations; allegations that Clinton sold weapons to ISIS). While in the era of citizen journalism, fake news could appear rather unadorned, thanks to easily accessible photo-editing software and web page templates, it may also appear in the style of news organizations with high production values, such as the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and *CNN*. Mimicking the style of professional journalism is the way fake news produces its credibility for some audiences; it is even reflected in web addresses (URLs), which imitate recognized news sites by inserting the words “news” or “report,” or more partisan-comforting brand names:

worldnewsreport.com, winningdemocrats.com, conservativestate.com (McClain, 2017; Silverman, 2016).

Lying

All of these previously discussed forms of PT misinformation can contain lies. Yet there is a difference between them. What is lying? According to Mahon, “The most widely accepted definition of lying” is Isenberg’s: “a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it” (Isenberg in Mahon, 2016).

Post-truth is perhaps most saliently marked by an emphasis on lying, constant accusations of lying (without proof) and revelations of lying (with convincing proof). While it is nearly impossible to prove definitively that there are more lies or liars today than in the past, there is clearly an observable discourse about lying, which claims that there are more, that people perceive or feel there must be more, because there is also so much empirically verifiable distrust and documentable dishonesty (a quintessential example: fake news).

In his book *When Presidents Lie* (2004), Eric Alterman discusses what he argues were major lies of US presidents from FDR to JFK, Johnson to Reagan. For the George W. Bush administration, Alterman coins the term “post-truth presidency” to describe the general mode of dishonesty that he saw pervading the quotidian White House communications. Alterman is correct both to emphasize the commonplaceness of dishonesty in the history of modern presidential communication and to signal something of a historic shift in the Bush regime. It is of little wonder that a public discourse heavy with accusations, perceptions, and documentations of lying could have effects on political trust and motivation.

Political communication and news practices and values have shifted in a way that favors even banalized lying, whereby “honesty is a novelty” (Corner & Pels, 2003, p. 11). The very conditions for being considered honest and truthful have been reconfigured thanks to processes of mediatization and celebrification in politics, the internalizing of entertainment genre expectations and values in their political performances as a perceived requirement for gaining attention.

Yet, while claims of increased lying appear constantly (Manjoo, 2008), it would be almost impossible to prove such claims convincingly. If PT’s forms can be recognized as having particular qualities, the question remains: what are the mechanisms that have brought it about now? It is argued that multiple agents synergized more recently in ways previously not possible.

Four Synergistic Agents

Thus, while aspects of PT communication and its context have existed before (if not always) new forces have converged with old, creating a communications environment unlike anything seen before. Later theorists have referred to mediatization as a macro-cate-

gory describing the way mediation has engulfed all institutions instead of, in the predigital mass communication era, these institutions having some separation from media as an institution itself (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Hepp & Krotz, 2014, p. 2; Livingstone, 2009). Yet while the general concepts of mediatization, hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013), or mixed media culture (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999) are useful starting points for thinking about the causes of PT communication practices, critical approaches must further examine and theorize the historically and culturally specific mechanisms of PT within the new highly datafied capitalist communication structure. Four major historical agents synergistically structure PT communication forms and practices, while having particular national conjunctural specificities, themselves deeply mediating these changes.

Face 1: Technology and Attention Economy (Speed and Cognition)

Technology is treated as a category of influence here, but with important qualifications, since it does not exist outside political economic, cultural, and other contexts and forces. Considerations of technological agency in PT production must include the fact that they do not exist free of human agency or goals. In fact, the digital mediascape is the grounds for an economy embedded in communication technology as never before, which restructures the way communication can be produced, circulated, used, and received. Strategic political communication in PT is thus inevitably parasitic on and structured by attentional capitalism. Attentional habits are then structured through the programming of apps and platforms and their algorithms. At the same time, various forms of digital technology have enabled a dizzying amount of cultural production (user-generated content) and social media platforms have permitted their potentially broad diffusion as mass self-communication (Castells, 2009).

