

Careless Speech: Towards a Conceptual Clarification of Post-Truth Politics

Abstract. The notion of post-truth politics has been insufficiently conceptualized, leaving its empirical feasibility undetermined. As a response, this article specifies the notion of 'truth' involved in post-truth politics. It draws from Hannah Arendt, suggesting that simple factual truths are the center of gravity in post-truth politics. Distinguishing factual from philosophical and rational forms of truth, the article defends the role of facts in pluralistic politics. It likens facts to public infrastructure, both limiting and enabling opinionated debate. It is argued that post-truth politics draws from older forms of propaganda, conspiracies, and PR-oriented 'bullshit' (Frankfurt), yet differs from them on the level of details. The article contends that post-truth politics is best understood as an intersection of two dynamic forces: structural tendencies relating to economic, cultural, discursive, and technological factors, and political strategies utilizing these structures for the sake of dodging proper democratic debate. The structural factors are contextualized, in particular, to contemporary forms of capitalism. Effective practices of conveying and acknowledging truth in the public sphere are discussed through ideas of fact-checking, frank speech and storytelling. The article concludes with a call for holistic approach coupled with institutional reforms in order to make space for factual truth in democratic politics.

Keywords: truth-telling, post-truth, democracy, bullshit, Hannah Arendt, fact

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1. Introduction

The empirical feasibility of the now fashionable epithet, “post-truth politics”, is questionable. In fact, the term has mostly been used in popular discussion. While the situation is evolving, it is still the case that “as yet, very little scholarly literature” has been published that would engage “directly with the concept of post-truth politics” (Lockie, 2016: 1). The few academic studies thus far published on the topic have shed some light on the persuasiveness of “alternative facts” (Rodriguez Barrera et al., 2017) and the reasons behind the electoral success of Trump and the Leave campaign (Hopkin – Rosamond, 2017; Montgomery, 2017). The present article argues, however, that direct engagement with the concept of post-truth politics is indeed lacking. As of now, there is no *concept* of post-truth politics at all, no satisfactory definition of the term or its exact qualities. Before such attempt at conceptualization is undertaken, empirical analysis of the phenomenon is bound to remain, at least in part, unsatisfactory and vague. Concepts, after all, are devised to make phenomena more clearly visible so that they can be properly analyzed. Engaging in the task of conceptualizing post-truth politics, furthermore, has the potential of productively broadening the ways in which truth is approached in critical political studies and International Relations (IR).

The popular analysis of post-truth is largely unsatisfactory, but the phenomenon ought not to be dismissed without further investigation. It does seem to capture something essential of the contemporary political situation. My argument here is neither that we have entered a post-truth *era* (I suggest we leave eras to historians) nor that post-truth politics has emerged *ab ovo*. The present situation can be described as a continuation of a longer process of devaluating truth in political discussion. I propose we approach post-truth as an event of crystallization that brings into a view a longer trajectory that might have otherwise remained of

marginal interest. While lying has always been a part of politics, this does not mean that it is an ahistorical constant in terms of its specific forms. The reverse of truth, as Michel de Montaigne suggested, “has a hundred thousand shapes, and no definite limits”(Montaigne, 2004: 35). Hence, the aim of this article is to open a discussion on the concept of post-truth with the objective of capturing the novel aspects of our current predicament, and in order to resurrect effective forms of truth-telling. In particular, I specify the notion of truth involved in post-truth politics. Drawing from Hannah Arendt’s ruminations of truth and lying in politics, I argue that the fate of what I call simple factual truths is centripetal for the understanding of the issue. Post-truth can be viewed as an intersection of two dynamic forces that feed each other. On the one hand, the phenomenon relates to a structural tendency emerging from intertwining economic, discursive, ideological, and media-environment-related factors contributing towards the devaluation of factual truth. On the other hand, it can be understood as a successful strategy by which political speech is detached from the register in which shared factual reality structures debate and differing opinions. Outrights lies about things technically anyone could verify are used – albeit perhaps not always consciously – for various political purposes towards both adversaries and one’s own supporters (or citizens of one’s country). I also argue that as opposed to Harry Frankfurt’s “bullshit” – speech indifferent to its truth-value, yet carefully crafted – post-truth political speech is characterized by carelessness.

The article has three main sections. I begin by short general reflections on the relationship between popular and academic analysis of events, which grounds my discussion of post-truth politics. I then discuss factual and other types of “truth” – rational, scientific – and their relationship to politics. I suggest that facts can be compared to material environment that according to current understanding both enables and limits democratic debate. The second section continues this analysis and provides a short genealogy of post-truth politics, distinguishing it from the previous modes of political mendacity. The concluding section finally ponders possible channels for effectively conveying truth in the public sphere, without making the preposterous claim of providing a solution to this problem. My interest lies in the political practices of truth-telling, instead of the morals of public truthfulness and

mendacity, which have been analyzed to some detail by other authors (Bok, 2011; Jay, 2010; Williams, 2010). I discuss in particular Arendt's notion of "saying what is" that takes place on the borders of the political sphere and Michel Foucault's musings on *parrhesia*. I suggest that Foucault's historical and subject-centered analyses are important, but need to be supplemented if we wish to gain an understanding of truth-telling in the contemporary context and with a focus on the public world. Turning to Cornel West, Linda Zerilli, and others, I ponder ways of *acknowledging* factual truths in politics and argue there is a need to broaden practices of telling the truth. I discuss the importance of viscerally engaging truthful narratives, comedy, and popular culture. I conclude by urging for the need of holistic approach that ties the issue of public mendacity to the broader struggle for better democratic institutions capable of alleviating the negative consequences of contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

