Read the attached text carefully and respond to the following question:

What does Jan Kraski argue about fake news and post-truth? In what ways does the discussion of those terms affect public discourse in general? In what ways does this debate affect the area that you would like to pursue during your MA studies: English language, literatures written in English or English-speaking cultures?

Answer these questions in an essay (7200–9000 characters with spaces).

ARTICLE

How to hijack a discourse? Reflections on the concepts of post-truth and fake news

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The aim of this paper is threefold: to perform a (meta)discursive archaeology of the concepts post-truth and fake news, to critically reflect on the change in the application of these concepts between the various domains of discourse such as public intellectual field or academic research and mainstream media, and finally to show how the concept of post-truth is now used against the very intellectual milieu it originates from. Whereas the first objective deals with the historical reconceptualization process, the second shows—drawing on the case of social networks—how the concept of fake news infects topics of public relevance, while the third demonstrates how ubiquitous the critique of the left and postmodern intellectual tradition is. This paper combines Foucault's and Agamben's approaches to reconstruct the changes and evolution of the *concept and the knowledge that defines it*. It considers various sources in which this discourse exists regardless of their ideological background—from intellectual discussions on its formation and critiques of the phenomenon it stands for, to journalistic materials which constitute the body of post-truth and fake news discourse today.

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Introduction

The concept of *post-truth* politics has been often used to explain the emergence of the fake news controversy (Davies, 2016, 2019; Tillmans, 2018; Kakutani, 2018). Most of the sources in this large body of literature belong to (Western) mainstream media. However, the topic has also been exhaustively discussed by researchers in various academic disciplines—e.g., political science (Barrera Rodriguez et al., 2017), discourse studies (Farkas and Schou, 2018; Angermuller, 2018), IT (Vosoughi et al., 2018), history (Groebner, 2018), and philosophy (McIntyre, 2015, 2018, 2019b). The omnipresence and inflationary use of the term in both public and academic spheres (Hughes, 2016; Chadwick, 2017) shows that the discourse and dominant positions towards the post-truth complex have been firmly established. The research and public debate mostly focus on specific dimensions of this phenomenon, such as the threat of spreading fake news, the technologies for spreading fake news, its sources, and the means of countering or debunking it.

This paper reflects upon the reconceptualization process(es) of 'post-truth' from its origins in leftist and liberal intellectual critiques of the media system in the 1980s to the early 2000s and its iteration during the 2016 US elections in the form of fake news, to the contemporary intellectual critique which sees post-truth in the context of science denial and as a consequence of both the (right wing interpretation of) postmodern thought and left ideology. The first section explores the original concept of post-truth rooted in the US American left and liberal intellectual field as a critique of mainstream media being intertwined with and legitimating the political establishment. The second section discusses the self-conceptualisation of the mainstream media as an actor and the ideological background of its positioning in the public sphere. The third and fourth sections deal with the social media strand within the fake news discourse and illustrate the ambivalent perspective of mainstream media towards these problematic online practices. The last section touches upon the contemporary *critique* of post-truth and science denial. From the perspectives of the mainstream media, liberal academics, *and* the conservative/right wing intelligentsia, this problem is a consequence of left and postmodern intellectual tradition.

Archaeology of the post-truth concept

Inspired by Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, this paper describes the historical formation of the post-truth concept within its meandering discursive flow. It will follow the steps of *succession* and *coexistence* of different notions of the same field of knowledge, and the *procedures of intervention* which lead to new understanding(s) of the same phenomenon (cf. Foucault, 2002, pp. 63–66). In order to understand the (implied) meaning(s) in the contemporary, diverse applications of this concept, the paper draws on Agamben's diachronic reflections from *What is an Apparatus?* The history of the notion of apparatus/dispositive is a model of how to describe the development of a complex concept which combines distant fields of knowledge, extended meanings, and diverse modalities of application. Agamben shows the roots of the term in patristic theological writings from late antiquity, medieval church economics, different schools of philosophical literature, and its evolution to what we have today in terms of its operationalisation in the theory, technology, and politics (Agamben, 2009). In the same way, this paper wants to show the development of the notion of post-truth in the domain of public intellectual discussions over two generations as well as in the domain of mainstream media. Even if these insights are incommensurable with Agamben's, they help illuminate the controversy both in terms of its applicability (in various contexts) and of discursive actors.

The terminology used to describe the positions in this paper is borrowed from the discursive actors themselves. The ideological markers such as left, left-liberal, liberal, democratic, conservative, alt-right come from the discursive actors who identify themselves or their adversaries in such manner. The same goes for the term mainstream media, which stands for those *usually* uncontested media outlets determining and sharing the tenor of public opinion.

First mentions and the original setting

The original context of the term *post-truth* as formulated by Steve Tesich (1992), clearly illustrates his fundamentally critical standpoint towards the position of power:

> "[T]he fact that the Bush Administration felt safe in declassifying those cables shows it was no longer afraid of the truth because it knows that the truth will have little impact on us. […] We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world" (Tesich, 1992, p. 12).