However, the constant strategic uses of and attempts to manage the spaces of mass self-communication (big data analytics, microtargeting, neuromarketing, bots, trolls) likely help explain the subsequent effects on trust and truth (surveys showing little trust in digital platforms or the Internet generally, thus also suggesting users' cynical disavowal). Mostly overlooked in the discussions of PT is the fact that the digital communication infrastructure, though identified by many citizens as a source of political news and means for political speech, is not designed to suit democratic political communication or trustworthy information but, rather, to suit recent forms of consumer capitalism, "the attention economy." In this sense the Internet, and especially social media, in places like the United States has quickly become economically structured in a way it took American broadcast journalism years to succumb to, as Marc Gunther noted in 1999: "Twenty years ago, there was no network news 'business.' The Big Three broadcast television networks—ABC, CBS and NBC—all covered news, but none generally made money doing so. Nor did they expect to turn a profit from news programming" (1999). However, it is not simply the economic embeddedness of platforms that need attention in a discussion of PT but also technologies that have enabled or "democratized" cultural production.

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Part of the new production and broadcast technologies include accessible photo and audiovisual editing software, as well as platforms for mass publication or broadcast. Yet the capacity to “jam” and “hack” original content, altering it while retaining an aura of authenticity, has enabled a near constant stream of deceptions (to which AI developers are responding with “reverse image search” by Google Image or TinEye).⁵

Technological developments also include the powerful influence of algorithms in structuring fields of perception and trust. Algorithms structured for networking, marketing, and constant “participation” become useful for political PT ends. Thus, repetition and illusory truth (more repeated, more likely to be judged true) is extremely important in algorithmically constructed publics, polarized politics, and filter bubbles, evidenced by studies concluding that “top fake election news stories generated more total engagement on Facebook than top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined” in the US 2016 presidential campaign (Silverman, 2016).

Furthermore, some PT commentary and research has put considerable causal and explanatory emphasis on algorithmic ideological filtering (echo chambers) and cognitive bias (especially confirmation bias) (Bear, 2016; Dieguez, 2017; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). However, few approaches to PT so far have seen the attention economy’s techno-infrastructure as itself creating conditions unfavorable to more deliberative forms of cognition when consuming digital content (such as fake news headlines and rumor bombs). Not only is the digital communication infrastructure oriented toward profit, instead of toward dissemination of factual information, it is built for speed and constant individual movement and attention shifting, which research suggests has an impact on perception, interest, temporal reasoning, and knowledge (Carr, 2010; Manjoo, 2013; Harsin, 2014). Tech-focused cognitive scientists are beginning to argue that this techno-economic structure (they do not base their analyses in the structure’s embeddedness in capitalism) has effects on reasoning, long-term memory, and thus knowledge acquisition (Atchley & Lane, 2014). Cognition in the attention economy is typically fast, emotional, and targeted with distractions. Such an “information ecology” is not, it is argued, conducive to more deliberative political participation, thus posing challenges to proposed PT solutions, such as the necessarily slower and colder cognition required by proponents of media literacy. Technology identified as a primary cause (instead of as a secondary cause embedded in capitalism and synergizing with other agents) leads to solutions also often embedded in capitalism (self-regulation of service providers, fact-checking businesses and apps to buy—the commodification of truth).

Face 2: Journalism

Changes in journalism, such as downsizing staff while accelerating the publication pace (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999, 2010), invited inaccuracies and vulnerabilities to hoaxes (later fake news); partly issuing from “citizen journalism,” by which everyone is now a journalist (the opposite of the progressive promise of networked journalism [Russell, 2011]) and which brings not just packs of watchdogs but also armies of rumor bombers and fake news purveyors. As Harwood notes, “[g]ossip, rumor and fact, truth and falsehood (with

rare exceptions) have equal standard under the law and, in practice, universally coexist in the unending ‘news’ stream saturating the environment” (Harwood, 1999). The latter was partly explained by market pressures to grab readers’ and viewers’ attention, partly resulting in trends of infotainment and tabloidization, and politainment allowing for the repetition of rumors and disinformation as agenda-setting topics themselves (Thussu, 2009; Riegert & Collins, 2015). Market pressures are also blamed for significant amounts of public relations material that appear unidentified in news products (Bennett, 2003, p. 175; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008). Finally, new apps (e.g., Bulletin) allow quick posting of citizen journalist content, while critics have warned about a “high potential for abuse,” especially for producing “fake news” (Kaufman, 2018). Citizen journalism app experiments are complemented on the professional end by robot (also called automated or algorithmic) journalists (Carlson, 2015), which risk being recuperated for strategic communication purposes, just as had been the case with human “fake reporters” under the Bush II administration (Rich, 2005).

