

## BOOK REVIEW

Conrad, M., Hálfdanarson, G., Michailidou, A., Galpin, C., and Pyrhönen, N. (Eds.) (2023). *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere*. Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-3-031-13693-1. pp. xvii+259. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13694-8>.



This edited volume's intention is to contribute to the extant literature on post-truth politics by providing theoretical and empirical evidence on the interactive game between the *actor* and *arena* dimensions of post-truth politics. The book critically examines the effects of post-truth politics on European political culture by underscoring the role of specific types of political actors involved in different public arenas because of disseminating misinformation in the public sphere. Undoubtedly, post-truth deconstruction of politics is conducive to detrimental outcomes in political life and public deliberation. Employing such a rationale for explicating the emergence and proliferation of post-truth political agendas, the book addresses the following research questions (p. 5):

*If post-truth politics constitutes a transformation of political culture, then what are the defining features of this emerging political culture?*

*If post-truth politics is a symptom of a deeper crisis of political communication, the public sphere, or democracy more broadly, then what has brought this crisis about? What is this deeper crisis that finds expression in the emergence of a specific kind of populism that is articulated in a specific post-truth mode of communication?*

*What can our empirical case studies tell us about this hypothesized link between the actor and the arena dimensions of post-truth politics?*

The volume is divided into three sections properly arranged to reflect each chapter's importance attributed to either theoretical or empirical aspects of post-truth politics in the European context. The three initial chapters in the first section focus on the relationship between post-truth politics,

democracy, and the public sphere from a predominantly theoretical lens, a prominent theme in extant literature (Christensen, 2022; Lynch, 2022; Porpora, 2020). In the second chapter, Saul Newman explores the epistemic challenges that post-truth discourses pose to the idea of a liberal democratic public sphere in the unprecedented times of the pandemic situation. This challenge allows us to demonstrate the mechanisms through which emancipatory social movements disrupt the institutions of the liberal democratic state. The author posits that public reason should involve an ongoing critical reflection on its limits, whereas the maintaining of truth necessitates a constant interrogation of its innate relationship to power. He then investigates the controversial relationship between post-truth and postmodernism, plausibly arguing that poststructuralist theory may counterbalance post-truth claims. The author concludes that “the most effective response to the post-truth condition and to the crisis it creates for the public sphere is for truth to position itself once again on the side of freedom” (p. 28).

John Erik Fossum’s contribution in ch. 3 is based upon the premise of a direct link between democratic decline and the rise of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation. The type of post-truth politics in which populist actors engage should be perceived *as an existential peril* to the operation of democracy: the factual foundation of democratic politics is challenged by the rise of a particular species of populist parties. The author elaborates on a constitutional-democracy multilevel pathology scale and identifies structural changes, in particular *the policy-politics dislocation* that generates a deficient functioning of democracy, extending *far beyond* actors espousing fake news and disinformation.

In ch. 4, Asimina Michailidou, Hans-Jörg Trenz, and Elisabeth Eike address the issue of distrust in European journalism and discuss potential strategies facilitating trust from a top-down European Union normative policy perspective. The authors highlight the fact that “the challenges of the post-truth era can also activate resistance and resilience mechanisms across all three core functions of the public sphere, both at the macro/policy level and the micro/individual level” (p. 69). They thus realize that the recognition of news media *as an inalienable public good* could indicate an attempt at overcoming the prevailing neo-liberal market logic that has so far defined the digital public sphere.

Section two entitled “Post-Truth Populism and the Disintegration of Europe” comprises a set of chapters that examine issues regarding post-truth populism and the decline in the quality of European politics. In ch. 5, Maximilian Conrad draws on the notion of an elective affinity between

populism and post-truth politics to analyze populist challenges to public-service media. The author convincingly argues that fake news' allegations to denounce and repudiate public service journalism as integral to a corrupt liberal elite are embedded in a post-truth strategy to undermine the credibility of mainstream media to justify their eventual defunding. Drawing on an analysis of the AfD *Grundfunk* initiative to reduce funding for German public-service media in the aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemic, Conrad posits that this endeavour paves the way to a post-truth ambivalent world in which citizens' access to objective information is expected to be substantially curtailed.

Vittorio Orlando in ch. 6 evaluates the impact of post-truth politics on the Brexit process, a typical case study in the literature (Birks, 2021). More specifically, the author investigates the role of misinformation disseminated by the Leave campaign in the debate engendering the Brexit referendum, assessing the significance of these findings in the context of European disintegration. This process was facilitated by the political exploitation of pre-existing ideas on immigration and sovereignty, in conformity with the scope of populist rhetoric and identity politics. The interplay between actors and ideas significantly influenced voters' political preferences, viewed as a by-product of a misinformation process shaped by political actors, ideas and expectations of the external crisis.