In his short article in *The Nation* magazine, Tesich focuses on the fact that in spite of publicly released pieces of evidence, the *mainstream media* at the time did not significantly pursue the Iran–Contras controversy and did not question sufficiently the position of the establishment (Brody and Shapiro, 1989). In other words, the actors who held power over the discourse ignored the wrongdoings, at the same time neglecting democratic and liberal values. The idea behind Tesich's term post-truth and the title "Government of Lies", was one of a liberal American intellectual who saw himself defending the principles of what he thought was the fundamental value of American society from the very government *and* media of this society. As one can see in the quote, the *publicly displayed feeling* of having done the *right* thing is stronger than the fact that both unethical and illegal actions were undertaken: *the collective emotions were blocking a cognitive dissonance.*

This standpoint was characteristic for Tesich's time and intellectual milieu. Both the predecessors of the original notion of post-truth from 1992 and proponents of this term's contemporary interpretation in the wake of the fake news discourse in 2016 share a similar critical standpoint towards the media establishment and the public sentiment as Tesich. They all saw the betrayal of liberal democracy and its values steered by (both liberal and conservative) political elites and mainstream media. Tesich's notion of post-truth shows significant similarity with Herman and Chomsky's ideas underwriting *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman and Chomsky, 2002 [1988])—an informed leftist critique which found its echo *also* among liberal intellectuals. In other words, the very *public sentiment* that Tesich describes with post-truth is closely related to what Herman and Chomsky see as consent through *disinformation by mainstream media*.

Nowadays a classical companion to political economy of media, *Consent* demonstrates how state *propaganda and disinformation* are re-produced in a democratic society and what kind of actors participate in its creation. The "five filters" of mass and mainstream media are even in today's online media the main gate keeping mechanisms: market share and ownership of the

company, advertisement as a mean of financing, controlled sourcing through selected corporations and institutions, flack as a mean of content control and anticommunism (or rather displayed hostility towards external threat) as a mean of mobilisation of audiences against and/or for various goals (cf. Herman and Chomsky, 2002, pp. 3–31 [1988]).[1] Such constellations lead to biased reports serving the interests of the establishment. This propaganda and disinformation model (or in Agamben's term *apparatus*), in addition to the revolving door between the government and media (cf. Herman and Chomsky, 2002, pp. 13–14), supports connections between secret services and media regardless of the division of liberal and conservative media outlets: "The mass media not only allowed these disinformation sources to prevail, they protected them against disclosures that would reveal their dubious credentials" (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, p. 160).

The intellectual scene from the early 2000s shows that this leftist critique of Western media and societies has been adopted by the academics and liberal/liberal-left public intellectuals. From the perspective of political studies and sociology, both the term and the book *Post-Democracy* (Crouch, 2004) address the political system of Western democracies and the role of media in social developments. Similarly to Herman and Chomsky, but from a liberal ideological position, Crouch points out that the threat for democracy is posed by the concentration of power over the information flow in the hands of a few media moguls. Even if these large corporations belong to the state (and at least in the West, this is not the case anymore) and even if there are strict regulations on media (which is also only partially the case, e.g. in the form of flack), accumulating media capital leads to the destruction of any competition or to any political views alternative to the mainstream (Crouch, 2004, pp. 30–52). On the level of content, this also leads to a worrying level of conformity, especially when it comes to any issue connected to establishment —which is the very situation pinpointed by Tesich's term (1992). Accumulated power leads finally to the steering of public discussion through allowing or disallowing the opening of specific discourses in the mainstream. The warning about *post-democratic* control of the media and the high concentration of power over the media infrastructures is, as recent events with Facebook have shown, still valid, deep in the digital era (Joler and Krasni, 2017).

The Post-Truth Era by Ralph Keyes (2004) brought back Tesich's term—enriched with the 1990s history of disinformation —becoming an unavoidable first reference for most academic and journalistic texts dealing with post-truth after 2004 (Enfield, 2017; Temmerman et al., 2019). Without quoting Herman and Chomsky's *Consent*, Keyes' *Post-truth Era* also criticises the political establishment and fake stories of the mainstream media supporting the wars at the beginning of the 21st century. In the chapter 'Creative Journalism', Keyes deals with several journalists (from the *New York Times* and *USA Today*) who were making up stories throughout their careers. Paired with the similar contemporary scandals, like the case of the journalist Relotius in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* (Spiegel, 2018), this confirms an unchanged systemic property of *false standards—or rather editors' expectations—of the quality journalism* (which represents itself as the opposition to 'disinformation of social networks'). When talking about one of the journalists, Keyes emphasises:

> During two decades' time, Kelley's vivid reporting from hot spots such as Iraq, Bosnia, Chechnya, Israel, and Cuba earned him five Pulitzer Prize nominations. […] The newspaper's investigation revealed that their reporter not only fabricated material in one story after another, but, once challenged, wrote scripts for friends to follow when pretending to have been his sources" (Keyes, 2004, pp. 163–164).