In a culture of multiple institutional and professional trust deficits, journalism’s traditional credibility is threatened. If for decades, journalism relied on “authorized knowers” (Fishman, 1980), officials in government, business, and political organizations who were deemed knowledgeable (Epstein, 1973), then “webs of facticity” (Tuchman, 1978) become undermined in PT, for such sources, as well as their journalist-intermediaries are seen as illegitimate by millions of people. The web of facticity comes to be perceived as a web of deception that news organizations and their sources weave.

If journalism has lost authority to tell and distinguish truth, while news has a proliferating and competing cast of truth-tellers, promotional culture applies cultural pressure to journalism, politics, and everyday social relations. Its agency in PT synergy cannot be ignored.

Face 3: Promotional Culture

Promotional culture is another factor of PT cultural synergy that has been almost completely absent from public intellectual and recent computationally driven PT analyses (Harsin, 2017; Hearn, 2017). Promotional culture studies argue that culture and social relations have been powerfully transformed by the role of communication in new forms of consumer capitalism—the latter’s hyperpromotional stage, with no small effects on perceptions of honesty, truth claims, and trust-granting. According to Alison Hearn, one of promotional culture’s primary theorists:

Promotionalism names the extension of market values and commodity relations in all areas of life.... As we increasingly come to see our selves, relationships, political candidates, and social issues in terms of this logic of promotion, we can no longer determine, or read, genuinely expressive intent or determine what is truth as opposed to a lie, what is authentic as opposed to “spun.” In a population so acclimatized to the constant sell, how can we recognize or construct legitimate authority? What is the impact of the generalized public acceptance of “spin” and pro-

motional politics on the democratic process?... [T]he logic of commodities and their promotional signs, also known as advertising and marketing, comes to dominate and structurally condition all other forms of political expression and power relations.

(Hearn, 2011)

Promotionalism's relationship to truth has thus always been more like Harry Frankfurt's (2005) notion of bullshit—it is agnostic toward truth in its strategies to promote attention and consumption. Promotional culture scholars view bullshit-friendly communication as having become accepted in a wider and wider array of human practices, not in the least politics (see also Davis, 2013). Professional bullshitters are essential to contemporary consumer economies and politics. One rarely hears about promotionalism in causal explanations of PT (and one has almost never heard of counter-attacking its origins—consumer capitalism—as a logical solution to such a powerful form of causation).

Just as the very infrastructure of contemporary communication practices, the digital attention economy, leans toward PT, so does professionalized political communication, with its modern roots in mass electric communication and mass democracy at the turn of the 20th century.

Face 4: Professional Political Communication

Promotionalism's relationship to PT was also anticipated by Hannah Arendt in her well-known reflection "Lying in Politics," spurred by the release of *The Pentagon Papers* (1971). She spoke of a "recent variety" added to "the many genres in the art of lying developed in the past: the apparently innocuous one of the public-relations managers in government who learned their trade from the inventiveness of Madison Avenue." Arendt noted that their "origin [lay] in the consumer society" (p. 8). This importation from consumer society to politics was problematic, according to Hannah Arendt, for public relations "deals only in opinions and 'good will,' the readiness to buy, that is, in intangibles whose concrete reality is at a minimum" (p. 8).

The promotionalism that Arendt regarded as a threat to democracy has been discussed in political communication textbooks for several decades now as "professionalization," a trend in elite political communication that since the onset of TV has put "image-making" at the center of politics (Lilleker, 2014; McNair, 2017). This professionalization is marked by the growth of political marketing, using highly strategized forms of influence employed by cognitive science-oriented commercial and military communication (Alic, Branscomb, Brooks, Epstein, & Carter, 1992; Lees, Strömbäck, & Rudd, 2010). One may recall here that Arendt's influential account of lying in politics ends by emphasizing the spread of promotional communication orientations to politics, resulting in a propensity for lying, and thus contributing to PT (Arendt, 1972).