In ch. 7, Giulia Evolvi underscores the entwinement between populism and post-truth politics through a qualitative textual analysis of the Italian far-right politician Matteo Salvini's tweets on religion. Salvini is viewed as ascribing symbolic power to those belonging to the alleged Judeo-Christian roots of Italy by employing emotional narratives that render religion a mechanism of reinforcing ideological antagonisms and social demarcations. The author identifies three types of post-truth narratives in this communication strategy: first, *generalizations* that consider Muslim value systems as inimical to Western political culture; second, *hyperboles* that negatively frame helping behaviours displayed by Catholic clergy toward migrants, and third, *misleading connections* that suggest correlations not being inferred from factual evidence. Giulia Evolvi posits that in post-truth politics, "religion is used to create narratives in a public sphere not characterized by Habermasian rationality, but rather on emotional reactions and non-rational conflicts" (p.144). In this respect, disinformation creates a climate of post-truth that mobilizes emotional potential through the circulation of religious rhetoric that in turn triggers further affective responses stimulating the spread of disinformation.

The theme of migration occupies a prominent position in the contributions of the third Section which addresses the relevance of post-truth politics to the mediatisation and politicisation of immigration. In ch. 8, Verena Brändle focuses on the role of governments' information campaigns for irregular migrants within the post-truth context. She thus discusses how governmental actors claim authority over the truths and facts of irregular migration, focusing on three core aspects of these campaigns: *the strategies of information provision, the reaffirmation of the dominant discourse about irregularity, and the contestation of the information campaigns and their claims*. The author argues that deterrence becomes particularly dominant, thus contradicting the ethical and humanitarian goals of the campaigns (p. 168). Concomitantly, these state policies tend to maintain the current status-quo insofar as they hinder constructive social transition towards the improvement of the current situation around the EU's external borders.

In ch. 9 Anna Björk assesses the role of narratives in ongoing efforts to address migration as a political issue through the recognition of the importance of framing, accurate information and communication tools. In so doing, she suggests a shift of focus on acknowledging that states, as sovereign entities invested with the responsibility to respect and secure human rights, *are deemed critical actors in delineating a field that can neutralize post-truth claims against human rights*. The author proposes human rights communication and migration governance as two perspectives on reducing the peril of disinformation on human rights and migration. In respective importance, she highlights the role of the UN and EU, two influential actors supportive of policies on mitigating disinformation and encouraging the implementation of international migration governance agendas (pp.186-192).

In ch. 10, Sanna Malinen, Aki Koivula, Arttu Saarinen and Teo Keipi examine the role of counter media sites in the rise of an anti-immigration movement in the case of Finland. Employing a nationally representative survey, they investigate how social-media-related concerns addressing mis(dis)information are explained in terms of political party preferences, media trust, and immigration attitudes. Findings of this empirical study denote that populist right-wing communication strategies appear highly critical of the reliability of established media institutions, undermining trust in professional journalism and subverting the validity of political correctness.

In the last chapter, Gwen Bauvois and Niko Pyrhönen investigate the remediation of the mainstream news cycle on the "refugee crisis" to the social media audiences of two Finnish anti-immigration groups, namely

“Close the Borders!” and “Finland First”. The study expands the scope of earlier literature on right-wing populism which displays a vested interest in advancing political agendas replete with disinformation content, thus seeking to discredit relevant epistemic authorities. The authors demonstrate the post-truth tropes these groups employ to subvert information stemming from mainstream media. Among such tropes, we focus on that of “unexpected allies” (pp. 232-238), understood as prominent actors who appear to share the same concerns with the anti-systemic groups’ audience, thus employed to emotionally motivate the more devoted followers of such movements in pursuit of their supposedly legitimate goals.

Finally, in their concluding reflections, Guðmundur Hálfðánarsson and Maximilian Conrad advance the view that despite the existing evidence on the detrimental aspects of “techno-scientific imaginaries” (Ballo and Vaage, 2021), “the emergence of post-truth politics was, however, not merely an automatic consequence of a transformation in communication technologies” (p. 249). More importantly, they argue, “the power of populist discourses is not determined by its veracity-or lack thereof-but rather by how they fit into a convincing political narrative” (p. 251). Despite the disruptive effects of such post-truth narratives on the social justification of norms deemed necessary for a functioning democratic public sphere, “this does not mean that democracy is necessarily doomed, in part because the challenges posed by the post-truth era have triggered resistance among various governmental agencies and international organisations” (p. 251). Yet, “it is probably premature to declare the total demise of post-truth politics” (p. 252) insofar as the post-truth conditions still remain. As Greene (2021) suggests, this fading of the commitment to truthfulness for the sake of power stems from conflicting interpretations of political participation that in turn undermine political legitimacy. Affirming the advent of a post-truth era is rather misleading, given the emergent consensus on what constitutes the truth, as well as on the appropriate procedures for arriving at the truth (Michailidou and Trenz, 2021). Post-truth politics arises in a world in which individuals are subject to the constraints of conformity that prevent them from finding *their own independent role in a world they do not fully control* (Schindler, 2020). Hopefully, the authors conclude with an optimistic belief in that “the tide has been stemmed at least for the time being” (p. 252).

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