2. The Same Old Same? Or, What Kind of Truth Are We Talking About?

My starting point in this analysis is that we should resist the natural reaction of social scientific minds that rejects popular declarations of novelty and tends to reduce all events into what is already known to us. We should indeed attune ourselves to the new features presented to us by the present age, and it is in hope of doing this that I try to delineate post-truth politics from its predecessors. I think Jane Suiter is on the right tracks when she suggests that there is an "important qualitative difference between the post-truth politician and the spin doctors of yore" (Suiter, 2016: 1), but this statement needs further explication. In order both to appreciate the new elements in post-truth politics and to be able to assess its significance for democratic politics, it is pivotal to make clear what kind of truth is at play.

Throughout the twentieth century, there was a movement in various strands of philosophy towards emancipating politics from the "tyranny of truth". So perhaps what we have today is the long-awaited liberation army? According to such critics as Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, all references to truth necessary imply an idea of

The Way Things Really Are, and hence lead to an anti-pluralistic essentialism (Rorty, 1989; Vattimo, 2014). However, what was rejected by these writers was both a very particular idea of what the truth is and an equally particular idea of what role truth could play in politics. Truth, for them, is a conversation-stopper, a reference to inhuman reality that is supposed to dictate the direction our politics should take.

Influential for our current understanding of truth and politics is also the reception of Foucault's thought in social sciences. Even though Foucault's own views are much more complex, the key takeaway from his work for most social scientists has been that truth and power are mutually dependent on each other (see e.g. Foucault, 2014: 9). There is no truth without power, and vice versa, and hence the task of scholarly analysis is to explicate how truths are construed, with what kinds of power effects, and what kind of resistance they invite. Arguably, however, the current situation calls for a more careful attention to forms of government by *untruth*.

One could argue that in the field of (mainly Anglophone) political theory, movement towards a more multifaceted, rich engagement with truth started to emerge approximately a decade ago as a response to both theoretical cul-de-sacs and the acts of the George W. Bush administration (see especially Elkins and Norris, 2012). In fact, both Rorty and Foucault (but perhaps not Vattimo) also provide useful, if somewhat condensed suggestions to this direction. In an interview, Rorty makes an important distinction between legitimate political concern for truthfulness and the "really technical" discussion on truth in analytic philosophy (Rorty, 2006: 57). Foucault, on the other hand provides intriguing formulation of the paradox emerging from the relationship between democracy and truth – namely, that democracy is dependent on true discourse, yet the "death of true discourse [...] is inscribed in democracy" (Foucault, 2011b: 184). The questions raised by both Rorty, Foucault and recent political theories received an insightful treatment already in Arendt's two essays on truth, lying, and politics published in 1968 and 1971 respectively. In the attempt to understand post-truth politics, I argue, her reflections are of great value.

In “Truth and Politics”, Arendt makes a distinction between rational and factual truth (Arendt, 2006: 227–228)¹. The distinction of course simplifies a great deal, but it communicates an important insight. To understand what she means, rational truth could be rephrased as truths relating to the “life of the mind”, i.e. human mental efforts. It contains forms of truth whose opposite is not lie, but illusion and opinion (philosophical truths) or error and ignorance (scientific, especially mathematic, truths). It also contains the Platonic “true standard of human conduct” that are perhaps in Rorty’s mind when he rejects the value of truth in a pluralistic democracy. Arendt, too, agrees that the philosophical strand of truth is rarely politically relevant, and has more or less ceased to command obedience in the public sphere². Her main concern is with the fate of factual truths, which indeed “constitute the very texture of the political realm” (Arendt, 2006: 227).

Perhaps the most important difference between the two types of truth emerges from their relation to plurality of human beings, which factual truth presupposes and rational truth does not, pleading to human beings in their singularity. Because they emerge from plurality, facts are inherently contingent. As the etymology of the word fact suggest (literally: “things done”), they relate to human action. And since action is free, they have “no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are”. Moreover, factual truth depends upon testimony, on witnesses telling what they saw “with the eyes of the body” rather than the “eyes of the mind”. This makes factual truth very vulnerable. Because of its contingent origin and the dependence on witnessing, “[f]acts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories [...] Once they are lost, no rational effort will ever bring them back”. (Arendt, 2006: 227, 233–234, 238).