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Several PT commentators point to the post-9/11 Bush regime's sophisticated propaganda as a turning point in contemporary state communication. It is important to note that the conjunctural conditions of communication were and still are quite different than those of pre-Internet times, while the practice of strategic political communication, aiming at creating its own realities to which it can respond to achieve its goals, is a staple of modern mass communication influences, in the commercial and political sector. A passage from Daniel Boorstin's influential *The Image* is illustrative on this point. Boorstin discusses one of the most influential theorist-practitioners of public influence in the 20th century, Edward Bernays, by way of Napoleon (indicating a cross-fertilization of military, political, and commercial communication). Of the public relations-produced realities he calls "pseudo-events," Boorstin writes:

The power to make a reportable event is thus the power to make experience. One is reminded of Napoleon's apocryphal reply to his general, who objected that circumstances were unfavorable to a proposed campaign: "Bah, I make circumstances!" The modern public relations counsel—and he is, of course, only one of many twentieth century creators of pseudo-events—has come close to fulfilling Napoleon's idle boast. "The counsel on public relations," Mr. Bernays explains, "not only knows what news value is, but knowing it, he is in a position to make news happen. He is a creator of events." (1992, pp. 10-11)

Roughly 80 years after Bernays's confident declaration, Karl Rove, George W. Bush's legendary spin doctor and strategist, bragged that journalists naively belonged to a "reality-based community," while strategists like him "create our own reality," which they (journalists) are free to "study." Journalists will be left "to just study what we [strategists] do" (Suskind, 2004). The arrogance aside, of course, communication strategists are sometimes forced to respond to journalist-produced events, and perhaps more often, to events opponents publicize with the assistance of news organizations. They nonetheless lead by misleading.

Indeed, the Bush regime's communication strategists ushered in the shifting signification of fake news registers from largely comedic to more traditional political communication (Rich, 2005). The Bush team used "fake reporters" and fake broadcast segments (video news releases dutifully broadcast by local newscasts) over a decade prior to the term becoming a "word of the year." In the *New York Times*, Frank Rich made the crossover explicit: "The White House Stages Its 'Daily Show,'" he wrote (February 20, 2005). Writing a year before, but looking back at 2003, Naomi Klein dubbed it the "year of the fake" in a *Nation* column. She wrote that 2003 was, for starters, "a year that waged open war on truth and facts and celebrated fakes and forgeries of all kinds...: fake rationales for war, a fake President dressed as a fake soldier declaring a fake end to combat and then holding up a fake turkey." *Nieman Reports* spoke not just of an episode but of an "Age of Pseudo-reporting," citing a "spate of media infamies known by the names Armstrong Williams, Maggie Gallagher, Jeff Gannon, and Karen Ryan" (Greve, 2005). Recently, the use of big-data-driven political marketing (even neuropolitical marketing), bots and trolls (human

and non-), and censorship in several countries, contribute mightily to PT synergy (Bulut & Yörük, 2017; Harsin, 2015, 2018A, 2018B).

As Arendt foresaw, organized, systematic lying, or, more easily proven, deceptions, the bread and butter of consumer capitalism and the communications wing of the state security apparatus, have come also to be the organizing force of mediated political life. Thus, when analysts shrug skeptically at claims that there is more lying now than before, they are looking at lying and deception through a lens too methodologically individualist to comprehend the production side of it. Both consumer capitalism, deeply embedded in everyday life, and elite liberal democracy, as its communication apparatus has been structured for over 100 years, demand deceptive communication. It is systematic, strategic, highly organized. There is a structural incitement to deception.