Higher up the chain, the cosiness of editors of mainstream media with political, military and economic elites, and an ever growing alienation from the audiences, echoes Herman and Chomsky's *Consent* today (cf. Krüger, 2013, 2016 for the German case). The 'quality journalism' in mainstream media is therefore based on *reproduction of the stated discursive position* and not on (often too complex, not coherent and therefore unwanted) factuality. This confirms the older idea that the *post-truth apparatus of mainstream media* runs disinformation campaigns, spreads rumours, and frames facts in order to reinforce the official position (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, pp. 18–19, in detail: pp. 157–161).

Keyes' observations of online rumours show that the contemporary argumentation used to explain *the contagious* nature of fake news has not evolved significantly despite the variety of methods developed to adapt it to the online realm. For example, the rumours and mass panic spread *mostly* online as a consequence of the news about the SARS epidemic in the early 2000s (just as is the case today in the Covid19 pandemic). In other words, online rumours enhance the alarmist properties of the original news (cf. Keyes, 2004, pp. 207–209). Therefore, fact checking agencies became an important element of the post-truth apparatus in the peak of the fake news discourse having a serious impact on the political scene (Graves and Cherubini, 2016, p. 23; Brandtzaeg and Følstad, 2017b). Their assessment of the authenticity of information (Floridi, 1996), should rely on the moral and value systems of a cybercommunity (Keyes, 2004, p. 210). It should not rely on the ethics of (mainstream) news outlets in digitality (Ess, 2017; Hayes et al., 2007; Ward, 2014).

Ideological self-conceptualisation of media

In their media critique, Herman and Chomsky, Tesich, Crouch, and Keyes all concentrate on the problematic structures and fakery of mainstream and establishment media. Even though the term was used earlier, the famous 'You are fake news!' reaction to CNN journalists by the US president on during his first press conference after elections (Trump and Acosta, 2017), symbolises a new strand within the post-truth discourse. Here, a focus shift takes place, in which both terms are used by the *mainstream media* against 'others' (e.g. alt-right movement, postmodern intellectuals and/or science deniers), but also by the 'others' against mainstream media. Instead of the cynical, but hardly wrong, observation that all three sides are both right and wrong to some extent, or are practicing the post-truth logic, Farkas and Schou (2018) recognise that depending on the perspective of one's hegemonic ideology, the *other side(s)* is delegitimized by the use of fake news as a floating signifier.

This discursive change, namely, the hijacking of the post-truth concept from the left/left-liberal critical position, was completed during the 2016 US presidential race. This was possible because of the media self-conceptualisation *as an active participant of the discourse*—a proponent and defender of the democratic order, despite the intellectual media critique of being de facto conservative. In order to grasp the self-representation of the mainstream media as liberal, progressive, and democratic, which entitles them to operationalise post-truth discourse, we need to remind ourselves how the political change in the 1990s brought the new solidarity between the political and mainstream media elites. Alterman (2003), an acclaimed and explicitly liberally oriented journalist, comes (albeit from a different ideological background) to a similar conclusion about the US media of the 1990s as Herman and Chomsky did for the earlier period. The reason that the US media is *not liberal* lies in the *economic intertwining* of media houses with other corporations and their joint market interests, i.e. profit orientation. The all-for-profit

orientation is simultaneously the reason for the tabloidization of the media industry which results in the strident and over-simplified form of expression: "the viral growth of a form of "news" that owes more to sitcoms and theme parks than […] ideas of public and civic life" (Alterman, 2003, p. 24). The journalists cannot express views other than those which conform to the system because "they simply do not "make" the news" (Alterman, 2003, p. 25). In other words, what gets coverage, must pass through a complex deliberative apparatus conditioned by various interests, from economic to the political ones.[2]

As Alterman points out, political changes during the Clinton administration supported the idea that the media are liberal even though his own political views were *actually* conservative: "He supported the death penalty, "free trade," and "an end to welfare as we know it". […H]is hawkish views won him the support of right wingers […] and many hard-line neoconservatives" (Alterman, 2003, p. 17; cf. Springer et al., 2016; cf. Chomsky, 2017). He largely represented the views of the so-called *reform republicans*—politicians framing their conservative and corporation-friendly political views *in the form of liberal reforms*. The change which Clinton's 'New Democrats' brought is similar to what Blair's New Labour did in terms of masking corporation-friendly deregulation with a 'modernising', 'liberal' reform agenda.

> "It was not a matter of Blair (or New Labour) borrowing piecemeal from the New Democrats, but recognising similarities between the 'modernisers' in the two parties […] Both have selectively assimilated elements of the discourse of the new right into new political discourses that cannot however be simply seen as new right" (Fairclough, 2000, p. 68).