¹ To be precise, Arendt says she “shall use this distinction for the sake of convenience without discussing its intrinsic legitimacy” and indicates the political relevance of the distinction mostly by leading to (Arendt, 2006: 226) the formation of the “self-evident” truths into opinions, like in the Declaration of Independence which through the ostensible fact of “We hold these truths to be self-evident” led the only way to avoid these formulations of the “self-evident” truths into opinions, like in the Declaration of Independence and Jesus of Nazareth and through the external fact of “We protest these by unjust rulers” (Arendt, 2006: 242–244). This idea in fact interestingly ties Arendt to Foucault’s celebration of cynicism as a mode of “living the truth” in his *Courage of Truth* lectures (Foucault, 2011; Prozorov, 2015).

What kind of facts are we talking about, exactly? Arendt characterizes politically relevant facts with such epithets as “brutally elementary data” and “modest verities”. In the same fashion, Bernard Williams has talked about “plain” and “everyday truths”. Such truths are not defined by certainty, but they are, however, commonly known (Williams, 2010: 10-12, 40). Arendt gives two particular examples for what she means by these elementary factual truths: that Germany invaded Belgium in the First World War, not the other way around, and the role of Trotsky in the Russian Revolution (Arendt, 2006: 227, 234).

That such facts are simple does not mean they are either self-evident or not socially constructed. Indeed, Arendt continuously emphasizes just how fragile they are, given their contingent nature noted above. Because of their inherent contingency, factual truths “are never compellingly true” (Arendt, 1972: 6). Furthermore, given that they are dependent on testimony, storytelling and historiography, their existence is without a doubt socially constructed. Facts are established, not found. Consequently, there is no absolute criteria demarcating truth from opinion, value, or the frame/discourse within which the facts are placed. Yet, this does not mean that we could have equally well established the opposite. Indeed, Arendt seems rather steadfast in her belief that factual truths of the “Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914” type are not meaningfully contestable. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into the epistemic and philosophical complexities relating to this view. In terms of epistemic validity, it suffices to say that – *at least implicitly* – most scholars tend to subscribe to some form of “everyday realism” when it comes to facts in the abovementioned category. *These* are not the kinds of facts that usually invite the inquiry into “what gets constructed as the factual” (Gholiagha, 2017: 25). What concerns us here is the *political* face of factual truths, and the mode of objectivity demanded by political criteria. A skeptic might argue that if the types of factual truth just described are indeed seldom analyzed from the perspective of power-relations and social construction of “the factual” it is because they are, mostly, irrelevant. The verities they contain are so “modest” that nothing interesting follows from them. This argument, however, ought to be repudiated from two seemingly opposite perspectives.

On the one hand, factual truth – once it is established – acquires a status that from a political perspective appears as peremptory and despotic, because it is beyond debate. Whereas the “validity” of an opinion consists of the amount of different viewpoints and other opinions it is capable of imagining and taking into account, a fact simply is what it is³. And whereas disturbing opinions can be rejected or argued with, “unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies” (Arendt, 2006: 236). Once something has been established as true, the debate cannot any more (at least primarily) be about their existence. Consequently, it is a deeply problematic and highly political act either to lie about the factual data or to turn questions of fact into matters of opinion. As attempts to “change the record” they can and should be considered forms of political action (Arendt, 2006: 245). Something like this can be detected in the attempt to counter uncomfortable facts with “alternative facts”, as if the facts themselves were a matter of opinion.

On the other hand, the clash between truth and politics only appears on the lowest level of human affairs, i.e. interest and power politics⁴. In a proper political discussion,

“Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute.” (Arendt, 2006: 234-237)

³ Philosophically, Arendt is here on her Kantian gear – but there is also an interesting overlap between Kant (of the Third *Critique*) and Nietzsche on this issue, given that the latter states in the *Genealogy of Morals* that “There is only a seeing from a perspective, only a ‘knowing’ from a perspective, and the *more* emotions we express over a thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we train on the same thing, the more complete will be our ‘idea’ of that thing, our ‘objectivity’” (Nietzsche, 2003: 86).

⁴ Arendt indeed fundamentally challenges the common view that “politics is always *Herrschaft* (dominium)” (Kratochwil 2017, 8; c.f. e.g. Markell, 2006).

Democratic exchange of opinions, in other words, requires that some facts are settled. This is the properly political task truth can perform. What Arendt means is nothing like the liberal market place of ideas, which is sometimes evoked as a process that leads to “the truth” in the public sphere (Williams, 2010: 212–213). Instead of being distilled from the plurality of perspectives, truth invites and makes possible the expression of different viewpoints. It stands at the *beginning* of the processes of agonal debate, of wooing and persuasion, not at their end. Opinions depend on a minimal ground of shared facts so that they can be opinions *about something*, that is, different perspectives to something shared and not subjective whims. Thus, denying facts means undoing the very ground of politics, making us incapable of responding to political events.

There is a mutual dependency between facts and opinions. Facts become meaningful only through the process of exchanging opinions about them, but we cannot have opinions without shared factual background. This relates to the particular type of objectivity that, according to Arendt, corresponds to politics. Instead of the clinical God’s-eye view we tend to associate with the word, objectivity in politics refers to an ability to conceive the common world as constituted through multiple perspectives. Consequently, a political approach to factual truth must balance between the Scylla of anti-pluralistic objectivism and the Charybdis of subjectivism that does away with shared facts.