American democracy, like most if not all contemporary liberal democracies, has been, among other things, an evolving competition of fakery. This is not to suggest it fails by comparison to some essential, purely honest democratic utopia (a fantasy, of course) but is rather to emphasize the massive scale of organization and systematicity. Now fakery is embedded in everyday commercial promotionalism as well as in mass self-communication (individual broadcasting) amid historic levels of distrust; thus, it is understandable that deception's effects would be felt more intensely to the point of PT today. Meanwhile panics around PT disavow how embedded promotionalism and deception is in 20th-21st-century liberal democratic political communication practices, which may suggest that such panics are a fundamental symptom of PT itself.

(Post-)Trust

The foundation of popular truth, often taken for granted in the heyday of mass communication and journalism's monopoly on gatekeeping and authoritative truth (re-)telling, has come into greater relief in the PT moment: (dis-)trust. The sociologist Georg Simmel argued that trust is actually a "weak form of inductive knowledge," and "very few relationships would endure if trust were not as strong as, or stronger than, rational proof or personal observation" (2004, p. 179). Understanding shifts in the communicational mechanisms of trust may be seen as key to understanding the epistemic problems often discussed separately.

What is the evidence for widespread and increasing distrust? Consider, for example, declining numbers of voters in presidential and parliamentary elections across the West, where similar techniques of strategic political communication, among other things, are imitated. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France have seen participation dips by 30 percentage points over the last 50 years (International IDEA, N.D.).

Compare the decline in voter turnout with the rise of self-identified disenfranchised movements and new parties in the very same countries. On the right, one sees the Front National in France, the UK Independence Party, Germany's AFD (Alternative for Ger-

many), and even the insurgent democratic socialist challenge to the US Democratic Party by Bernie Sanders. Meanwhile, left “prefigurative” social-political movements such as *les Indignados* in Spain, Occupy in the United States, and *Nuit Debout* in France have stressed their alienation from liberal democracy’s lack of choices and means for a real hearing of grievances, a critique realized in their own performances of direct democracy.

Distrust is also widely self-reported. Edelman’s Trust Barometer study for 2017 featured a provocative headline announcing a “Global Implosion of Trust.” Some of their highlights across 43 countries include the following: CEO credibility at lowest point ever; trust in media fell and is at lowest point ever in 17 countries; trust in government dropped (at 41%) in 14 countries, being the least trusted in institution in half of the countries surveyed. Categories of leaders dropped in trustworthiness across the board: an all-time low of 37% for CEOs and government leaders are the least credible of all, at 29% (“2017 Edelman Trust Barometer,” 2017). The news media in particular suffers significant distrust, across the United States and Europe. Just over half of Americans in a 2017 survey said they trust information from the news media “some,” while about 15% trusted it “a lot” (“People have more trust in ‘my’ media than ‘the’ media,” 2017). However, people have more trust in their own choice of news media. Post-truth thus thrives in this context of political polarization.

Perceptions of widespread cynicism of course also have effects on trust. As Sissela Bok notes in her classic examination of lying in public life and a discussion of Hannah Arendt’s influential comments on public lying, “Even when the substitution of falsehood for truth is not total, but seems random or partial to the deceived, or when it affects matters they consider crucial, such a state of cynicism may result. For this reason, the many forms of international deception which are assumed to be merely a ‘part of the game’ by governments can have far-reaching effects on both internal and external trust” (1978, p. 150). Speaking primarily of governments, she adds, in 1978, that “there is a growing evidence that the world audiences to which propaganda is directed *are* becoming more distrustful.... As a result, citizens the world over have less confidence that they can influence what governments do” (p. 150). She was of course writing before the Bush administration’s strategic communication efforts to promote the Iraq War, and before the financial crisis of 2008, among other major events in a cultural slide toward generalized distrust.

If, as Simmel and others argue, trust is a kind of crude knowledge, which may be closest to the kind of knowledge citizens exercise on public issues, pervasive deficits thereof would likely lead to not just any kind of epistemic but *public* epistemic instabilities. As Longino explains, “[m]uch of what passes for common knowledge is acquired from others. We depend on experts to tell us what is wrong or right with our appliances, our cars, our bodies. Indeed, much of what we later come to know depends on what we previously learned as children from our parents and teachers. We acquire knowledge of the world through the institutions of education, journalism, and scientific inquiry” (para 9, 2015). Consequently, “we do not know most of what we think we know.”

