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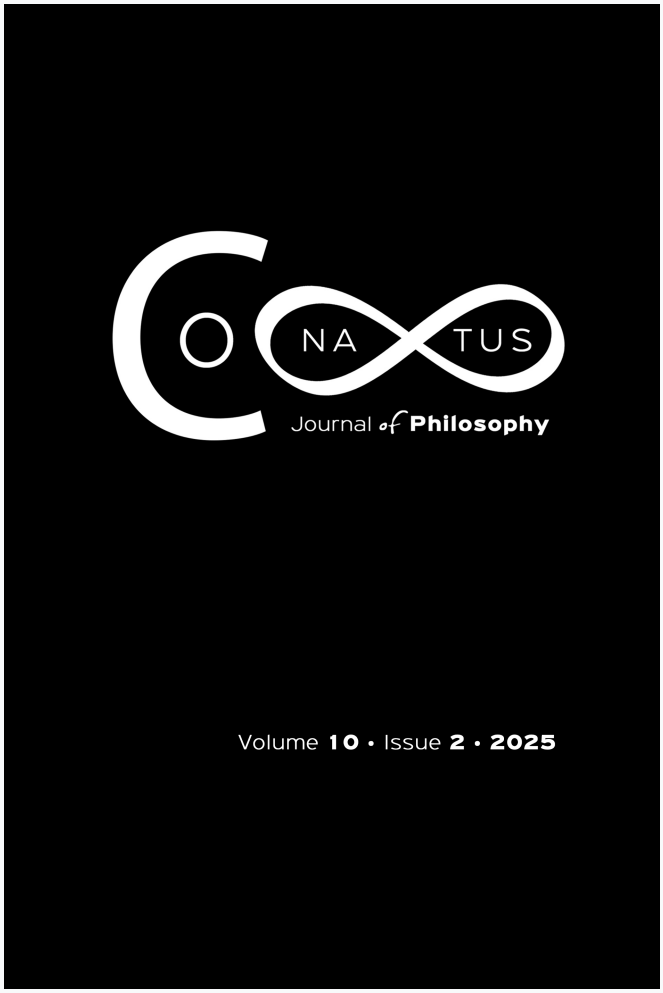

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The Fragility of Truth: Skimming through Noise and Bias in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract

In today's society, where false information is widely spread and noise makes accurate information elusive, the concept of truth faces constant assault. This situation emphasizes the harm caused by disinformation and underscores the necessity for individuals to develop critical thinking skills to navigate through the sea of misleading noise. The present paper also explores the phenomenon of "post-truth," where subjective opinions and feelings often override objective facts, significantly influencing people's reactions. Furthermore, this investigation sheds light on the intricate relationship between information credibility and public perception by examining the decline of trust in scientific discoveries and the subsequent emergence of fact-checkers as a response to the erosion of factual information's trustworthiness.

Keywords: *post-truth; bullshit; disinformation; truth; noise*

I. Introduction

The concept of truth is the subject of extensive philosophical debate, which has led to the formation of various theories. Among the most prominent are correspondence theory, coherence theory, deflationary theory, and pragmatic theory. It is worth noting that this topic remains an area of intense research in the current context, where the value of truth is under fierce attack. This paper aims

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to bring multiple perspectives to the fore, particularly through the lens of disinformation, stressing the importance of developing the necessary skills to better defend against all aspects of noise. The relationship between factual incorrectness and conspiratorial thinking requires careful epistemological consideration. Noise refers to anything that is factually incorrect, malicious, or conspiratorial. However, the term 'conspiratorial' here warrants a nuanced understanding. As Dentith demonstrates, treating conspiracy theories as a monolithic category oversimplifies their epistemic status, arguing instead that evaluative criteria should serve as useful guidelines or considerations for the appraising of particular conspiracy theories.[1] In contrast, Boudry and Napolitano specifically reject the particularism distinction that Dentith employs and adopt the term 'conspiracy theory' as having a pejorative sense, whereas Dentith opts for a minimal definition. Despite these differences in approach, both perspectives highlight the importance of examining the evidential foundations of conspiracy claims. In this context, 'conspiratorial' specifically refers to claims that lack sufficient evidential support or methodological rigor, rather than any claim involving conspiracy, as some conspiracy claims are well-documented and evidentially supported.[2]

This present paper argues that effectively combating disinformation requires a multidimensional approach that integrates both epistemological and psychological insights. By examining the interplay between bullshit receptivity, noise in judgment, and the emotional appeal of conspiracy theories, the paper argues that current fact-checking approaches alone are insufficient, but nevertheless, one can have the liberty to assess claims based on factual information without being called a modern inquisitor. Instead, countering disinformation requires addressing three distinct but interconnected dimensions: cognitive biases in information processing, the role of emotional resonance in belief formation, and the social-linguistic mechanisms that enable misinformation to spread. Recent discourse positioning fact-checking as a form of censorship fundamentally misapprehends the epistemological function of verification in public discourse. This paper does not advocate for an unequivocal defense of fact-checkers, but rather seeks to situate fact-checking within its proper epistemic context. It is particularly noteworthy that free speech absolutists who defend the propa-

[1] Matthew R. X. Dentith, "Some Conspiracy Theories," *Social Epistemology* 37, no. 4 (2023): 526-530.

[2] Matthew R. X. Dentith and Melina Tsapos, "Why We Should Talk about Generalism and Particularism: A Reply to Boudry and Napolitano," *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 13, no. 10 (2024): 57.

gation of climate change denial as an exercise of free expression often object to independent fact-checking organizations providing contextual labels and empirical data.[3] This represents a striking logical inconsistency: if the free marketplace of ideas is to function effectively, then the provision of additional context and verifiable data should be welcomed as an enhancement of discourse rather than condemned as suppression. The crux of the matter lies not in whether fact-checking should exist, but in understanding its role as an epistemic tool that enriches rather than constrains public debate.