Simultaneously, an important part of the governing strategy, or rather *public deliberation process* was the "management of perception through 'media spin'" (Fairclough, 2000, p. 157). All these elements were endorsed as acceptable by the various media elites in their respective countries (for Germany cf. Kranert, 2019). This liberal-reform aura hiding its conservative core is what attracted media actors to the system which would later become known as neoliberal: "The percentage of elite journalists who voted […] was probably consistent with the percentage he received among all well-educated urban elite […]" (Alterman, 2003, pp. 20–21). This trend continued with the Obama administration as the positive/negative ratio of media reports on Republican and Democratic presidents clearly show (Mitchell et al., 2017).

The displayed self-conceptualisation of the urban, globally relevant mainstream media actors is openly formulated as belonging to the liberal and democratic social order. An editorial asks in its title "Is the New York Times a Liberal Newspaper?" and answers in the first sentence "Of course it is," arguing that this does not stand for biased but non-partisan journalism: "Start with the editorial page, so thoroughly saturated in liberal theology that when it occasionally strays from that point of view the shocked yelps from the left overwhelm even the ceaseless rumble of disapproval from the right" […] (Okrent, 2004). A contemporary example from the *Washington Post's* advertisement video and slogan, 'Democracy dies in darkness,' demonstrates explicitly that such self-conceptualisation has evolved over time:

> When we go off to war./When we exercise our rights./When we soar to our greatest heights./When we mourn and pray./When our neighbours are at risk./When our nation is threatened./There's someone to gather the facts. To bring you the story./No matter the cost/Because knowing empowers us./Knowing helps us decide./Knowing keeps us free (WP, 2019).[3]

This slogan, coined "long before Trump was the Republican presidential nominee" (Farhi, 2017), shows a clearly martial attitude with the goal to *mobilise* the audience. The opening visual scene is a picture of the historical D-day landing in Normandy followed by dramatic stills of several recent historical and dramatic events from American history. The second half of the clip contains pictures of various journalists killed on duty and ends with the view of the Statue of Liberty in night. Democracy here becomes identical to knowledge and media. And the Washington Post is clearly associated with *war* and put in a rather nationalistic context through many visual symbols from the army to the flag on the grave and national landmarks. The focus on these negative elements, followed by the Statue of Liberty shining in the night and the motive of a divide (conflict, we vs. them, our casualties, our heroes), imply danger and a call for action. The intended message that journalism is *in the service of the Nation* is clear regarding the self-perception of the mainstream media *as discursive actors*, but also highly ambivalent regarding the communicated values.

Fake news in social networks

"*Post-truth* is an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford, 2016). The fact that according to the Oxford English Dictionary "post-truth" was the word of the year in 2016, and, according to Collins Dictionary, fake news got this title in 2017 (Quin, 2017), confirms the appropriation of this concept by the mainstream media and its spread across the domains of public relevance. The way *how* it was reconceptualised (and recontextualised) by mainstream media is best seen in the concrete case of the fake news discourse strand on social networks (SNS)—although it could also apply to other themes. In what follows, four interrelated and overlapping topics illustrate the inconsistencies of the fake news adoption and adaption process.

The *first topic* concerns what political economy of communication calls 'digital capitalism' (Fuchs, 2015, 2017; Fuchs and Mosco, 2017), i.e. a media monetisation system which rewards attracting attention (Zajc, 2015; Krasni, 2017) regardless of the posted content. One argument for the negative view is that SNSs take the share of the mainstream media market (Watson, 2019) and that the individual SNS such as Facebook or Twitter have more regular users than any media outlet alone (Clement, 2019). Consider only the reports from 2016, the year of the discursive turn: "According to some estimates, technology groups such as Facebook and Google attract 85% of digital advertising spent in the US. Faced with such competition, Guardian revenues have failed to meet expectations despite having risen in the current financial year" (Martinson, 2016). "The internet-borne forces that are eating away at print advertising are enabling a host of faux-journalistic players to pollute the democracy with dangerously fake news items" (Rutenberg, 2016). As the neoliberal reform (which normalised freelance journalism) already forced journalists to work on many projects in order to survive and also impacting the quality of their journalism, digital capitalism has pushed this even further by rewarding attention-attracting, not truthful content.

The *second topic* concerns the critique of the role of SNS in the democratic process, i.e. their openness to *unfiltered* political influencing (Heller, 2016; Hughes, 2019; Murphy and Espinoza, 2020). Online political campaigns have been a legitimate activity since the inception of SNSs among both the Republican and Democratic parties in the US. The *New York Times* political blog *The Caucus* reported in 2007 that a conference on online political campaigning was attended by "e-advisers to the campaigns,

namely those with the Clinton, Obama and McCain operations" (The Caucus, 2007a). While in the same report we learn that the veteran of online political campaigns was McCain who started with it as early as 2000, the next article shows that Facebook was suspected to have been biased supporting Obama, but: "Legally, it hardly matters, said Kenneth Gross, an election law expert. A 2002 ruling by the Federal Election Commission excludes Web sites from restrictions on giveaways of other forms of media. 'The Internet is essentially a free-for-all,' Mr. Gross said. 'it is treated differently than any other method of communication'" (The Caucus, 2007b). The SNS system is however also open to 'alien' actors (political opponents of the establishment, alternative news outlets, human, semi-human and virtual entities such as bots,[4] foreign actors, etc.). The gatekeeper function (or *flack* in the terms of Herman and Chomsky) inherent to mainstream media, can therefore be hard to exercise online. Or as a *Guardian* article expresses it: "Before social media, the filter was provided by media companies, who acted as gatekeepers to the news and had staff trained in fact-checking and verifying information. In an age of budget cuts in traditional media, and the rise of clickbait and race-to-the-bottom journalism, standards have slipped across the board" (Solon, 2016).