In order to concretize this idea of objectivity, we could compare factual truths (or *matters of fact*) – in the lines of Bonnie Honig’s recent book – to “public things”. What this phrase refers is the the material infrastructure, (*very*) broadly construed, that gather people together both physically and symbolically (Honig, 2017: 14–19, *passim*.; see also Burdman, 2017: 8–9). This metaphoric comparison allows us to see how the “despotic” character of factual truth is similar to the limiting conditions of public, material things. It is a limitation that at the same time performs the role of enabling, encouraging and stimulating debate. A destruction of these limits would spell doom to the very conditions of possibility of these activities. Similarly, taking care of the facts, telling the truth, can be conceived of as a practice of world-building

similar to building of physical infrastructure or political institutions. The comparison is also helpful in that no one would expect guidelines on *what to do* from the material environment, just as no one would completely ignore the limitations it poses on our actions. Facts cannot resolve politics, but they ought to define the situation within which debate is burning.

On the basis of this conceptual elaboration, let us return to the issue of post-truth politics. The term has been applied to a relatively broad array of issues (Brexit, Trump, Orbán, Putin), and consequently, different types of truth have been evoked. Unfortunately, many commentaries also lump these different categories of truth together, making a critical analysis of the situation next to impossible. In some of the attacks against the notion, this ambiguity seems strategic, but even its defenders have not generally managed to escape vagueness. One dividing line seems to be, however, whether Brexit or Trump is considered as the key example of post-truth politics. In the case of Brexit, the idea of truth as expert knowledge seems central. As a derivative of scientific knowledge, expert knowledge seems to come closer to the rational form of truth than the factual. It implies the idea that some people have better access to the relevant facts than others do, and that quite specific policy-recommendations can be drawn from the factual matter directly. If Trump is seen as the central figure, however, expert knowledge is certainly one aspect of truth violated by his political rhetoric. But, and it is here that we arrive to the heart of the matter, his mode of mendacity both cuts much deeper and violates truths much “plainer” than mere populist revolt against the experts.

Post-truth politics, I contend, ought to be understood as a predicament in which political speech is increasingly detached from a register in which factual truths are “plain”. Due to various socio-economic processes, intentional and unintentional demagoguery, and erosion of common sense, the idea of a world constituted by shared facts withers away. This, in turn, tampers with our ability to react to political events and to engage in a democratic process of opinion-formation. There is a decreasing demand for speakers to produce even the *semblance* of truthfulness. That all this is accompanied with carelessness and a *lack* of attention to the details is

among the unique features of recent political situation; it also explains the fact that “post-shame” is sometimes suggested as a more apt term than post-truth. These two, however, work on different registers, and are hence not relevant alternatives for naming the same phenomenon.

It follows that the instances that make Trump the most potent example of post-truth politics are the ones in which something obvious or seemingly uncontroversial is denied or an event is made up that never happened. Perhaps the most well-known example of the former is the dispute over the inauguration audience, and of the latter the claim made by Kellyanne Conway regarding a fictive Bowling Green massacre. Such claims, I argue, are not primarily attempts to convince or persuade. On the contrary, their main impact seems to be the creation of confusion. They seek to make “normal” political debate and critical scrutiny of policies impossible. Even the more conventional array of lies produced by Trump can be seen from this perspective. Many of his lies are lies about numbers or audience sizes (not just in the inauguration), misrepresentations of long-term processes in his own favor, or false statements about media coverage. In many of these cases, the originality resides not so much in the content, but in the sheer quantity of these lies, which in this case seems to turn into a quality. The carelessness and numerousness of these lies has the same effect as the denial of simple singular facts.

Trump is of course also notorious for his denial of the scientific consensus of the age. By focusing on factual truths as the centers of gravity in post-truth politics, my aim is not to downplay the importance of scientific truths⁵. Following Arendt in her later work *The Life of the Mind* and the recent explication by Javier Burdman I argue, however, that *some* scientific statements can be regarded as “factual truths” in the realm of politics, without thereby committing to anti-political scientism (Arendt 1978; Burdman 2017)⁶. In this context, the existence of human induced climate

⁵ By this term, my aim is not to side with the realist position within the metatheoretical debates of political science. As I hope my explication will make clear, it is possible to talk about “scientific truths” without necessarily committing to the view that science aims at truth-like propositions.

⁶ Relatedly, Williams argues that not all “plain truths” need to be visible to the bare eye, but can require the use of instruments (Williams, 2010: 40).

change would be the most obvious example of such factual truth. Given the effective scientific consensus on the matter, and the vast political importance of it, climate change could be seen as a simple fact, whose denial immediately becomes a political act, but whose affirmation leaves the door open for opinionated debate over the proper way of handling the problem. Just as we have to believe those who were there to witness that Germany crossed the border over to Belgium, we must acknowledge the scientific consensus without taking it as infallible. Political debate, like political thought, is not about the *existence* but the *meaning* of these things. This requires we move beyond the factual matter itself, and consider its implications for different people.