The crisis of contemporary public discourse around disinformation must be understood through Habermas's foundational analysis of the public sphere's structural transformation. Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere emerged as "the sphere of private people come together as a public,"[4] characterized by rational-critical debate rather than the representation of power. This ideal of reasoned discourse provides a crucial framework for understanding current epistemic challenges. The deterioration of public discourse that Habermas identifies begins with what he terms the "re-feudalization" of the public sphere.[5] In this process, private interests increasingly colonize public debate, transforming citizens from active participants into passive consumers. Particularly relevant to current disinformation challenges is his observation that "critical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity."[6] where the goal becomes manufacturing consent rather than facilitating genuine debate. Habermas's analysis of how public discussion has become a consumer good[7] precisely anticipates our current crisis, where algorithmically-driven social media platforms optimize for engagement rather than truth. His critique of how "rational-critical debate has a tendency to be replaced by consumption"[8] speaks directly to how disinformation spreads in today's digital ecosystem. Most crucially for the present paper's analysis, Habermas describes how the commercial-

[3] Wudan Yan, "Încălzirea Globală, Pusă Pe Seama Unor Evenimente Climatice Din Trecut – Dezinformările Din Social Media," *Factual*, July 21, 2022, https://factual.ro/dezinformare/dezinformare-incalzirea-globala-pusa-pe-seama-unor-evenimente-climatice-din-trecut/. This case study from Romania illustrates how a TV presenter repeatedly challenged fact-checkers by making science denial claims regarding climate change.

[4] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (MIT Press, 1994).

[5] Ibid., 195.

[6] Ibid., 178.

[7] Ibid., 164.

[8] Ibid., 161.

ization of the press led to a situation where "the public sphere becomes the court before whose public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which public critical debate is carried on."[9] This transformation maps directly onto current tensions around fact-checking, where the performance of truth-telling often supersedes genuine epistemic inquiry.

However, Habermas's account also suggests potential remedies. His description of the original coffee houses and salons as spaces where "private people come together as a public"[10] through the "parity of 'common humanity'"[11] offers a model for how fact-checking might be reconceptualized: not as authoritative pronouncement, but as part of a broader project of collaborative truth-seeking. This connects to his emphasis on how the early bourgeois public sphere was characterized by "people's public use of their reason."[12] In our contemporary context, fact-checking could be understood not as censorship but as facilitating exactly this kind of reasoned public discourse, providing the shared epistemic foundation necessary for meaningful debate. The challenge, as Habermas notes, is that "the public sphere with which the eighteenth century had begun started to come apart at the seams"[13] as it expanded. This tension between inclusivity and the maintenance of critical standards remains central to current debates about disinformation and fact-checking.

II. Knowledge, manipulation, and the battle for truth

Knowledge is powerful. In 1504, Christopher Columbus was stranded in Jamaica on his fourth trans-Atlantic voyage. Stranded by running out of supplies along with his crew and two ships. Knowing that some of his men were coming to help him, but lacking resources, he had to find a way to stall for time. Columbus, being scientifically literate, carried with him astronomical tables indicating that a lunar eclipse was coming. Taking advantage of the knowledge he possessed and aware that the natives did not have access to his knowledge, Columbus resorted to manipulation. He told the natives that his God would darken the moon. The natives laughed at first, but when the eclipse began, they reconsidered their decision. Columbus retreated to his cabin to nego-

[9] Ibid., 201.

[10] Ibid., 27.

[11] Ibid., 36.

[12] Ibid., 27.

[13] Ibid., 141.

tiate with his God, and after the eclipse was over, the natives were convinced of his powers and offered him everything they needed until their rescue.[14]

The natives were victims of a hoax. Although this example seems far-fetched, it is relevant to the times we live in. Various protagonists choose to misinform the public, not out of a lack of knowledge but rather out of a lack of conscience, pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of the common good. This illustrates a broader phenomenon that Stamatiadis-Bréhier terms "second-order conspiracies" (SOCs), where certain actors deliberately conspire to create and disseminate conspiracy theories for specific ends. As he defines it, "a conspiracy C is a second-order conspiracy of conspiracy theory T if C is, in some important way, the reason why T exists."[15] This framework helps us understand how deliberate misinformation campaigns operate systematically rather than emerging spontaneously. Particularly relevant are what Stamatiadis-Bréhier calls "denial industries," which create and spread conspiracy theories for monetary gain, such as the anti-vaccine industry's multimillion-dollar ecosystem of companies that profit both from spreading vaccine hesitancy and selling "solutions" to manufactured problems. The genealogical approach proposed by Stamatiadis-Bréhier for evaluating conspiracy theories suggests examining their origins rather than just their content, as this reveals the deliberate nature of their creation and the self-interested motivations behind them. This framework demonstrates how hoaxes and misinformation campaigns are often not simply matters of misunderstanding or genuine belief, but rather calculated efforts by actors who, "not out of lack of knowledge but rather out of lack of conscience," pursue their interests at the expense of truth and public good. The sophistication of these operations is evident in their comprehensive approach, spanning multiple media channels, creating seemingly independent but connected organizations, and strategically undermining legitimate expertise – all while maintaining plausible deniability about their coordinated nature.[16] A second-order conspiracy refers to a deliberate effort to create and disseminate conspiracy theories, with two key aspects: (1) it can generate either single or multiple conspiracy theories, and (2) it involves a designed, methodical process of creation and distribution. The text uses two examples: anti-vaccine groups creating vaccine-re-

[14] William F. Rigge, "The Columbus Eclipse," *Popular Astronomy* 31, no. 506 (1923): 506.

