Rethinking journalism standards in the era of post-truth politics: from truth keepers to truth mediators

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Abstract

In this article, we argue for a pragmatic understanding of the role of news media and journalism not as truth keepers but as truth mediators in the public sphere. In the current debate on 'post-truth politics' the emphasis is often put on the formulation of ethical guidelines and legal solutions to regain control over 'unbound journalism' or to re-establish truth in the news media. Instead of holding journalists individually accountable for the spread of fake news, we consider truth as an unstable outcome of fact-finding, information-seeking and contestation, where journalists act as professional brokers. Journalists are not individuals that are closer to facts or more devoted to truth than others. They are rather embedded in a professional field of journalism practices that help to establish the value of information in a trusted way that becomes acceptable and convincing for the majority. Standards and procedures of journalism can therefore not be applied in a way to detect truth in an absolute way and defend it against falsehood, but to approach truth in the most reliable and acceptable way. The truth value of information then becomes the (unstable) outcome of a democratically necessary procedure of critical debate facilitated by journalists.

Keywords

fake news, journalism, post-truth democracy, public sphere, trust, truth

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Introduction

Digitalisation, particularly its social media dimension, is inextricably linked with what most scholars, politicians and journalists consider an unprecedented fake news epidemic that is putting the very legitimacy of democratic government in peril. At the same time, digital media are considered the catalyst in the (re)surfacing of extreme political ideologies and the disruption these bring in democratic discourse conventions and trust in representative democracy (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Sunstein, 2017). Consequently, we observe increasing polarisation of political discourse, often characterised by 'trench warfare dynamics' (Karlsen et al., 2017) and the radicalisation of political views (Ernst et al., 2019; Sunstein, 2009; van Houwelingen et al., 2019). The process of public opinion formation through the public sphere is thus disrupted in the double sense of the erosion of the trustworthiness of news and of the consensus of core democratic values (Alvares and Dahlgren, 2016; Edson et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2018). For critical media scholars, it is clear that the digital spread of misinformation, division and hatred is a 'peril for democracy' and a pollutant of '[t]he channels of information that inform democratic citizens – the lifeblood of democracy' (Ward, 2019: 33).

Nevertheless, the empirical evidence that supports the fake news-epidemic thesis and the link between politics, digital media and the declining trust in democratic institutions – including journalism and the democratic public sphere – is inconclusive (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Halberstram and Knight, 2016; Hong and Kim, 2016; Srijan and Shah, 2018). Data on Computational Propaganda from around the globe (Woolley and Howard, 2018) shows that conspiracy theories, misinformation and digitally-spread propaganda find fertile ground among voters in one part of the political spectrum mostly – the extreme right. In a similar vein, digital echo chambers that were meant to signal the fragmentation of the public sphere remain an empirically limited phenomenon (Karlsen et al., 2017). This relative lack of empirical verification has led scholars to reject the term 'fake news epidemic' – or even 'fake news' altogether (Joshua Habgood-Coote, 2020) – as hyperbolic at best (Mudde, 2018), since the spread of fake news online seems to largely correlate with voters of the far right. Instead, the argument goes, we ought to consider – and tackle – mainstream media and their click-bait strategies, along with the lack of in-depth investigation and analysis in journalistic work; both factors that contribute, not exclusively but to a great extent, to the spread of uncorroborated evidence and biased sources (McIntyre, 2018). Viewed in this light, journalism becomes one of the core villains in the 'prophecies' about the state of democracy in the post-truth era (Farkas and Schou, 2020: 58–60).

In this article, we argue for a more pragmatic understanding of the role of news media and journalism not as truth finders but as truth mediators in the public sphere. We first revise the current debate on 'post-truth politics' where the emphasis is often put on the formulation of ethical guidelines and legal solutions to regain control over 'unbound journalism' or to re-establish truth in the news media. Instead of holding journalists individually accountable for the spread of fake news, we then consider the intermediary role of journalism as truth brokers. Journalists are not individuals that are closer to facts or more devoted to truth than others. They are rather embedded in a professional field of journalism practices that help to establish the value of information in a trusted way that

becomes acceptable and convincing for the majority. Journalists are not defending truth standards against what is identified as 'fake' or 'wrong' but operate within a field where the value of Information remains principally contested. Standards and procedures of journalism are therefore not applied in a way to detect truth in an absolute way and defend it against falsehood, but to approach truth in the most reliable and acceptable way. The truth value of information is not attached to it as an attribute that decides over its use in public debates; it is rather the (unstable) outcome of such procedures of critical debates and journalism practices. The way journalism can perform this role as truth brokers in public debates then depends in important ways on *trust* as an enabling and constraining factor of journalism work and practices. In the last part of the article, we discuss changing trust-truth relationships in the work of journalism in the context of the digital transformations of the public sphere.