This attempt at conceptual elucidation questions some of the dominant premises of the discussion on post-truth thus far, both popular and academic. Some of such differences have already been mentioned – such as rejecting the subsumption of post-truth to a sub-category of populism or its characterization by emphasizing the attack on expert knowledge. When it comes to the role of emotions, many of the early attempts to engage the issue academically followed popular definitions of the term. Both the Oxford Dictionaries and the *Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache*, which nominated post-truth and the corresponding *postfaktisch* as the words of the year 2016, highlighted in their definitions the value of emotions over objective facts in political debates (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache 2016; Oxford Dictionaries 2016). Truth, it is suggested, is being replaced by emotion. The same feature has been picked up by academics. The first characteristic of post-truth politics mentioned by Suiter, too, is that “appeals to emotion are dominant”⁷. I do not think it is sustainable, however, to present emotions and truth as diametric opposites of each other. Certainly, the affective component plays a significant role in post-truth politics. However, seeing truth as the beginning of debate – and taking into account the up-to-date knowledge on how our reasoning works – should alert us to the fact that we are not dealing with a simplistic victory of emotion over cool, rational truth.

⁷ While Laybats and Tredinnick emphasize the inescapability of emotional aspects in decision-making, their (largely borrowed) definition of post-truth reproduces the dichotomy between facts and rationality on the one side and post-truth and emotions, on the other (Laybats and Tredinnick, 2016).

The problem is not emotions per se, but certain system of circulation and consumption of affects, created by contemporary capitalism, that guides our attention.

Relatedly, I disagree with Suiter's presentation of the hegemony of centrist liberalism as a golden age of facts, a stand also assumed by Bue Rübner Hansen and Rune Møller Stahl who complain that 'post-truth' implies support for the technocratic, neoliberal approach to politics (Rübner Hansen and Møller Stahl 2016). Suiter is correct, I think, in arguing that the post-truth politician does not simply pick-and-choose convenient facts, hiding uncomfortable ones. Rather, they produce their own facts (Suiter, 2016). However, this form of political mendacity arguably emerged already earlier in the twentieth century. In order to properly distinguish between such issues as PR, propaganda, and "bullshit" on the one hand, and post-truth, on the other, I will next turn to a (very short) genealogy of post-truth politics. Having traced the development of political lying in the twentieth century, I will resume my conceptual explication.

3. A Rough Genealogy of Post-Truth Politics

"Big Brother turns out to be Howdy Doody" – Neil Postman

Political speech has always been about twisting words and language to your own advantage. Political debate has always had the aim of bringing to focus the rhetorical gimmicks of your opponents. Plain lies have been among the basic tools of power politics, both domestic and international. However, several authors have suggested that due to economic, socio-political, and technological developments, the twentieth century introduced forms of political mendacity never seen before. The following historical presentation will concentrate especially on modern PR, the totalitarian use of lies, and – in Harry Frankfurt's terms already mentioned before – "bullshit". These

are part of the same trajectory that has led to the emergence of post-truth politics, but my discussion of them is not meant as a causal story⁸.

The most radical example, and by the same token one often evoked in response to Trump, is the totalitarian hatred of factual reality. William Connolly, for example, has suggested that Trump should be read from the perspective of the “big lie” known to us from National Socialist propaganda (Connolly 2017). It was Adolf Hitler who, in *Mein Kampf*, famously noted that the masses are more easily deceived by big lies than small ones (Hitler, 1943: 231–232). While in its original context the notion of big lie was an accusation against the Jews, it became a central piece in the National Socialist propaganda, in which the idea of Jewish World Conspiracy became a central piece around which a coherent narrative comprising all possible events was weaved. The lure of totalitarian movements was largely due to the consistency of the system within which individual facts – true or fabricated – were forced (Arendt, 1973: 351). Once in power, this “logical system” was transformed into practice, so that reality was constantly created and recreated according to fictive premises. This eradicated the very distinction between fact and fiction.

Totalitarianism, however, is not the only new form of political lie in the twentieth century. In “Truth and Politics”, Arendt mentions, first of all, the curious hostility towards factual truth in modern democracies “if it happens to oppose a given group’s profit or pleasure” and the tendency to turn facts into opinions, “as though the fact of Germany’s support of Hitler [was] not a matter of historical record but a matter of opinion” (Arendt, 2006: 231-232). Second, we also encounter all kinds of image-making that bear family resemblance to the totalitarian attempts to create facts. The purpose of carefully crafted public images (whether of politicians or states) is to provide a full-fledged substitute for reality crafted with the aid of “business practices and Madison Avenue methods”. Further, due to the mass-mediated nature of our society, the image is much more visible than the “original”, so it tends to manage quite well in the task of substitution. Indeed, it may happen

⁸ For reflection on the causes of the popularity of post-truth politics, see Hopkin and Rosamond 2017.

that the image is defended more passionately than the reality it is supposed to represent, partly because the images also tend to become reality for their makers themselves (Arendt, 2006: 248–251). In “Lying and Politics”, Arendt indeed argues that such substitution of image for reality was at play in the U.S. Vietnam policies.