[15] Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, "Genealogical Undermining for Conspiracy Theories," *Inquiry* (2023): 1-27, 3.

[16] Ibid., 3-5.

lated conspiracies and fossil fuel industries fabricating climate change denial theories. Both employ sophisticated techniques like "repackaging," where the same conspiracy is tailored for different audiences – such as presenting mRNA vaccine conspiracies differently to Black communities versus prospective mothers, or how climate change denial narratives have evolved from complete denial to questioning human responsibility.[17]

The Columbus example parallels what Keeley identifies as "conspiracy politics" rather than genuine conspiracy theory. Like Alex Jones, Columbus knowingly manipulated beliefs not to explain reality, but to achieve specific goals (in his case, survival). This aligns with Keeley's distinction between conspiracy theorists, who genuinely seek explanations, and those who engage in deceptive manipulation for personal gain. Keeley's framework helps distinguish between:

1. Genuine conspiracy theorists investigating real concerns (like Watergate).
2. "Conspiracy liars" who knowingly spread false information for profit/influence.
3. "Bullshitters" who are indifferent to truth and focused on manipulation.

This maps onto Stamatiadis-Bréhier's concept of "second-order conspiracies" – both identify systematic manipulation by actors who understand the truth but choose deception for personal gain. The "denial industries" that Stamatiadis-Bréhier describes match Keeley's analysis of conspiracy politics aimed at undermining trust and creating chaos for profit.

The key insight combining both perspectives is that the most dangerous actors aren't misguided conspiracy theorists, but rather knowledgeable manipulators who, like Columbus, exploit information asymmetries for personal advantage while undermining public trust. This helps explain why examining the origins and motivations behind conspiracy claims, rather than just their content, is crucial for understanding their true nature and impact.[18]

Today, we live in a system where relativity often trumps reality. While it is true that data can be selectively presented to support various narratives, this does not mean that truth itself is unattainable or

[17] Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, "The Power of Second-Order Conspiracies," *Inquiry* 68, no. 8 (2024): 2633-2634.

[18] Brian L. Keeley, "Conspiracy Theorists Are Not the Problem; Conspiracy Liars Are," *Inquiry* 68, no. 8 (2024): 2753-2762.

irrelevant. Rather, it underscores the importance of methodological rigor, transparency, and verification in data interpretation. Being 'pro-truth' entails recognizing these challenges and striving to mitigate them through critical inquiry and evidence-based reasoning, rather than succumbing to radical skepticism. As D' Ancona argues, in the post-truth era, the credibility of a statement hinges more on its emotional appeal than on factual accuracy.[19] Let us start with the surrealist painter René Magritte's "The Treachery of Images." In the painting, we obviously see a representation of a pipe accompanied by the text *"Ceci n' est pas une pipe."* Thus, we have a representation of a familiar and easily identifiable object and a text that contradicts our actual knowledge of what we instantly identify as a pipe. According to one perspective, Magritte's work resembles the saussurean linguistic, where words are not in direct reference to things.[20] As put in the book *This is not a Pipe*, "the painter's images do not really 'resemble' anything whose sovereign presence would lend it the aspect of a model or origin."[21] This perspective criticizes the concept of resemblance by considering that when a thing resembles another thing, the latter "is somehow ontologically superior [...], more 'real' than the former."[22] Thus, the conventional idea of representation and the notion of a singular objective reality are undermined. Reality is not entirely fixed, as social conventions play a significant role in shaping aspects of our world. For instance, concepts like money, legal systems, and language exist primarily due to social agreement. However, this does not imply that all aspects of reality are purely conventional. Certain fundamental truths – such as gravity, mathematical principles, and biological processes – exist independently of human perception. Even in cases where social and objective factors interact, such as time measurement or economic markets, there remain underlying physical or structural constraints that conventions cannot override. Thus, while social conventions shape much of our lived experience, not everything is reducible to them. Michel Foucault expresses the following about the writing that accompanies the painting, which clearly represents a pipe: "Take me for what I manifestly am – letters placed beside one another, arranged and shaped so as to facilitate reading, assure recognition, and open themselves even to the most

[19] Matthew D' Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (Ebury Press, 2017), 53.

[20] Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. and ed. James Harkness (University of California Press, 1983), 7-8.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

stammering schoolboy. I do not claim to swell, then stretch, becoming first the bowl, then the stem of the pipe. I am no more than the words you are now reading."[23] Thus, one can understand from this statement that on some level the text of the painting is right; what we see is not a pipe but only the visual representation of it, which is an insistence on symbolism in the context of the physical world.

The tension between representation and reality that Magritte and Foucault explore takes on new urgency in our contemporary media landscape. The painting's declaration that 'this is not a pipe' beneath an unmistakable image of one reveals a fundamental truth about representation that becomes crucial for understanding modern disinformation: the gap between sign and referent can be exploited while maintaining technical truth. Just as Foucault notes that the text speaks truth on one level (these are indeed just marks on canvas), sophisticated disinformation often operates in this liminal space between representation and reality. When the text asserts 'I am no more than the words you are now reading,' it highlights how representations can simultaneously tell truth and mislead – a dynamic that characterizes much of modern media manipulation. This self-referential commentary on representation anticipates how contemporary disinformation requires us to question not just individual claims, but the very nature of how meaning and truth are constructed through media. Thus, the painting's paradox illuminates not just philosophical questions about representation, but practical challenges in navigating an information environment where the relationship between signs and reality is increasingly complex and deliberately manipulated.