One of many controversies illustrating both monetisation and unfiltered political influence, involves teenagers from the Macedonian town of Veles posting links to their fake news websites (containing content interesting for right-wing users) on Facebook in order to earn money from the ads (Subramanian, 2017). Except for the fake content, this practice resembles those of the mainstream media:

> It was a surprise when, on April 21, 2010, readers loaded the *Washington Post* homepage and discovered that their friends were on it. In a prominent box in the upper right corner—the place where any editor will tell you the eye lands first—was a feature titled Network News. Each person who visited saw a different set of links in the box—the *Washington Post* links their friends had shared on Facebook. The *Post* was letting Facebook edit its most valuable online asset: its front page. The *New York Times* soon followed suit (Pariser, 2011, p. 25).

The reason, just as with the Macedonian teenagers, was to boost online traffic for ads by engaging people through their friends' interests. Even though this targeting practice has changed since, it is still the main motor of the contemporary online attention economy. Finally, in his opinions in the *New York Times* and before that in his book *Trust me, I'm lying* (Holiday, 2018 [2012]), Ryan Holiday describes nothing less than how to conduct online campaigns of misinformation, how to spread rumours, and how to place fake news websites *for commercial purposes*. The same practice which the teenagers from Veles discovered.

Critique of SNS by emphasising the lack of content quality control, justifies the call for reintroducing the gatekeeping function (flack) and the information bottleneck as necessary for defending a democratic system from fake news threats (Herwartz, 2016; Nuspliger, 2018; Sulzberger, 2019; Tett, 2019; as often found in mainstream media, cf. Davies, 2019). This corresponds with a view that journalists are "supposed to place the facts in some political or sociological context so that the viewers have some sense of how to weigh the facts and what value to give them", as the chance of error and misinformation increases with the press of deadlines and "without the benefit of a gatekeeper" (Postman and Powers, 2008, pp. 48–49 according to Brown, 2018). At the same time, the use of social media by the journalists is replicating obsolete practices: "Technology, in this case social media, is being used in a manner that fits into the traditional gatekeeping role of journalism" (Tandoc and Vos, 2016, p. 12).

A discursive position even implicitly advocating information control (flack) and calling for a restrictive approach to unfiltered circulation of opinions is inconsistent with the idea of defending *liberal democracy* from any inner or foreign enemy. Also, tolerating fake news practices for commercial purposes and boosting the traffic for profit by integrating SNS tracking tools and thereby profiting from the very system of digital capitalism does not fit with the public outcry against the fake news on the very same SNS. These fundamental inconsistencies are paired with the following two topics in this strand.

Data-based psychological profiling, targeting, and manipulation

The third topic concerns the lack of true privacy protection as data harvesting is crucial for the quality of targeted advertising. The practice of harvesting and processing data enables social media companies to create very accurate classifications of users according to their political, economic, social and cultural preferences. Fine-grained targeted advertising based on such profiling is more precise and more lucrative than any other form of advertising (Joler, 2015a, 2015b; Joler and Petrovski, 2016a, 2016b). This leads to the *fourth topic*: the perfect user profiling raises speculations about psychological manipulation. In this context, it is important to remember that the official patent application for a technological solution for "determining personality characteristics" from online behaviour on Facebook was submitted in 2012[5] and that experiments on the effects of so-called "emotional contagion" were conducted both before and after this date. These experiments have been assessed both positively to neutral in scientific papers (Kramer et al., 2014) and negatively in the mainstream media (Booth, 2014).

The Cambridge Analytica (CA) controversy illustrates the third and fourth topic of this discourse strand. While reporting about SCL, the mother company of CA, the *Guardian* reports on these practices in a relatively neutral light: "In 2015, it secured a $750,000 contract to help NATO states counter Russian propaganda in eastern Europe" or "As more contracts rolled in, SCL attracted funding from powerful investors including Lord Marland, a trade envoy under David Cameron" (Doward and Gibbs, 2017). In general, the use of these propaganda services was not presented as problematic: "Both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton's campaigns employed behavioural profiling companies" (Doward and Gibbs, 2017). Even the fact that American billionaires helped the UKIP movement is represented in the similar way: "The US billionaire Robert Mercer—a major Trump supporter who is close friends with Bozell and the former Ukip leader Nigel Farage—was so impressed with Cambridge Analytica that he has reportedly become a major shareholder" (Doward and Gibbs, 2017). However, in the context of foreign meddling, the representation of both the practice and technology of propaganda is framed as a controversy, while the earlier "domestic" history of these activities is removed from the context.