There was also another new form of lying – also connected to image-making – that emerged to view, Arendt suggest, with the publication of the Pentagon papers. Namely, they revealed the willingness of the US foreign policy experts to ignore factual data in favor of a scientific model or theory they had produced. Rather than hiding anything, they simply ignored facts. They preferred, in other words, their game theoretical model for the actual reality, and hence managed to liberate themselves from the weight of actual facts (Arendt, 1972: 5–10; Guaraldo, 2008: 208–209). In a way, this substitution of reality for a model is worse than the occasional outright lie, not least so because it bears some resemblance to the emancipation from reality seen in totalitarian ideology.

If we compare Arendt’s analysis of the forms of lying nascent in the twentieth century to the present-day worries of “post-truth” politics, what emerges into view are not only similarities, but also interesting deviations. Most relevant point of comparison between Trump and the totalitarian movements before the full seizure of power relates to the role of conspiracy theories and the treatment of media. Indeed, the “Lügenpresse” trope plays a key role in Trump’s rhetoric, effectively seeking to undermine the media as tellers of factual truth and, consequently, the very idea of non-partisan reality in any sense whatsoever.

It is also plausible that the way to Trump’s electoral success was paved by the growing grasp of conspiracy theories over a significant segment of the American citizenry. While the American public has always been exceptionally receptive to conspiracies, over the recent decades their role has further increased, as they have become fueled by Internet communities and the fake news media outlets. Trump and his supporters have made a notable use of different conspiracies. He made his most visible entrance to politics through the Obama birth certificate conspiracy.

Early on, Trump also constantly showed his support for the climate change denialist cause which continues to direct his policies. In November 2012, he made the conspiracy dimension of his thinking clear by stating: “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive” (@realDonaldTrump, Twitter 6 November 2012). During the campaign, he made numerous conspiracy-related accusations against his opponents, most notably in reference to Hillary Clinton’s emails⁹, and suggesting both media and the elections were “rigged”. He also made an extensive use of public mistrust of government and bureaucracy or “the deep state”, referring to “draining the swamp” and presenting the entire establishment as allied against him. As a president, there was the Obama wiretapping conspiracy, and the list could go on.

Lot of this is familiar, but not everything. From totalitarian lies to the Pentagon papers and “Madison Avenue” tactics in public relations, the uniqueness of the twentieth century political mendacity had to do with the perverse combination of fictional elements and the faculty of reasoning in the logical sense. From premises completely alienated from reality, the most wonderful conclusions were compelling derived through simple but strict deduction. In the case of totalitarian ideologies, everything flowed smoothly from the dialectical view of history or the quasi-naturalistic racism. In the decision-making process revealed by the Pentagon papers, on the other hand, the scientism of rational choice theories and game theoretical models was allowed to overrule the factual data provided by the intelligence community.

Conspiracies too, as Jonathan Kay has argued, are coherent, all-embracing narratives (or sets of narratives), whose popularity emerges from the fact that they allow the denial of certain uncomfortable parts of reality either as somehow non-existing (9/11) or illegitimate (Obama presidency). They build on public cynicism and mistrust against the media and officials that is caused by the unearthing of particular lies.

⁹ There is some evidence that the so-called “Pizzagate” conspiracy was well received among Trump supporters, even though he did not openly endorse it (it has been speculated that Michael Flynn was forced out of then president-elect Trump’s transition team for having retweeted Pizzagate conspiracy material).

According to the same logic detected by Arendt in totalitarian ideologies, conspiracies provide a fictional coherence that is more compelling and more comforting than the messy, contingent, actuality of political realities, especially given the occasional lies by politicians (Kay, 2012: 57–64).

Now, the similarities notwithstanding, the logical element seems often lacking in the case of Trump administration. Granted, the situation would be decisively different if Steven Bannon was the president instead of Donald Trump. It is debatable, furthermore, to what extent his vision defined, and continues to define, the U.S. policies. Arguably, however, what the term “post-truth” seeks to denote is not Bannonism. This takes us to the feature I dubbed carelessness. While Trump certainly constructs a semi-coherent worldview and builds on elaborate conspiracies, there is an element of contingency and non-instrumentalism in his mendacities that in part makes him unique.

Arendt’s essays are still based on the premise that the pieces of factual truth that break into the carefully crafted image are powerful and have to be carefully managed. Mendacity that takes the form of creating a fictive reality seeks, in her view, to eliminate contingency. To some extent, this does not seem to be the case in the post-truth context. This is also, I argue, what separates post-truth from Frankfurt’s bullshit. In an interesting recent article, Jonathan Hopkin and Ben Rosamond discuss post-truth politics in Frankfurt’s terms. They argue that the economic policy debates over the response to sovereign debt crisis in the UK are instances of bullshit – indifferent towards its truth-value (unlike lying). In other words, even the technocratic argumentation that is often posited as the opposite of post-truth can in fact be seen as a part of the same phenomenon (Hopkin and Rosamond 2017). However, if we consider the qualities that Frankfurt lists as signs of bullshit, clear differences to what I have been describing as post-truth politics start to emerge.