Journalism and truth

Before journalism, religious leaders and monarchs represented (the divine) truth and conveyed it to the laypersons. That truth was not to be questioned, if not at the cost of torture, social ostracism or death. With the enlightenment idea of reason as an act of liberation of self-realising individuals, a social and communicative infrastructure was needed for individuals to partake in exchange of arguments about what could be held true and valid. This infrastructure was established with the modern public sphere grounded in the principles of free speech, and reasoned argumentation. In such an anonymous public sphere of mass communication, newspapers and journalism have played the key role as truth mediators and function as a safety valve that prevents the imposition of one institution's or person's truth on the whole of a society.

Truth is then not only dependent on 'scientific facts' but also on intersubjective agreement. It requires a shared epistemology among the truth finders and their publics (Waisbord, 2018: 1871). Journalists, as critical mediators of truth, contribute to the sharing of such a common epistemology of rationality and facticity and need to conform to its premises in their own work. They 'tell the truth', which they uncover from the 'facts out there', by applying de-personalised and rationalised working methods (Broersma, 2013: 32). At the same time, journalists stick to rules of impartiality and fairness. They support public reasoning by allowing for the expression of plural voices (governmental and oppositional, mainstream and marginal) and therefore, ideally, arrive at a balanced account of different versions of truth. This includes the difficult task of critically putting to the test the validity claims raised by these plural voices in a way that informs public opinion.

Journalism's relationship to truth is thus ambivalent: On the one hand, journalists claim the 'ontological truth' of news and their privileged role as 'truth finders' through their own methods of investigation. On the other hand, they do not work like scientists and therefore do not have the epistemological means that could substantiate the 'truth' in journalism work (Broersma, 2013: 33). In practice, this means that journalists have to weight various accounts of truth and to acknowledge that their informed opinion cannot lay claim on the absolute truth, but instead remains tentative, contested and open to revision whenever new information comes forth and doubts about the correctness of

available information are raised (Hendricks and Vestergaard, 2018: 53). Their mediating role notwithstanding, there is no guarantee that society can agree on the truth value of information and its public uses. Such an approach of the relationship between journalism and truth limits the explanatory force of establishing a causal linkage between journalism output and the proliferation of fake news. How, then, are we to approach the role of journalism in the so-called post-truth era?

Truth and trust from a communication perspective

By shifting the 'villainess' (Farkas and Schou, 2020) from journalism as such, to the process of digitalisation more broadly, we take a multi-causal approach of the way truth and trust are (re)defined and mediated by journalists in the digital era. The public sphere is inherently driven by critical debates and exchanges that contest the value of information and the degree of informed opinions. Information is therefore not synonymous with 'the truth' that only needs to be picked up by journalists and amplified to become accessible for broader publics. Truth is not an external input to news, but an unstable outcome of fact-finding, information-seeking and contestation, where journalists act as professional brokers. News media derive their trustworthiness from their 'selectivity' capacity rather than a claim of representing 'the absolute truth' (Kohring and Matthes, 2007), that is, their capacity to (convince the public that they) select reliable and appropriate sources and information and provide credible and objective assessment of these (Kohring and Matthes, 2007).

Trust in journalists is in this sense a prerequisite for society to reach agreement about the value of information and of the public use of information to identify and detect problems (Fink, 2018). At the same time, a well-functioning journalism and public sphere are needed to generate trust in the functioning of democracy (McNair, 2018; Peters and Broersma, 2013). Trust has, thus, a plural meaning. It is trust in representatives, who defend or contest the value of truth, it is trust in the procedures that allow to establish the value of truth and, ultimately, it is also trust in the mediators, that is, in the institution of journalism.

In the fake news debate, it is often assumed that truth orientation leads to trust building, while misinformation and fake news are ways to undermine trust or disseminate distrust. Truth orientation unites and builds trust, while falsehood triggers distrust and polarises. The way trust is generated through the public sphere and journalism is, however, not through consent, but through public contestation of what is held to be true. People trust because they can also express critique (and thus distrust). In the same vein, people accept the value of information, because they can also question its value. Information as such is not trusted. It is the procedures that establish the value of information and the collective actors and institutions that make use of information that are or are not trusted. As Farkas and Schou (2020: 57) remind us, trust can '[. . .] interfere with or combat truth: When users receive content from people they trust, they forget to assess its inherent accuracy'. In a similar vein, promoters of fake news can only undermine trust, if their own style of communication is found trustworthy. They therefore not only undermine trust, but also generate new trust through what is called 'alternative facts'.