The *Observer/Guardian* article from April 2018,[6] one month after the CA whistle-blower Christopher Wylie leaked information about CA malpractices, demonstrates this shift in focus. In the video integrated in the article, Wylie describes the wrongdoings of his company. This time, the *practice* of psychological targeting based on personal data without permission is represented as controversial. The questions of the journalist back up this position: "So, you've harvested my data and then you've used that to target me in ways that I can't see and that I don't understand?" (video, min 9.21–9.29, Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). However, in the immediate context of the video interview, the focus is on the (unfinalized) contract between CA and the Russian company Lukoil and, in the second part of the

text, on the Russian personal and academic connections of the psychologist Aleksandr Kogan (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). In other words, *the context of foreign connections* (in the text) suggests that the practice of gathering personal information for psychological programming through fake news (from the video) is problematic.

It is important to mention that the demonstrated inconsistency in such discursive positions leads to a lack of credibility in condemning the problematic practices of the psychological manipulation.[7] The representation of (CA) is well deserved and the work of scientists like Aleksandr Kogan and Michal Kosinski—who were in the focus of mainstream media as directly or indirectly involved in CA scandal but never found guilty (Mac, 2018)—should also be condemned as it leads to dystopian practices. But it was only *another example* of the well-known and often used automation of psychological research methods, microtargeting possibilities of Facebook and its commercial exploitation.

That the practices of data harvesting, psychological profiling, and manipulation through fake news were broadly represented as problematic by the mainstream media was made possible through their integration into the specific context of the fake news discourse. The discursive turn which leads to this appropriation of the post-truth concept is anchored in these inconsistencies and paradoxical positions of the mainstream media as a self-reflective actor. In other words, this strand of the fake news discourse is being used to pursue the specific discursive interests of this complex semi-autonomous actor.

Post-truth in the public intellectual field

Academics, public intellectuals, and the mainstream media are significantly contributing to the recontextualisation and reconceptualisation of the fake news and post-truth in the broad intellectual field of the West.[8] For many of them, the whole critical tradition rooted in Marxism, the leftist movement, postmodern thought, and social constructivism leads to relativisation of scientific truths, common sense, moral values and/or democracy. In other words, in this iteration of the concept, the very intellectual milieu in which post-truth was formulated as a critique of the media and political system is represented as the root of, or rather, the reason for this phenomenon. From Foucault's ideas of discourse as a programmed meaning production and the regime(s) of truth under which this very meaning making process takes place, to the idea that language defines values or reinforces the hierarchies within society—all of these get recoded by the fake news discourse as forms of *intellectual misinformation*.

As philosopher Lee McIntyre argues, the logic and core arguments of postmodern thought were adopted by right-wing populists and alt-right activists:

> "Even if right-wing politicians and other science deniers were not reading Derrida and Foucault, the germ of the idea made its way to them: science does not have a monopoly on the truth. It is therefore not unreasonable to think that right-wingers are using some of the same arguments and techniques of postmodernism to attack the truth of other scientific claims that clash with their conservative ideology" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 141).[9]

In this line of thought, the critical postmodern approach *helped* the alt-right to develop their own argumentative patterns when attacking scientific truths (e.g., flat earth), moral virtues (e.g., gender and racial tolerance), and democratic order (e.g., Brexit in UK, AfD in Germany, alt-right in the US) by relativizing truth enough to make fake news and alternative facts competitive. Such interpretations are pursued simultaneously by scholars, theorists,

and columnists from different disciplines and the mainstream media—all of whom see themselves as representing liberal and democratic values (McIntyre, 2015, 2018; cf. opinion of the philosopher Daniel Denett in an interview with Cadwalladr, 2017).

> "Call it what you want: relativism, constructivism, deconstruction, postmodernism, critique. The idea is the same: Truth is not found, but made, and making truth means exercising power. The reductive version is simpler and easier to abuse: Fact is fiction, and anything goes. It's this version of critical social theory that the populist right has seized on and that Trump has made into a powerful weapon. […] For decades, critical social scientists and humanists have chipped away at the idea of truth. We've deconstructed facts, insisted that knowledge is situated and denied the existence of objectivity" (Williams, 2017).

This line of thought in the mainstream media such as the *New York Times* puts the traditions of post-structural theory, social constructivism, and science–technology studies in the same intellectual context as the right wing politicians, their parties and think tanks,[10] and ascribes (usually implicitly, but in many cases also explicitly) the right ideology to the forerunners of critical and postmodern thought.