III. Considerations on bullshit – or everything against truth

Harry Frankfurt describes our culture as one rife with what we colloquially call bullshit, to which the author argues we all contribute.[24] Frankfurt's work draws attention to the insincere discourse in our contemporary society. Take political communication, for instance, which is often laden with what can be lumped under the umbrella of bullshit. A politician running for office may come up with a revolutionary promise like health care reform. It is, of course, a worthy goal to pursue, but without a strategy, these words turn into deception, part of disingenuous communication. Another example of where we run into such hollow rhetoric comes from the advertising field, from anti-aging skin care creams to deals that trig-

[23] Ibid., 25.

[24] Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

ger in us FOMO (fear of missing out) by using the terms of a limited offer or exclusive deal, all warrant bullshit. This phenomenon parallels what we observe in the realm of conspiracy theory entrepreneurship, where certain individuals have transformed the dissemination of alternative narratives into profitable business ventures. As Harambam demonstrates, prominent figures like Alex Jones and David Icke have successfully monetized conspiracy theories through multiple channels, including books, documentaries, websites, and even merchandise.[25] Their business model extends beyond mere content creation to include "shops that sell, besides their own videos and books, many different products, mostly in the realm of alternative healing and food supplements."[26] This commercialization of conspiracy theories reveals how entrepreneurial figures can capitalize on people's search for hidden truths, much like how advertisers exploit consumers' insecurities and fears.

As Frankfurt argues, bullshit is differentiated from lying, which involves intentionally stating something false, by the fact that it creates a facade that can be devoid of any meaningful content.[27] Bullshit does not necessarily focus on the accuracy or truthfulness of the information, but on the appearance of authenticity or importance of the subject. Thus, for Frankfurt, the lack of authenticity is worse than falsehood. Through bullshit, you can mislead by pretending to cover important but unfounded information. The emphasis is mostly on persuasion. Frankfurt's seminal distinction between bullshit and lying turns on the former's fundamental indifference to truth. For him, bullshit is not simply falsehood but a performative act, one that disregards the truth-value of its claims in favor of constructing a facade of authenticity.[28] Bullshit, in this sense, is not concerned with deception per se but with persuasion, often leveraging emotional resonance over factual rigor. This framework aptly captures how politicians, influencers, and media personalities weaponize ambiguity to manufacture credibility.[29] However, while Frankfurt's account illuminates individual speech acts, it fails to account for the systemic evolution of bullshit – a phenomenon that has become especially pervasive in digitally mediated societies.

To bridge this gap, contemporary philosophers have expanded Frankfurt's theory to incorporate structural, ethical, and epistemic di-

[25] Jaron Harambam, "Conspiracy Theory Entrepreneurs, Movements and Individuals," in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, eds. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (Routledge, 2020), 280.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Frankfurt, 47.

[28] Ibid., 33

[29] Ibid., 56.

mensions of misinformation. A key limitation of Frankfurt's model is its focus on individual intent, which overlooks how digital platforms incentivize bullshit as a collective practice. As Nguyen argues, social media transforms bullshit into epistemic pollution: users are not rewarded for truthfulness but for maximizing engagement, often through sensationalism or moral grandstanding.[30] Unlike Frankfurt's solitary bullshitter, algorithmic platforms foster echo chambers in which epistemically unreliable claims circulate unchecked, further detaching public discourse from truth-seeking.[31] This structural dimension amplifies bullshit's harm, making disinformation the norm rather than an aberration. Beyond digital platforms, Frankfurt's theory also neglects the social mechanisms that legitimize bullshit. O'Connor and Weatherall illustrate how false beliefs often spread not through individual malice but through epistemic network failures – for instance, through institutional distrust or partisan clustering.[32] Consider, for example, the persistence of anti-vaccine rhetoric. Its traction does not stem solely from the mendacity of its proponents but from a broader crisis of credibility, in which scientific institutions are framed as untrustworthy. This epistemic breakdown creates fertile ground for bullshit to masquerade as alternative expertise.[33] In this light, bullshit is not merely a matter of individual bad faith but a product of structural epistemic erosion – a dimension that Frankfurt's individualistic framework fails to capture.

Frankfurt also treats bullshit as an issue of moral negligence, a stance that Seana Shiffrin complicates by distinguishing deception (intentional lying) from misleading (a careless disregard for truth).[34] On Frankfurt's terms, bullshit often falls into the latter category. However, as Shiffrin argues, misleading speech can be equally corrosive, for it exploits the audience's implicit trust in the norms of communication. A politician, for instance, may evade direct questions with vague, impassioned rhetoric, without outright lying. While this may not involve an intent to deceive, it nevertheless degrades democratic deliberation by normalizing vacuous discourse. This reframing shifts the ethical analysis of bullshit from a failure of individual integrity to a broader collapse of communicative responsibility.

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[30] C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 151.

[31] Ibid., 13-15.

[32] Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* (Yale University Press, 2019), 73-75.

[33] Ibid., 132.

[34] Seana Valentine Shiffrin, *Speech Matters: On Lying, Morality, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 135.