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While 1980s and 1990s postmodern theory already flagged scholarly preoccupations with epistemic skepticism, legitimacy and reality, the contemporary focus on lying and dishonesty distinguishes PT discourse from its 1990s forerunner (Lyotard, 1984). Post-truth's epistemic crisis is really an ethicofiduciary one. Its epistemic crises are the effect of distrust and dishonesty crises regarding systematic widespread deception.

It is worth noting that, in this critical synergy theory of PT, the panic about irrational duped citizens appears misplaced. Given these conditions from public relations- and hoax-infiltrated journalism, resource rich strategic political communication using sophisticated data analytics, deceptive AI (bots and trolls), cognitive scientifically informed microtargeted messages, and a widespread promotional culture of exaggerated claims and games of fakery for profit—it could be said that people would be irrational not to be highly skeptical of truth claims. The question, of course, is what kind of performances and communication successfully produce trust and truth in this climate.

Trust and Emotional Truth

Anthony Giddens (1994) has argued that modern and traditional societies differ importantly in terms of trust-granting, and that late modern societies underwent a shift from “passive trust” toward social institutions and their experts to general distrust and fleeting, “active trust” today. Trust-granting appears to have taken even more intensely restricted roles, based much of the time on performativity (rhetorical devices to produce credibility), ongoing “facework.”

If trust amid PT is short term and, if maintained, constantly renewed, how is active public trust performed and earned today? One argument is that the synergistic agencies of PT favor highly emotional communication, and that this is partly the way many subjects identify with truthful communication. This turn to emotion and affect is not based on a traditional rational/irrational, reason/emotion dualism. On the contrary, it builds on revolutions in cognitive science and neurophilosophy over the last thirty years, which holds that there is no actual separation between emotion and reason. However, they insist that the conceptual distinction be maintained since there are different degrees of emotion in reasoning, even shown to be located in different parts of the brain (Damasio, 1994; Kahneman, 2011; Westen, 2008). While promotional industries and political communication have for some time used this research to produce strategies (hoping especially for quick manageable affective responses), journalism is now visiting this research in order to manage visitor attention online (and probably in what remains of print and broadcast) (Song, 2013).

Resource-rich political and economic actors using big data analytics and sentiment analysis target audiences emotionally, hoping not simply to produce beliefs (ideological effects) but to modulate cognition, emotion, and attention, via quick likes/dislikes, shares, before moving on. In a culture of speed and attention scarcity, of exigencies and expectations of faking or exaggeration (promotionalism), slower, perhaps “quieter” civil forms of communication are suspicious to some audiences. These audiences are attracted to what ap-

pears “authentic,” which seems to periodically escape the exigencies of promotional culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012). These fleeting moments have been described as emotional truth and “emo-truth” (Harsin, 2017, 2018A).

Emotional/emo-truth theory argues that there are parallels in reality TV and popular politics regarding the way truth and trust is performed and granted. The theory is based on insights from audience studies of melodrama genres (Ang) and “fact-based” programming’s (i.e., reality TV) audiences (Hill, 2007, p. 141; Grindstaff, 2008):

Emo-truth is truth where emotion serves as inference (prime or indexical sign, emotional or unconscious affective response, and presto: truth). It is felt (though not necessarily consciously), not accompanied by long temporal reasoning. It is akin to what reality TV audience scholarship has documented as trust in perceived authenticity (i.e. truth) of moments where participants lose control, get angry and aggressive, bully, or, conversely, cry. It is a variant of what Laura Grindstaff in her landmark work on sensational talk shows called “the money shot.”