Models of journalism often explain the linkage between truth orientation and trust-worthiness of news by underlying a linear transmission model of communication, as famously proposed by Lasswell (1948). According to this model, information and facts are considered as senders' input that is channelled through the black box of the media to form receivers' opinions (informed opinions, so to speak) as an output. Once the information value of communication inputs is established, opinions can be classified as being close or not to truth (to the original input). To be able to identify disruptive public spheres based in misinformation and fake news, we would thus need to identify deviations in the 'normal functioning' of public spheres and journalism, that is, a dissonance in the truth orientation of the senders of information and a non-linearity in the process of intermediation. Under these circumstances, media and journalism could be claimed to become 'dysfunctional'.

Problems with this model are addressed by more recent approaches of mediatisation, which instead of a simple cause-effect model, as for instance in the uni-directional relationship between sender and receiver, emphasise the ubiquity of media communications as constitutive for culture, politics and society (Hjarvard, 2013). The emphasis then shifts from trust-building through the strategic communication efforts of political actors to the overall role of media institutions and practices as infrastructures that foster trust but also distrust relationships or that sustain cultures of trust and distrust (Barthel and Moy, 2017). Trust is thus no longer considered as a media output that results from informed inputs but as a complex feedback relationship that involves, for instance, creative ways of role shifting between producers and users of fact finding (the 'producers' of online communications as in (Bruns, 2010). The literature on social media political communication provides ample evidence for such interlinkages and feedback mechanisms in trust and distrust building. For example, fake news creates distrust in the work of media and journalism and discredits, at the same time, established political institutions, particular actors or even the whole democratic system (McNair, 2017). Yet, fake news also triggers public sphere resilience in the form of a re-assessment of the work of quality journalism or a return of critical counter-publics (Trenz et al., 2021).

The new reality of hybrid media cultures also invites us to reconsider the neat distinction, offered by functionalist accounts of media studies, of desirable (thus functional) and undesirable (thus dysfunctional) media effects. What is usually not taken into consideration, is the possibility of an inverse relationship in the sense that distrust may also be functional (Rosanvallon, 2008). Such an inverse perspective comes close to the agenda of critical media studies with an emphasis on the role of conflicts and contentions as constitutive of trust and distrust, for instance, subversive actions by social movements that are mobilised to challenge and rebuild trust relationships (della Porta, 2012). An attitude of mistrust in media products and media performance is also part of a more recent opposition movement to global surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Distrust should neither be considered just as the absence of trust nor is it a temporary dysfunction that can be corrected by taking the right measures of trust building. Critical media scholars would rather understand media trust building as ideological, and thus as a form of power politics defending the hegemony of an ideological apparatus of culture and politics (Fuchs, 2019). Distrust in media and Distrust in representative government are then closely interlinked as a form of political resistance. We discuss in the following how this

interlinkage of trust and distrust plays out in the public sphere most recently, for instance, in the case of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The proliferation of fake news is parasitic on a well-functioning public sphere. The diffusion of disinformation and conspiracy theories would be more difficult to achieve in authoritarian societies, where 'truth' is defended by government in an inherently propagandistic manner. A well-functioning public sphere allows multiple proponents of fake news the freedom of expression, to protest in the streets and to make use of media channels to reach out. Fake news production is thus driven by Ideological divisions and diversity of opinions in the public sphere (Schlesinger, 2020). This means, in turn, that also populists as fake news promoters cannot escape the mechanism of trust-building through the public sphere. Even if their primary aim is to undermine trust in democracy, they still need to use public sphere infrastructures in a way that their own communication appears trustworthy (Privitera, 2018). In doing so, they not only rely on the availability of media infrastructures and channels to amplify and reach out to audiences. They also require critical engagement with news and presuppose audiences that take critical distance and question truth. Fake news is critical in the basic sense that it is used to question power and gain control.

From the above it becomes clear that what is critical for the democratic resilience of the public sphere – besides the content of news – is the procedure through which the value of information is established: either through an argumentative exchange, which remains principally open and inconclusive (trust in the procedures and institutions of public contestation) or through personal attributes and style of representatives who proclaim the value of information through the media. In the first case, the value of information relies on an argumentative exchange in search of truth, in the second case, it relies on the blind faith of publics and the face value of information received by them. Journalism and the news media have thus principally two options to generate trust in the value of information:

- Truth through argumentation. This is the type of truth we arrive at through consideration of different arguments in a critical and open exchange among journalists, experts and political representatives. Truth is the unstable and preliminary outcome of the procedures of fact-finding and fact-checking. Even if arguments and debate do not lead to an ultimate agreement on the value of information as truth, democracy can still rely on trust in the process of establishing truth and the collectively binding forces generated by it. Procedures of establishing the truth: this is what journalists ought to adhere.
- Truth through proclamation. Contrary to the Socratic, or deliberative, type of truth established through exchange of arguments, proclamatory truth entails the acceptance of the truth value of information on the basis of the authority or the person defending it, the suggestive force of the underlying dogma or the blind trust of the followers of the proclaimed truth. Truth would be an external, but stable and unquestionable input that determines the content of news. Expressions of critique of distrust in the value of information are not foreseen or even precluded. Journalism and the news media would then simply be a forum for trusted authorities to proclaim truth, which would have an ultimate binding force for their followers. The press would ultimately be partisan, and readers would align according

to the trustworthiness of news sources for whom journalists are only the mouthpiece.