Moreover, Frankfurt's analysis is curiously apolitical, overlooking the unequal distribution of bullshit's harms. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice, we can see how bullshit disproportionately targets marginalized groups by preying on existing epistemic inequities.[35] Take, for example, the proliferation of medical misinformation in Black and Hispanic communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to historical marginalization from healthcare institutions, bullshit claims often appeared more credible than expert guidance, reinforcing cycles of epistemic disenfranchisement. This dimension – the way bullshit weaponizes preexisting structures of oppression – remains absent in Frankfurt's analysis. Finally, Quassim Cassam challenges Frankfurt's implicit emphasis on individual blame, arguing instead that systemic misinformation arises from collective epistemic vices – such as institutional laziness or societal gullibility.[36] While Frankfurt focuses on the bullshitter as an isolated agent, Cassam highlights how bullshit's success depends on an audience conditioned to value emotional appeal over critical scrutiny. For instance, clickbait journalism flourishes not merely because writers generate it, but because readers reward it, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of epistemic decay. In this view, the challenge is not merely to condemn bullshitters but to interrogate our own complicity in the structures that sustain them.

Thus, while Frankfurt's framework offers a compelling starting point for understanding bullshit, it remains insufficient in an era where misinformation is not merely an individual act but a structurally embedded practice. By expanding the analysis to include digital incentives, epistemic networks, and structural inequities, contemporary theorists expose bullshit's deeper social, ethical, and epistemic entanglements – a shift that demands not just a critique of the bullshitter, but a reckoning with the conditions that make bullshit so dangerously effective.

There have been recent attempts to explain empirically what bullshit is and what makes people fall prey to it. One study suggests that there may be a common psychological factor or factors that link receptivity or susceptibility to accepting various types of bullshit. It mentions pseudo-profound bullshit, which consists of abstract buzzwords arranged randomly in a sentence, and fake news headlines, which lack concern for the truth. Despite their differences, both can be categorized as bullshit. The study found that individuals who rated

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[35] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 44-49.

[36] Quassim Cassam, *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 89-95.

random bullshit sentences as profound were more likely to perceive fake news as accurate.[37] This suggests a positive correlation between the propensity to accept different types of bullshit and the perception of fake news accuracy. The term "fake news" is widely used in public discourse, but it remains a subject of academic debate, with scholars such as Habgood-Coote (2019) arguing that it is an imprecise and problematic concept. Nevertheless, in this study, we use the term as it aligns with common usage in media research and public understanding, while recognizing its contested nature.[38] However, the passage also highlights that prototypically profound (non-bullshit) sentences did not consistently correlate with judgments of fake news accuracy when controlling for bullshit receptivity. This suggests that the ability to detect bullshit is distinct from the capacity or willingness to think analytically. In other words, some individuals may be better at identifying bullshit, even if they are not necessarily highly analytical thinkers. Furthermore, the study found a strong positive association between over claiming (indicating prior knowledge about fabricated historical names, events, and topics in the physical sciences) and perceptions of fake news accuracy.[39]

Author Daniel Kahneman and colleagues offer the following perspective: "to understand error in judgment, we must understand both bias and noise."[40] Hence, they introduce a sensitive point, especially in our contemporary society – namely, noise. This perspective comes in a context where bias is always brought up when a decision may turn out to be wrong, but our judgment is also significantly affected by the surrounding noise. To illustrate what noise means, the authors come up with some real-life examples, such as medicine, particularly psychiatry, where subjective judgments are involved. At the same time, noise is also found in the field of radiology, where X-ray interpretation should be much more objective. Other examples extend to the decision on whether to grant asylum to a person who wants to move to the United States, job interviews and even forensic science, all of which are in one

[37] Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, "Who Falls for Fake News? The Roles of Bullshit Receptivity, Overclaiming, Familiarity, and Analytic Thinking," *Journal of Personality* 88, no. 2 (2019): 190-191.

[38] Joshua Habgood-Coote, "Stop Talking about Fake News!" *Inquiry* 62, nos. 9-10 (2018): 1041-1046.

[39] Pennycook and Rand, 190-191.

[40] Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony, and Cass R. Sunstein, *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment* (Little, Brown Spark, 2021), 12.

way or another tainted by noise.[41] Reflecting on these considerations, it becomes clear that combating bullshit and pursuing truth require both individual discernment and a collective commitment to honesty and authenticity. We must cultivate our ability to identify and reject bullshit, while also recognizing the impact of noise on our judgment. By valuing truth over manipulation and striving to reduce noise in our decision-making processes, we can contribute to a society that upholds the importance of genuine communication and accurate information.

IV. Post-truth and the current paradigm

The problem of countering disinformation poses a philosophical burden, one could argue. Not only because it requires answering some important questions such as what is truth, how can we determine what is a reliable source, and what are the criteria for establishing validity in information, questions that concern ethics and epistemology. Another reason is that, for a fact-checker or for people trying to counter this harmful phenomenon, this task seems like a *Sisyphean* task; for every lie debunked, ten others appear in its place. The issue of hostile epistemology[42] and extreme skepticism and absurdism raises legitimate concerns about the credibility of fact-checking, particularly in environments where misinformation thrives. As Brian Keeley puts it, a conspiracy theorist embraces hyperskepticism, assuming large-scale deception by institutions, rather than accepting a world that appears irrational and meaningless.[43] This epistemological tension helps explain why unfalsifiable conspiracy theories persist – until a viable third option emerges, they will likely remain influential. In this light, fact-checking efforts risk being dismissed as part of the very dissimulation they seek to counter, as seen in cases like Joseph Mercola's use of the fact-checking template to spread anti-vaccine misinformation. Moreover, as seen in cases like Joseph Mercola's anti-vaccine rhetoric, fact-checking methods can be co-opted to undermine legitimate scientific consensus. This highlights the need for safeguards that ensure fact-checking remains a transparent and objective process.