(Harsin, 2018B, p. 45)

With such pervasive, systematic, strategic artifice in PT society and politics, it is these ephemeral moments of emo-truth that connect with some citizen-audiences, which helps to explain the success of aggressive emo-truth masculinities, fond of insulting, spectacular claims, and of attacking political correctness, of figures such as US’s Donald Trump, Philippines’ Roderigo Duterte, and the UK’s Boris Johnson, among others in varying degrees of the style (Harsin, 2017). Not all PT political performance is emo-truth; and not all of its performers do it as virtuosically or constantly. The key is that the connection of trust, the lack of concern with the falsity of some truth claims, is explained by an emotional, not rational connection, and perhaps for the angriest most distrustful citizens, emo-truth’s anger and aggression is most appealing. Emotional truth and emo-truth political communication also show signs of the normalization of celebrity politics and its games of authenticity and appeal (Street, 2004).

Solutions to Post-Truth as Perceived Problem

If critical communication studies have offered preliminary theories of PT as a historical and cultural phenomenon, from such a diagnosis, what kind of prognosis may it offer, while shedding a critical light on popular solutions proffered less critical PT theories? The main solutions proposed thus far (mostly from the computational and cognitive scientific sides of communication study) can be summarized as the following: techno-curatives, such as AI filtering of PT claims/stories; human fact-checking, especially rooted in journalism; strategic human responses to cognitive bias; more vigorous self-regulation by social media providers; and media literacy initiatives (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; European Commission, 2018). Each misses the entire synergy of historical and cultural causation, and therefore will not likely achieve the curative ends for which they aim. The problems

viewed from a critical perspective are not all acknowledged from other perspectives, and thus lead to very different calls for change.

Techno-curative solutions respond to the perceived problem of filter bubbles and fake news circulation (misinformed citizens), calling for AI tagging and suppression of false information. These problematizations and solutions overlook that the marketing structure of social media veers toward birds-of-a-feather networks, easier for big data analysis to aggregate (construct) into markets. The bracketed ethics of attentional capitalism are overlooked, and the general structure is unlikely to be overcome. Getting attention has apparently inspired fact-checking organizations to use infotaining categories of evaluation. When they rate statements as lies (“pants on fire”! or “five Pinocchios”!) but cannot prove deliberate statement of falsehood instead of inaccuracy or bullshit, they paradoxically undermine their purported task (pointing again to the informational and attentional embeddedness in capitalism) and may simply trigger the stubborn ire of those citizens they aim to correct. Techno-curative solutions in AI also overlook the problem that many people distrust the service providers to be truth arbiters, and this is even more the case when companies like Facebook attempt to “team up” with already extant fact-checking businesses (Snopes.com or the *Washington Post*, for example, or *Le Monde*’s “*Décodeurs*” in France) (“Voters Don’t Trust,” 2016). These brands are already ideologically contaminated, distrusted. Unless widely perceived partisan providers are to team up with more mainstream old “trustee journalism” organizations, the victims of disinformation are unlikely to see the debunking (because of customized content) or trust the post’s AI tag. Posts would have to be suppressed, raising concerns of freedom of speech in countries like the United States (Fisher, 2017). While experiments on cognitive bias are hopeful that misinformed users gradually change opinion and perception with repeated exposure to debunkings, these experiments do not account for the fact that the structure of the attention economy is, again, not one aimed at microtargeting repeated debunkings. The debunker (trusted/distrusted) is also crucial—who do people trust with such a role, seeing as how they are distrustful of most *macro-truth-tellers*?

Finally, deceptive forms of PT communication are built into the culture of liberal democracy, mediatized and dependent on highly professional strategists and practices. Few diagnoses consider this problem, and thus solutions will likely overlook and reproduce different versions of PT. Relatedly, strategic political communication produces PT forms that elude easy logical-positivist-type judgments of true or false, because they are often deliberately ambiguous. This means they require longer cognitive and critical analyses to explain what interpretations are more in accord with facts and which more errant—who is trusted enough to fulfill this role? Given the attention economy, who will engage with this necessarily longer and patience-demanding content?

A recent report by academics and journalists, sponsored by the European Union, touches upon what have become common policy recommendations (one can imply their diagnoses of cause from these proposed solutions):

1. enhance transparency of online news, involving an adequate and privacy-compliant sharing of data about the systems that enable their circulation online;
2. promote media and information literacy to counter disinformation and help users navigate the digital media environment;
3. develop tools for empowering users and journalists to tackle disinformation and foster a positive engagement with fast-evolving information technologies;
4. safeguard the diversity and sustainability of the European news media ecosystem. (European Commission, 2018)

Compare their solutions to these alternatives, which follow from the critical PT theory articulated in this article.