For Frankfurt, bullshit is “carefully wrought” and requires “thoughtful attention to detail” (Frankfurt, 2005: 22). It cannot be based on whim, but is produced by

“exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who – with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth – dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right” (Frankfurt, 2005: 23)

Now, it requires a leap of faith to apply this description, verbatim, to Trump. Frankfurt seems to be describing, then, the same phenomena of image-making that Arendt noticed in the public life of her time. Presenting the current post-truth phenomena in these terms leads to an a priori negation of any new elements in what we are witnessing today.

I argue, then, that bullshit is the fertile ground from which post-truth politics sprouts, but not its synonym. They share many features, such as indifference to truth-value of statements – as opposed to traditional lies that consciously negate truthfulness (Frankfurt, 2005: 34, 46–48, 54–61; Postman, 2005: 128). Furthermore, post-truth politics would probably not exist without bullshit, without the colonization of the whole public realm with PR mentality (Guaraldo, 2008: 217).

The upshot of PR mentality taking over the public sphere can be discerned by considering Arendt’s description of “a peculiar kind of cynicism—an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established” as a result of long-term brainwashing. Its effect, in other words, is “that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed” (Arendt, 2006: 252–253). This sense is the common sense, by which she means a kind of a mental organ that ties us to a community and unites the information we receive from the five senses. We can then argue that the rise of post-truth politics is related, on a broader scale, to a process of degradation of common sense – one taking place without overt exposure to brainwashing per se. This should invite us to read post-truth politics in a symptomatic manner, and alert us to a critical examination of political processes that produce these results.

It is surprising that Arendt does not tie her analysis of mendacity to the critical examination of corruption of politics and eradiation of common sense presented elsewhere. She also assumes that the gravest danger to truth emerges from a will to tyranny or interest politics. I argue, however, that the dissolution of factual truths whose most recent stage we are now witnessing ought to be read as a part of transformation of public ethos and techno-economic settings of our lives. The most well-known part of this change is the rise of neoliberal capitalism (which for the purposes of my argument, differs less from the previous forms of capitalism as sometimes suggested).

Recalling my comparison of facts to public things, it is noteworthy that according to Honig the neoliberal ethos submits everything to calculating instrumentality that is not capable of imagining a “world-building project that is not entrepreneurial by nature”. This, she argues, effectively undoes the *publicness* of public things (Honig, 2017: 14–19, *passim*). Something similar is taking place, I argue, in our relation to facts. Indeed, on a phenomenological level, one could speculate if our relationship to facts *directly* has something to do with our changing relationship to physical things, which in a service and sales occupation dominated economy becomes more ambiguous, fluid, and affective, compared to the simple instrumentality of the manufacturing era. In any case, it seems that like public things, facts cease to matter to us and also cease to receive the care and consideration they demand in democracy. They have become succumbed to what Neil Postman – before the emergence of the Internet – described as the “now...this” logic of the cable news. Contrary to the Orwellian fear of truth being concealed, Postman further claimed, we should fear – with Huxley – that “the truth would be drowned in the sea of irrelevance” (Postman, 2005: xix, 99–120). The social media of course adds its own twist to this issue, making it evermore easier and more pleasant to be ignorant. The social media indeed provides a distraction from the emotional distress of contemporary capitalism. And this role makes us less and less receptive to facts (Gilroy-Ware, 2017: 168–185). Social media has also shaped the whole mediascape, allowing in particular the creation of a radical right-wing media ecosystem capable of

insulating its followers from nonconforming news and building active links to conspiracy sites (Faris et al. 2017). While seeking solutions, then, it is crucial that the issue is seen in the broader cultural, economic, ideological, technological, and mediated context within which it occurs.

4. Concluding reflections of truth-telling in a post-truth context

I have suggested that post-truth politics ought to be understood in terms of devaluating factual truths in a public debate. I compared factual truths to “public things”, arguing that like the material environment they both limit and enable the kind of opinionated debate that is in the heart of democratic politics. I argued that post-truth bears resemblance to the previous forms of public mendacity, such as PR, propaganda, and “bullshit”, without being reducible to any of them. I also suggested that the structure of contemporary capitalism is essential for understanding the phenomenon. In this section, I turn towards possibilities. Given the previous analysis, what would effective practices of conveying the truth in contemporary public sphere look like?

In “Truth and Politics”, Arendt suggest that it is “something of a surprise” that the seemingly anti-political notion of truth turns out to be more important for politics than the explicitly political principles of justice or freedom. The reason for this curious outcome is that factual truth constitutes the basic fabric of that common world within which politics materializes. The world may be unjust or deprived of freedom, but it will not “be able to survive without men willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake consciously—namely, λέγειν τα ἔόντα, to say what is” (Arendt, 2006: 225). Truth-telling, then, is of vast political importance. Under “normal” conditions, however, telling the truth is not a form of political action and truthfulness “has never been counted among the political virtues, because it has little indeed to contribute to that change of the world”. It is perhaps best compared to other non-political activities that nevertheless ground politics, such as building the world of public things that host political activities. The lot of the truth-teller changes,

however, in a situation where mendacity becomes a general political principle. In such (exceptional) situations the truth-teller “has begun to act; he, too, has engaged himself in political business, for [...] he has made a start toward changing the world” (Arendt, 2006: 245-247).