One approach to addressing this challenge is ethical self-regulation, as seen in journalism. Organizations like the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) set clear guidelines to minimize bias and ensure

[41] Ibid., 13-14.

[42] C. Thi Nguyen, "Hostile Epistemology," *Social Philosophy Today* 39 (2023): 11-15.

[43] Brian L. Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (1999): 125-126.

methodological rigor. A key principle is that every fact-check should be replicable – a genuine fact-checker lays out the claims being assessed, the sources consulted, and the verification process so that any reader can independently reach the same conclusion. Transparency in methodology serves as the ultimate accountability mechanism, distinguishing genuine verification efforts from manipulative uses of the fact-checking format.

The emergence of 'post-truth' as a defining characteristic of contemporary discourse reflects a profound transformation in how societies negotiate the relationship between fact and belief. While Oxford Dictionaries' recognition of 'post-truth' as 2016's Word of the Year marked its lexical ascendance, this phenomenon transcends mere terminological novelty.[44] Scholars including Lee McIntyre and Steve Fuller situate this epistemic shift within broader philosophical and sociological frameworks. McIntyre posits that post-truth represents not merely an isolated cultural tendency, but rather a systematic degradation of institutional authority and expert knowledge, fundamentally accelerated by the fractured information landscapes of digital media.[45] Fuller's analysis extends this perspective by illuminating how postmodern skepticism toward objective truth claims has been appropriated and repurposed within contemporary populist movements, transforming theoretical critiques of epistemological certainty into powerful tools of political mobilization.[46] The responses of people in different scenarios are therefore influenced more by emotions and personal beliefs than by objective facts. To illustrate how the post-truth burden works, let us consider some examples. We can find personal beliefs when it comes to climate change denial, where, despite scientific evidence pointing to anthropogenic causes, a significant part of the population remains skeptical about the impact humans have on climate change. In this case, personal beliefs play a more important role than scientific consensus.

Lee McIntyre surveys the 'post-truth' in his book, where he describes this phenomenon in which objective facts are disregarded. This trend stems from the fact that there is an increase in non-experts who question or disagree with scientific findings. Scientific results that go through a rigorous routine are therefore criticized by a growing group of people. It is important to mention that scientific results are constantly under scrutiny by scientists, which is an important aspect of sci-

[44] "Post-Truth," *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, accessed July 4, 2023, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/post-truth.

[45] Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (The MIT Press, 2018), 10-12.

[46] Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (Anthem Press, 2018), 45-47.

ence.[47] The erosion of the credibility of science has a profound impact on the notion of truth in society. The emergence of the profession of fact-checker is a consequence of the decline of trust in facts, yet there is a danger in contemporary society, namely the lack of understanding of the work of a fact-checker. Although in the collective imagination the exercise is reminiscent of the Orwellian *Ministry of Truth,* whose windows are devoid of light,[48] making them appear secretive and bringing to mind the controlling and manipulative nature of government, the work is not about strictly controlling what is or is not true. As Jan Krasni argues, the concept of post-truth has evolved over the last three decades with the initial aim of criticizing the establishment media from an intellectual left point of view. However, the term has turned against its origins and now means the manipulation of public opinion through lies and emotional orchestration to support wrongdoing.[49] As the author continues, a significant development of the term happened in 2016, with the aim of criticizing fake news. The mainstream media, although a target of original criticism, positioned itself as an ideological opponent of post-truth without addressing the original point.[50]

The philosophical burden of countering disinformation is exacerbated by the rapid proliferation of digital and social media platforms. These platforms have fundamentally transformed the landscape of information dissemination, making it easier for misinformation to spread widely and quickly. The ease with which false information can spread on these platforms underscores the urgency of developing effective strategies to counter disinformation. Philosophers such as Marshall McLuhan have long argued that the medium itself profoundly influences the message, a notion that is more pertinent than ever in the digital age. The properties of the media used to deliver information impact its content and perception. In the context of social media, the quick, fragmented, and emotionally charged character of communication fundamentally transforms how information is received and digested, frequently prioritizing speed and participation over accuracy and depth.

Moreover, the economic incentives for creating and spreading disinformation cannot be overlooked. Disinformation campaigns are frequently profitable, motivated by ad income, political ambitions, or other financial rewards. This economic dimension of fake news empha-

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[47] McIntyre, 17.

[48] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984)* (Penguin Books, 2000), 34.

[49] Jan Krasni, "How to Hijack a Discourse? Reflections on the Concepts of Post-Truth and Fake News," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7 (2020): 7.

[50] Ibid.

sizes the importance of a holistic approach to countering disinformation, one that targets not only the cultural and philosophical issues, but also the financial reasons that drive it. The proliferation of disinformation represents not merely a sociocultural or ideological challenge, but rather constitutes a sophisticated commercial enterprise embedded within contemporary digital economies. As empirically demonstrated by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts in their seminal analysis, content aggregators and ideologically-driven media entities derive substantial financial benefits from the algorithmic amplification of inflammatory content, effectively monetizing audience outrage through targeted advertising mechanisms.[51] A paradigmatic illustration emerged during the 2016 United States presidential election, wherein entrepreneurial actors in Macedonia systematically manufactured anti-Clinton narratives optimized for viral dissemination, thereby exemplifying how economic imperatives supersede purely political motivations in the disinformation landscape.[52] This phenomenon is further perpetuated by major social media platforms, most notably Facebook, whose engagement-centric algorithmic architecture inherently privileges provocative content over factual accuracy, thereby fostering an ecosystem predicated on the commodification of misinformation.[53] Addressing this systemic challenge necessitates a robust regulatory framework targeting both content producers (through mechanisms such as financial penalties for demonstrably false content) and platform operators (via mandated transparency in content curation algorithms).