If one bears in mind the fact that majorities of citizens in many countries report that they distrust news media, corporations, government, democracy, capitalism and other major institutions and traditional accepted sacred organizing discourses of social life, at the most fundamental level “fixing” PT would first of all mean recovering social trust by radically transforming:

1. consumer capitalism (propelled by PT communication strategies and tactics—promotional culture) and its deep mediatization in an attention economy, since the latter must be made to serve ends beyond attention capture and data harvesting for marketing, i.e. corporate profit and state surveillance;
2. journalism’s slide into PT infotainment, even when ostensibly trying to extinguish PT via (infotaining and polarizing rhetoric of) fact-checking; and a debate about how it should be financed and what it can and should do under current conditions of communication and culture;
3. the unequal resources of professional political communication used to study, quantify, construct, and control pseudopublics instead of turning such communication channels and tools over to more democratic actors, albeit with strong emphasis on ethics;
4. education, teaching the history of anti-democratic elite forces that from the onset of mass communication commandeered scientific knowledges, immense communication resources, and strategic skills to manipulate and control the demos, with varying degrees of success.

Unlike popular and liberal-academic approaches, critical communication approaches to PT eschew nostalgia for earlier periods of pseudodemocratic opinion and perception management, and aim to avoid reactionary (cloaked in the rhetoric of progressivism) calls to restore liberal democracy, itself catastrophically recuperated by neoliberal failures of growing economic inequality, continual post-colonial exploitation, patriarchal backlashes, and the destruction of the environment. A PT cultural condition generates panics about truth that necessarily misrecognize the deeper origins of the condition. Critical approaches to PT wrestle with PT’s nascent roots in the scene of 20th-century mass democracy/

communication and consumer capitalism, while assisting with theory and critique to build a more socially just world.

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Notes:

(1.) In a 2012 *Atlantic* column, James Fallows covered the emerging claims to the term's origin. In terms of books, Alterman and Keyes originate the term in 2004.

(2.) Before Harsin's attempt to theorize it as periodizing concept with a strong communication component in 2015, the Foucauldian-inflected "regimes of post-truth" in 2015, there is scarcely any academic mention of the term, and no mention of the term in communication and media journals (*Google Scholar; Communication and Mass Media* database, October 15, 2017). The exceptions refer mainly to the South African "Truth and Reconciliation Commission." Between 1994 and 2014, one finds only two instances of "post-truth" in the full text of communication and media journal articles, and they use it loosely, in passing, without defining it (three others use the term but as a construct in experiments about truth and lying), and those refer to the popular uses of the term, especially "post-truth" as Eric Alterman (2004, "post-truth presidency"), Ralph Keyes (2004, "post-truth era") and Paul Krugman (2011, "post-truth campaign") use them.

(3.) One of the most misleading false starts has been to locate PT's origins in 1980s and 1990s academic theories of postmodernism. Despite some vigorous boxing with the theoretical fads of the 1980s and 1990s, these accounts offer little more than their enduring distaste for the fashion of a bygone era. They document the wide academic fascination with the sprawling body of thought associated with it, but they provide no empirical evidence that it had any major effects on public life, on the way citizens orient themselves to politics and the way journalism and politicians communicate to or with them: a correlation of alleged epistemic relativism a causation does not make (D'Ancona, 2017). Post-truth has far more obvious historical and contemporary causes, and more compelling evidence from which one can speculatively theorize.

(4.) Zelizer (2004) also offered an important challenge to critical cultural approaches to re-engage with the nuances of journalism's "god terms": facts, truth, and objectivity. As this overview shows, there was an increasing attempt to do that.

(5.) The flow of photographic or audiovisual deceptions since 2000 is impressive, and they range from fake photos about John Kerry with Jane Fonda at Vietnam War protests (Marinucci, 2004) to fake photos of Israeli military in its Lebanon conflict in 2006 ("Reuters Toughens Rules," 2007).

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