Regardless of whether or not we are in a situation yet where the truth-teller necessarily becomes a political actor, the concern about the fate of factual truth ought to be taken seriously. It is necessary to ponder modes of telling the truth that might act as a counter-force to the post-truth tendencies in contemporary politics. One response has been an increased emphasis on fact-checking agencies, such as *PolitiFact* and *FactCheck.org* in the U.S. However, given the reactive manner of their work, their tendency to overstep their (self-appointed) mandate, and general ineffectiveness (to be explicated below), it seems to me that we need to look elsewhere.

Theoretical attempts to grasp the practices of truth-telling have in recent years been guided by the ancient notion of *parrhesia*, frank speech, revitalized by Foucault in his late works. Indeed Foucault’s reflections provide rich material for pondering chances of truth-telling also against the mendacities of post-truth politics. Especially well articulated in his work is the fact that in democracy the ability to speak one’s mind freely and that of telling the truth are in fact in tension with each other. In Foucault, we also find illuminating taxonomy of different modes of truth-telling (parrhesiastic/ethical, prophecy, wisdom, teaching), whose mutual combinations form what he calls different “regimes of truth” in different societies (Foucault, 2011: 13–28)¹⁰. However, Foucault’s own explicit discussion is limited to the Greece articulation of the truth/democracy nexus, and he says relatively little of the contemporary situation – “not even hypotheses” (Foucault 2011a). Further, the main shortcoming of Foucault’s notion of parrhesia, in my mind, is related to the fact that it emerges as a sidetrack from his broader analysis of subjectivity in power relations. For this reason, his main focus is on the self-relation of the parrhesiast, also leading

¹⁰ Maria Tamboukou has written on truth-telling in Arendt and Foucault (Tamboukou, 2012).

to the idea of “living the truth”, which at least to an extent can be considered as an *alternative* to telling it (on the idea of living the truth, see Prozorov, 2015). The self-relation is no doubt an important concern per se, but less important from our perspective, focused as we are on the worldly, political relevance of truth-telling.

Cornel West has applied the idea of parrhesia in a much tangible manner, arguing for the importance of “free and frank press willing to speak painful truths to the public [...] against the misinformation and mendacities of elites”, accompanied by less well-established channels, such as rap music, which he argues has made vital contributions “not only to national but international political truth telling” (West, 2005: 39, 179-183).

The problem, however, only recently engaged with proper vigor, is that we don’t only need tellers of truth – we need a democratic audience capable of “acknowledging” facts (Zerilli, 2016: 118, 132–138). *Knowledge* of something is not enough. Already in the early 1980s, Peter Sloterdijk described a cynical logic of our age, reminiscent of the common sense destroying cynicism mentioned by Arendt, in which circumstances lead us to act against better knowledge (Sloterdijk, 1987: 5–6). For this reason alone, fact checking as currently practiced is a particularly ineffective mode of conveying the truth in public discourse.

One solution, suggested in a roundabout way by both Arendt and West, is to find ways to tell truthful stories that engage their audiences on both visceral and cerebral levels¹¹. But even this is not enough. In a culture where cynicism plays a major role, it is easy to evoke suspicion about facts, as all forms of truth-telling can be suspected of being forged or biased (see also Arendt, 2006: 239). Trump has indeed systematically diminished the idea of trustworthy sources of information. We are approaching a point where we recognize ourselves from Simon Blackburn’s description of the Soviet Union:

¹¹ Important venues for such acts of truth-telling are satire and comedy (Brassett 2016)

“Upon hearing a purported piece of information, the reaction was not ‘Is this true?’ but ‘Why is this person saying this? – What machinations or manipulations are going on here?’ The question of truth did not, as it were, have the social space in which it could breathe.”

Arguably, in a well-functioning democracy we would need citizens that ask both questions at the same time. However, our attempt in avoiding the dominance of the cynical question ought not to consist in epistemic practices only. We need to engage the societal, technological, and economic problems simultaneously with the practices of truth-telling. We need to find political institutions that are capable of addressing the uncertainties of contemporary life without succumbing to unduly simplifications.

This article cannot give any answers to the complexities of these institutional problems. I will conclude, however, by insisting that the above ought not lead to the conclusion that the fate of truth is only a surface phenomenon caused by deeper causes. It is an essential part of the problem field. Indeed, as Elkins and Norris put it, “questions about truth are inevitable in any society that takes politics seriously” (Elkins and Norris, 2012: 3). Furthermore, contrary to a common complaint, questions of truth, of factual truth, are not conservative concerns only. In Arendt’s words, what is at stake is the “common and factual reality itself, and this is indeed a political problem of the first order”. Without its basis in facts, “the political realm is deprived not only of its main stabilizing force but of the starting point from which to change, to begin something new” (Arendt, 2006: 232, 254).

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