According to philosopher Jürgen Habermas, commercial interests have progressively invaded the public realm, undermining the circumstances required for rational-critical discourse.[54] In this sense, efforts to combat disinformation must address the economic systems that facilitate and promote the propagation of misleading information. The challenge of regulating social media platforms while upholding free expression presents a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, restricting harmful actors can curb the spread of disinformation; on the other, as Neil Levy warns, such measures risk entrenching existing power

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[51] Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 112-115.

[52] Craig Silverman, "This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook," *BuzzFeed News*, November 17, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook.

[53] Sinan Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health – and How We Must Adapt* (Crown Currency, 2020), 89-91.

[54] Habermas, 176.

structures if applied inconsistently or without clear, transparent standards.[55] This dilemma reflects a deeper philosophical concern: in seeking to combat falsehoods, governments and corporations may inadvertently gain greater power to silence dissent – often under the pretense of protecting the truth. A striking example of this paradox is the deliberate promotion of climate change denial, despite the overwhelming scientific consensus.[56] This case highlights how state actors themselves can manipulate information to serve political agendas, complicating the notion that government intervention alone can serve as a neutral safeguard against disinformation. To navigate this risk, principles of public reason, as articulated by Rawls, suggest that oversight mechanisms should be embedded within democratically accountable institutions rather than centralized authorities.[57] A more balanced approach may lie in fostering independent fact-checking networks and enforcing algorithmic transparency, as Benkler and colleagues propose.[58] These measures distribute epistemic authority more equitably, reducing the likelihood of both corporate and governmental manipulation. Ultimately, as Habermas reminds us, the strength of the public sphere does not depend on absolute free speech or heavy-handed regulation, but on institutions that ensure all voices can engage in meaningful, reasoned discourse – preserving what he calls "the parity of common humanity."[59]

The role of education, particularly media literacy, is crucial in this regard. Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of cultivating critical thinking and the capacity for self-reflection as essential components of a well-functioning democracy.[60] By equipping individuals with the skills to critically evaluate sources and recognize misinformation, society can build resilience against the post-truth phenomenon. This educational approach aligns with the philosophical tradition of promoting autonomous thinking and skepticism, as advocated by thinkers like Immanuel Kant, who argued that enlightenment is the ability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another.[61] In the

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[55] Neil Levy, "No-Platforming and Higher-Order Evidence, or Anti-Anti-No-Platforming," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 5, no. 4 (2019): 100.

[56] Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 215-218.

[57] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 212.

[58] Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 327-330.

[59] Habermas, 36.

[60] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 45.

[61] Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift*

context of the post-truth era, fostering such intellectual independence and critical scrutiny is vital to counteracting the manipulative tactics of disinformation.

Legislation forcing political advertisements to reveal their financing sources, as well as making social media corporations accountable for the dissemination of disinformation, can help reduce the impact of fake news.[62] The philosopher John Rawls' concept of "public reason" provides a valuable framework for considering the role of policy in establishing a democratic society that functions properly. Rawls defines public reason as the use of common reasoning principles that all citizens can accept, which is critical for maintaining a just and stable society.[63] Policies that improve media transparency and accountability can help to guarantee that the public sphere is a place for logical, critical discourse, rather than manipulation and deception.

The function of traditional media in the post-truth era is also worth considering. While traditional media outlets have been chastised for contributing to the spread of disinformation, they also have the potential to act as a barrier against it. Maintaining strong journalistic standards, emphasizing fact-based reporting, and cultivating a culture of critical inquiry in the newsroom are essential steps that conventional media may take to counteract the spread of misinformation. As philosopher Hannah Arendt points out, the search for truth is a necessary component of political action and public life.[64] Traditional media can assist in restoring public faith in factual reporting by adhering to strict journalistic principles and demonstrating a dedication to truth.

Although the concepts of truth and fact-checking are related, these activities are distinct. From a fact-checker's perspective, things go quite smoothly, they verify claims made in the public space, claims that should be based on certain facts available to anyone. From this point of view, the task of a fact-checker is to verify the reliability of claims and determine, based on the evidence, whether these claims are true. This is far from determining what is true and is merely a transparent method of verification without requiring anyone to believe or disbelieve a narrative. Fact-checking is not the sole determiner of truth;

Dezember-Heft (1784): 481.

[62] Jon Penney, "Internet Surveillance, Regulation, and Chilling Effects Online: A Comparative Case Study," *Internet Policy Review* 6, no. 2 (2017): 4-7; Young Mie Kim et al., "The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook," *Political Communication* 35, no. 4 (2018): 528-532.

[63] Rawls, 212.

[64] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (Viking Press, 1961), 223.

rather, it plays a part in helping us understand what is true. Fact-checkers operate within the domain of evidence-based analysis. They have the responsibility of impartially evaluating claims using the information accessible to them at the time. Nevertheless, truth goes beyond the boundaries of fact-checking, encompassing individual perspectives, subjective encounters, and personal interpretations of the world. Society relies on fact-checking to verify the credibility and truthfulness of information in the public sphere. This important tool uncovers deception and promotes transparency. However, while fact-checking aids our comprehension of reality by examining assertions against evidence, it should not be seen as the ultimate arbiter of truth.