The latter mode of establishing the value of information through proclamation would easily lead to the strengthening of trust of single representatives at the cost of undermining trust in the procedures that allow to establish the truth. The public sphere would not be 'deliberative', but become 'representative' again, as in the pre-modern era (Habermas, 1989), with the difference that not one general absolute truth is defended with authority, but several versions of categorical truth. The result would be polarisation of different 'trust communities' that diverge in how they interpret the value of information. This model of journalism as a mouthpiece for the proclamation of partial truths is not new; we find it in the partisan press of the pre-digital era, and in many cases it remains a core pillar of national media systems today (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

The fake news debate thus relates to a shift from deliberative to categorical conceptions of truth, and it is therefore no coincidence that critical observers also speak of a return of the partisan press that spread their partial truths to faithful adherents, such as Fox News in the US (Levendusky, 2013). The denial of the promoters of fake news to enter an argumentative exchange and their often-aggressive strategies to proclaim their truth against science bears the risk of a retreat of reason in public debates. Deliberative rationalists, in turn, might take a more defensive stance by highlighting consensus about scientific facts instead of epistemological struggles over knowledge. As public contestation of scientific facts is increasingly perceived as risky, science communication in the media is thus either reduced or oversimplified. This might be an indicator for the fact that also deliberative democrats increasingly lose trust in the media as mediators of the value of information and in public sphere procedures of establishing the truth. Following this line of argument, if existing media infrastructures become dysfunctional and the public sphere is disrupted, democracy needs to be protected from the damaging effects of a disrupted public sphere and deliberative fora ought to be sheltered.

We therefore need to approach the role of journalism in the digital age not as an institution that ought to merely re-assert its authority, but rather to reinstall procedures of truth finding that have a collective binding force and do not divide society into different trust communities represented by different types of media. This requires journalism that is independent of financial and political influence (Broersma, 2013; Davies, 2019; Ward, 2015, 2019), but not necessarily non-partisan. The challenge, then, is not to strive towards a sanitised version of journalism, where journalists are expected to never express political opinion. Instead, the focus needs to be on a balanced relationship between policy makers, experts, plural opinion-makers and journalists themselves to safeguard the democratic public sphere from the conditions of 'deep' marketisation and political manipulation (Couldry, 2016; Couldry and Hepp, 2018; Murdock, 2017) that precisely hinder a return to – not always profitable or indeed government-favourable – trusted processes of truth finding.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that the identification of public sphere deficits is not something external to the public sphere (i.e. part of our 'scientific description' as media and

communication scholars), but something internal to the procedures of the public sphere and its mechanisms of critique. We have applied this argument to the fake news debate by testing out the assumption of public sphere resilience in the form of a rising awareness of fake news as a public problem. We have discussed empirical evidence for the fake news pandemic not as a failure of journalism as a collective actor and institution, but of established procedures of truth finding within the broader public sphere. Although there is clear evidence for the disruption of the democratic public sphere (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018), we also find that such disruptions do not necessarily lead to a post-factual or post-truth democracy. The challenge of mis- and dis-information is rather bound to a raising awareness among publics about the fragility of their news environment, to which they remain dependent in essential ways. We can predict that this dependence on reliable information will be translated into new demands for trusted news sources to the extent that audiences face the new uncertainties of digital communication or are confronted with the negative effects of fake news infodemic. Changing patterns of news consumption during the COVID-19 health crisis point, indeed, to a growing demand for quality journalism (Hans-Jörg Trenz et al., 2021). The rising awareness of the fake news problem challenges the critical capacities of the public, often provokes reactions of disgust or indignation but overall has the potential to lead to the reconfirmation of public sphere values. Evidence of resilience thus points to enduring trust in the process of argumentation and the principled recognition of journalism as a core institution in a truth-seeking public sphere, and this despite the commonly held assumption of a decline of trustworthiness of the news media.

To speak of a post-truth era is thus misleading; we find instead evidence for the resilience of the public sphere. What we see is that because we are living in uncertainty, digitalisation relies even more on the public sphere's truth-establishing procedures. Seen within a historical context of the development of the democratic public sphere, what we currently observe is not exceptional or unique to our digital era. On the contrary, we have now more agreement about what constitutes the truth and what constitutes appropriate procedures for arriving at the truth. Safeguards are, nevertheless, needed for trust in the procedure and in the way scientific knowledge is produced and reviewed and disseminated. This is where journalists come in: they are the translators and mediators that ensure the procedure is safeguarded.

Funding

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