Simultaneously, the accusation of 'progressive' journalists pursuing a leftist ideology through fake news comes expectedly from the *conservative* point of view: "In sum, fake news is journalism's popular version of the nihilism of campus postmodernism. To progressive journalists, advancing a left-wing political agenda is important enough to justify the creation of misleading narratives and outright falsehoods to deceive the public—to justify, in other words, the creation of fake but otherwise useful news." (Hanson, 2017). The category of 'progressive journalism,' in this context, refers to the mainstream media mentioned in Hanson's article: the *New York Times*, *CNN* and *CBS*. Despite the remarks on nepotism among media elites and the practice of media spinning—"No one has described the methodology of fake news better than Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security advisor for Barack Obama and brother of the president of CBS News, David Rhodes" (Hanson, 2017)—the ideological enemy is found in the field of academia and in postmodernism. Hanson writes

> "And indeed, the fake news mindset ultimately can be traced back to the campus. Academic postmodernism derides facts and absolutes and insists that there are only narratives and interpretations that gain credence, depending on the power of the story-teller. […] The work of French postmodernists—such as Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida that mesmerised academics in the 1980s with rehashed Nietzschean banalities about the absence of facts and the primacy of interpretation—has now been filtered by the media to a nationwide audience" (Hanson, 2017).

These views are reinforcing those of the conservative intellectual Robert Curry who sees leftist ideas—and postmodern thought—as opposed to common sense which according to him is the central element of the American political identity (Curry, 2015, 2019). One of the points he makes is that the premises and principles of postmodernism are different than the "self-evident truths of Jefferson and the Founders, and these ideas would not have made sense even to Woodrow Wilson" (Curry, 2015, p. 149). An example of one of the problematic points that he views as self-contradictory, is the claim that: "Values are subjective—but sexism and racism are really evil" (Curry, 2015).

The popular public intellectual Jordan Peterson follows this path in his famous self-help book *12 Rules for Life*. Spanning only

a few pages, he makes a large argumentative leap from Marx and crimes of the Soviet regime in Russia (based on Solzhenitsyn's descriptions), to the fact that Khmer Rouge leader, Khieu "Samphan's ideas were favourably looked upon by the French intellectuals who granted him his Ph.D." (Peterson, 2018, pp. 301–307). This moral disqualification of what he calls the "leftist ideology" (disregarding the complicated history of the leftist movement as a complex of various, often mutually incompatible schools) serves only to introduce Peterson's critique of Derrida: (a) he does not distance himself from Marx after learning about Soviet atrocities, (b) he substitutes "the idea of power for the idea of money", (c) he dismisses hierarchical structures (Peterson, 2018, p. 305), (d) he conflates language itself as a means of oppression and exclusion, and (e) he opens up everything for interpretation including scientific truth through his radical view summed up in the assertion 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte' (Peterson, 2018, p. 306). Peterson's conclusion against Derrida is

> "science is just another game of power, for Derrida and his post-modern Marxist acolytes, making claims to benefit those at the pinnacle of the scientific world. There are no facts. Hierarchical position and reputation as a consequence of skill and competence? All definitions of skill and of competence are merely made up by those who benefit from them, to exclude the others, and to benefit personally and selfishly. […] Although the facts cannot speak for themselves […] that does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Some hurt—yourself and others" (Peterson, 2018, pp. 306–307).

In other words, the freedom of interpretation is problematic, and restrictions based on skill and competence—the proper expertise—should be set on this freedom, a claim he sees postmodernism as opposing. Peterson accuses the left and postmodern thought for science denial in the same manner as McIntyre attacks social constructivism (cf. McIntyre, 2018, pp. 141–148). Both are trying to prove that the post-truth phenomenon is the *consequence* of the left postmodern tradition, whose representatives first identified the very phenomenon.

All the mentioned voices, from mainstream media to the liberal and conservative intellectual fields, represent the tenor of public opinion on post-truth as the offspring of postmodern thought and a case of yet another discursive change and hijack of this concept. Defaming poststructuralism and social constructivism by using contemporary fake news alarmism supports the existing threat of shutting down specific schools of the social sciences and humanities, as is the case with gender studies programmes in central Europe (Oppenheim, 2018). While the manipulation of core arguments of post-modernism by the right-wing propagandists may be bad, it is *not* the responsibility of post-modern philosophers nor do such acts prove that the theories themselves are wrong. One should defend the obvious fact that both moral values and truth—as well as scientific truth—are constructed or at least that their production depends on multiple factors and is rarely simple (cf. interview with Bruno Latour in Kofman, 2018). It is discourse theory which reveals how in the course of history the meaning making processes and notions of scientific truth change depending on the construction which elevates the level of scientific knowledge. Just as the mainstream media columnists were convinced of the 'truth' of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in the early 2000s, or the British press was convinced in soap produced from human flesh during the First World War (Neander and Marlin, 2010), or German media audiences were convinced in scientific proofs that Jews, Slavs, and other races or nations are different and therefore less worthy, such is the alarmist tendency of the *emotion based persuasion* in the mainstream media against postmodern and critical thought as the alleged carriers of the post-truth logic.