V. The importance of language in shaping reality

In the context of post-truth dynamics, language is not merely a means of communication but a powerful tool for shaping reality. The way information is framed, the words used, and the narratives constructed can determine what is perceived as true or false. This section explores how linguistic structures influence public perception and how they can be exploited to distort reality. Let us discuss the example brought up by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, where they come up with an example where personal experiences are transformed into shared knowledge through language. He describes a specific example within hunters, namely the loss of the hunting gun and hunting wild animals with bare hands; although it is a frightening experience and serves as a test of courage and skill, only a small proportion of individuals go through such an experience. When this experience is shared by multiple individuals, it has the potential to form a strong bond between them. Further, if this experience is transposed linguistically and passed on, it becomes accessible to individuals who have never experienced it, and language becomes an enabler of abstraction.[65] Promoting cultural continuity and the dissemination of norms and values, language allows for the conversion of individual experiences into collective knowledge.

It imparts the experience and its broader meanings to each new generation, or even transfers it to other cultures with different connotations. In an age of disinformation, it is crucial to cultivate media literacy and promote critical thinking to protect the integrity of collective knowledge. The objectification of experiences through language

[65] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Anchor Books, 1966), 86.

illustrates how individual encounters become part of shared knowledge among communities and generations. Nonetheless, this process can be exploited to manipulate collective knowledge and distort the truth in the context of disinformation and post-truth theory. The power of language to shape our understanding of the world emphasizes the need for a critical approach to information, ensuring that narratives are based on objective facts and evidence.

VI. The emotional appeal of conspiracy theories

Another factor that greatly strains the notion of truth is conspiracy theories that weave in people's imminent feelings of danger, fear, and uncertainty. From the famous Moon Hoax to the unfortunate PizzaGate in the US, they all seem to have one element in common. But how can we understand the behavior of people who, despite overwhelming evidence, choose to believe that the earth is flat and that the planet is ruled by lizard people? As Jovan Byford explains, everyone dealing with the phenomenon of conspiracy theories runs into a conundrum, namely that conspiracy theories happen quite often, from various scandals or cover-ups that happen with the help of the government. In this sense, the question arises: how can we differentiate real conspiracies from those that are pejoratively associated with conspiracy theories?[66] As van Prooijen and Douglas argue, conspiracy theories' psychological underpinnings have an impact on how people recall and transmit knowledge about historical events. Conspiracy theories sometimes start with feelings of helplessness or doubt. However, they can easily come together to form compelling stories that influence how people view the past. Conspiracy theories have the ability to condense complicated events into a tale about a strong adversary organization executing a sinister scheme. Because of their clarity, they are simple enough for the general public to understand, which aids in the spread of their cultural traditions.[67]

According to a series of five studies conducted by Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder, there is evidence supporting the notion that conspiracy mentality can be considered a distinct and coherent political attitude. One significant finding is that conspiracy mentality predicts

[66] Jovan Byford, "How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory When You See One," *The Conversation*, March 16, 2020, https://theconversation.com/how-to-spot-a-conspiracy-theory-when-you-see-one-133574.

[67] Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations," *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3 (2017): 329-330; C. Thi Nguyen, "The Seductions of Clarity," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 89 (2021): 227-230.

prejudice uniquely, even when accounting for other well-established political attitudes such as right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation.[68] The researchers also found that conspiracy mentality is associated with attributions of intentional misconduct as well as unintentional errors by authorities, and with behavioral intentions aimed at undermining or influencing those authorities. Conspiracy mentality was specifically linked to disliking and feeling threatened by powerful groups, which aligns with the nature of conspiracy theories that often attribute negative events to the malicious intent of conspiring groups. Conspiracy thinking may serve as a coping mechanism for negative social identity when group boundaries are rigid and leaving the group is not an option.[69]

VII. Conclusion

Summarizing the ideas addressed in this paper, we can note that truth is a complex concept with multiple facets, a subject under continuous debate both in philosophy and in society. The prevalence of disinformation and the rise of post-truth represent a new hurdle in the already complicated race to pursue truth. This essay explores multiple perspectives, including how disinformation, language, and emotion play an important role in the value of truth. This essay draws attention to the dangers of misinformation and the manipulation of public opinion, insisting on the development of defense mechanisms against noise. These mechanisms include fact-checking and critical thinking. Being able to differentiate between lies, bullshit, and truth is the most valuable skill in the contemporary era. This essay further draws attention to the impact this noise has on our judgments, indicating that outside biases and influences can distort our perception of the truth. Language shapes our understanding of reality, facilitating the transmission of acquired knowledge. This aspect can also be exploited from a manipulative perspective to distort the truth. Belief in conspiracy theories is a result of people seeking quick explanations and blaming others for negative events.

Uncovering the truth requires not only independent judgment but also a collective commitment to sincerity and authenticity. This paper argues that trust alone is not enough in today's post-truth landscape. Trust can be misplaced, and authoritarian regimes or ideologically

[68] Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder, "Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude," *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 1 (2014): 39.

[69] Ibid.

driven actors often exploit it to spread misinformation. Instead, this paper proposes a more holistic approach – one that weaves together epistemological, psychological, and socio-linguistic perspectives. Rather than relying solely on institutional credibility, it is essential to equip individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information for themselves. By exploring the impact of cognitive biases, informational noise, and the persuasive power of language, this study highlights that combating disinformation requires more than just faith in reliable sources; it demands an engaged and discerning public capable of navigating complex narratives.

Looking ahead, efforts to counter disinformation must extend beyond trust-building initiatives and fact-checking mechanisms. The findings of this study suggest that a more resilient information ecosystem emerges when individuals cultivate *epistemic resistance* – the ability to scrutinize narratives, recognize manipulative language, and resist the emotional pull of misinformation. Strengthening these critical faculties not only reinforces democratic discourse but also ensures that truth-seeking remains an active and participatory process, rather than a passive acceptance of authoritative claims.

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