The common point of critique of all the actors mentioned here is based on defending the truth from the left or postmodernism. We see that liberal and mainstream media perspective defends scientific truth, the conservative perspective stands for common sense, and the popular conservative intellectual fights for merit-based expertise against the antipode of leftist, postmodern, or constructivist thought. However, it is wrong to use common sense, expert-based claims, or scientific truth as an ideological tool in the fight against the theories of the *social sciences*. The need to *search for the alternative*, inherent to the postmodern tradition of social sciences, is being ridiculed by reducing it to scandals such as the famous Sokal experiment (Sokal and Bricmont, 2003; cf. Angermuller, 2018). The idea of finding alternatives to mainstream sources both in science and in political values represents the essence of any counterhegemonic discourse opposing the 'there is no alternative' doctrine. However, *this very idea* is delegitimised by the constant alarm about the risks of a post-truth era.

Conclusion

The archaeology of the concept *post-truth* reveals a whole odyssey of discursive turns in the three decades of its existence. Now, as much as at the time of its inception, the meaning remains the same insofar as it still denotes indignation to lies and emotional orchestration of the (represented) public opinion in support of obvious wrongdoing. However, in its various iterations, the concept which started as a critique of the media establishment from an intellectual left position, was eventually turned against the very milieu it originated from.

Displayed indignation over fake news is the point of departure for the use of the post-truth concept in the form of fake news critique after 2016. The mainstream media, as an institutional and discursive actor (complex and therefore heterogeneous) conceptualises itself as an ideological adversary to post-truth logic and its carriers. However, being originally the very object of the critique formulated through the post-truth concept, it seems hypocritical when mainstream media massively applies the term post-truth, when it identifies itself with democracy, or when it recognises danger for democracy in social networks—without acknowledging and addressing the points of the original critique. Given the background of the concept in media critique and the history of interconnectedness with social networks and shared problematic practices, the mainstream media as a systemic actor deserves to be seen in light of the interests it itself pursues within the discourse. That the term fake news is an operationalised form of the post-truth concept used regardless of the domain of public relevance (from politics and media to science and technology) is therefore just an expression of the discursive struggle in which this actor is engaged. On an individual level, brave investigative journalists who see for example Facebook as a threat to democracy (Cadwalladr, 2019) certainly have a point. At the same time, they are misled to condemn the malpractice *only* when it is too late (after it has stopped being a standard practice of their own institution), or only after it can be brought into connection with a mobilising external threat.

By arguing that postmodern thought drives post-truth logic, this broad consortium of mainstream media, right-wing, conservative, and liberal intellectuals is pursuing essentialist, emotion-based argumentation and mixing the construction of scientific method with moral values and ethics. The basic flaw in their line of thought is that the construction does not allow one to take a stance about the truthfulness of the findings or about the righteousness of the moral value. Finally, it is the methods of poststructuralism that can help maintain healthy criticism of these social actors which will hardly ever change their roles and positions of power in society but will preserve the logic of post-truth discourse.

Data availability

The author confirms that all data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article. Furthermore, primary and secondary sources and data supporting the findings of this study were all publicly available at the time of submission.

Notes

1. One could argue that the contemporary fake news mainstream discourse starts at the very moment when these filters show themselves as ineffective in the digital era.
2. This process should *not be mixed* with censorship.
3. Because of lack of permission, the stills cannot be shown here. Please see the original at the website of the Washington Post.
4. As the topic of bots is very broad, this paper will not be dealing with it. For further reading see Krasni et al. (2016).
5. See more about this patent on the Google Patents: https://patents.google.com/patent/US8825764B2/en (24.3.2020).
6. We did not receive the permission to show the webpage here. Please visit the website of the article to see the object of analysis. Only two sentences explicitly connect the video with the text.
7. This inconsistency has been significantly repaired in the later articles and in the page dedicated to CA scandal (https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files (15.5.2020)), even though the first mentioned article is not included there. The later texts are more focused on the malpractice of psychological manipulation. The same journalists were involved in the very informative portal on global activities of SCL and Cambridge Analytica https://www.propagandamachine.tech/ca-map (15.5.2020).
8. The main problem of this section is focus on anglophone intellectuals. However, their standpoints seem to be representative for a large portion of the Western intellectual field. Any quantitative study to counter the insights of this section would be more than welcome.
9. McIntyre devotes three books and several articles to science deniers and post-truth issues—all of which see postmodernism as the 'root of all evil'. His book *Post-Truth* (McIntyre, 2018) offers arguments anchored in self-critical quotes by Bruno Latour and biographic details of alt-right activists which seem to support such a position. However, whereas Latour's self-critique is interpreted rather freely (which is the author's right to do), the responsibility of dead philosophers for sophist hijacking of their thoughts by alt-right personalities can hardly be taken as a convincing argument.
10. For example, Steven Lukes, a renowned sociologist and political scientist, devoted his workshop at the University of Lucerne in September 2018 to the problem of post-truth. He openly criticised constructivism and Foucault's idea of regimes of truth and insisted that the truth disseminated through the mainstream media is acceptable. Even though the lecture was dealing with the concept of post-truth, the main topic of his lecture was reduced to the US administration—a rather subcomplex representation of such a complex phenomenon. This represents yet another example of discourse hijack by a politically partisan prominent liberal scholar.

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Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Additional information

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