INTRODUCTION

In search of paradigms: Disinformation, fake news, and post-truth politics

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This book aims to contribute to the debate on how the manipulation of information, under different guises, can deteriorate the status of democracy. The title conveys the ambition and scope of our volume, which seeks to examine and problematise the diffusion of practices of information manipulation thanks to the opportunities provided by the newest technological tools used for communication and information purposes. Although manipulating information can serve different goals, the authors who contributed to this volume focussed on its political implications and especially on the consequences that the diffusion of manipulated information can have on the quality of democracy.

In his 1922 essay *Public Opinion*, after a thorough investigation of the nexus between information and democratic decision-making, Walter Lippmann claimed that the quality of news revealed the strengths and weaknesses of a democratic society. Disguising the truth and manipulating information were means used by a few economic and/or political actors willing to substitute their particular interests to the public interest in order to obtain some advantages (Lippmann 1997: 364–365). Lippmann's pioneering intuition proves especially inspiring for current researches on the troubling relationship between information and democratic politics, not only in mature democracies, but also in those countries experiencing lengthy and stormy transitions from authoritarian rule. Moreover, the last century has provided abundant evidence of the strategic importance of the production and spread of information for the conduct of international affairs, facilitating or complicating cooperation among governments. Very recently, the global health emergency caused by the diffusion of Covid-19 has dramatically shown the importance as well as the difficulty of grounding policy-making on objective (i.e. unbiased) and reliable (i.e. verifiable, scientifically valid) information.

As we will show in our Introduction, the manipulation of information has a long history; however, the speed and extensiveness of the phenomenon has considerably

increased during the last two decades, thanks to the massive and continuous consumption of news that smartphones allow to large numbers of citizens of developed and developing countries. Social media platforms, which are a particularly fertile breeding ground for amplifying any message, proved to be particularly effective means for detecting, targeting, and mobilising high numbers of individuals who would form their opinions on any piece of news which might serve to confirm and reinforce their preconceived ideas. The consequence is the viral diffusion of a plethora of mystified information products. Some of them – namely news propaganda, conspiracy theories, opinion pieces, pseudo-satire, etc. – are already part of the historical heritage of information manipulation, while others – such as hate speech, fake news, and deepfakes – constitute relatively new phenomena whose relationship to democratic practices and values is still unclear.

Each chapter of this book contributes to shed light on a specific aspect of the information–democracy nexus, from its author(s)’ situated point of view. The first part of the Introduction will briefly present and discuss the main concepts that will ground the analyses and reflections presented in the chapters – namely disinformation, fake news, and post-truth politics – outlining the main attempts at contrasting the different phenomena included under the umbrella term of information manipulation. In the last part, the Introduction provides the readers with an analytical compass and a chapters’ breakdown, the aim of which is to guide the readers throughout the book.

Disinformation

Until recently, the term most commonly used in political discourse to identify issues concerning the manipulation of information was disinformation, from the Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, deriving from the title of a KGB black propaganda department responsible for producing false information with the intention of deceiving public opinion. Disinformation is a relatively recent practice in comparison to ‘propaganda’, which originated in the 1600s and generally connotes the selective use of information aimed at producing some desired political effects (NED 2017). Propaganda seeks to manipulate or influence the opinion of groups to support a particular cause or belief; it often promotes the benefits and virtues of one idea or group, while simultaneously distorting the truth or suppressing the counter-argument (as it happened, for instance, in Nazi Germany).

While disinformation is to be intended as the product of the construction of a purposeful untruth, misinformation indicates an incomplete, vague, misleading, or ambiguous piece of information. Disinformation “can be composed of mostly true facts, stripped of context or blended with falsehoods to support the intended message, and is always part of a larger plan or agenda” (NED 2017). Disinformation, a term which had been neglected for a while by IR (International Relations) and security studies, has recently known a revival, especially within the European Union (EU) (la Cour 2020; Chesney and Citron 2019; Lanoszka 2019). Drawing

on the ‘Action Plan against Disinformation’ issued in 2018,¹ several actions and programmes – including significant research funding – have been launched to detect and contrast disinformation on a variety of politically sensitive issues, such as Brexit, migration management, food safety, and health emergency management. For instance, the latest report published by the European External Action Service (EEAS) on disinformation activities related to the Covid-19 pandemic reveals many troubling facts, such as the significant number of coordinated disinformation campaigns by the Russian and Chinese governments to spread false health information in and around Europe, and conspiracy theories and claims that only authoritarian political systems – not democracies – are best suited to deal with the current crisis (European Commission 2020). The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has thus made clear that “intentional and coordinated disinformation campaigns should be treated as a hybrid threat to European and global security” (Borrell 2020).

Fake news

In the preceding section, misinformation has been defined as an incomplete, vague, misleading, or ambiguous piece of information. Accordingly, fake news could be understood as an advanced and technological version of misinformation, since with this term we mean pieces of intentionally manipulated information which appear on the Internet and in social media especially. At first, the diffusion of fake news was connected to political life at its most sensitive moments, such as elections and international crises; afterwards, the use of fake news rapidly expanded to concern every aspect of politics and life. The term ‘fake news’ was, for instance, used by both candidates to the US presidency in the 2016 elections. On 8 December 2016, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton made a speech in which she referred to “the epidemic of malicious fake news and false propaganda that flooded social media over the past year,” and stressed that “It’s now clear that so-called fake news can have real-world consequences” (Wendling 2018). President Donald Trump, the Republican candidate, even gave out ‘Fake News Awards’ to reporters who had made mistakes or unfortunate predictions – “with a special nod to all reporting on the ongoing and very real investigations into collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia” (ibid.).

Whereas the construction of a false, alternative, or altered reality and its diffusion through media and/or word of mouth – which depends on the contested nature of knowledge – is not a new phenomenon in politics, what is new is the massive worldwide use of digital communication systems and the extremely extensive reach of social media (see Corner 2017; Fuller 2018), which can spread news at a whirling pace, turning any message potentially ‘viral’. Social media platforms and instant messaging apps have proven to be extraordinary amplifiers for fake news and have therefore acquired a strategic political role far beyond their initial function as platforms for recreation and socialisation. They are, indeed, powerful

political weapons. The combination of fake news and social media is particularly fit for producing subliminal effects that can reach the deepest and most emotional strata of people's minds, with higher chances of persistence and persuasion compared to disinformation spread through other means.

Fake news can circulate in either a discrete or continuous way. In the first case, its appearance is inconsistent, even sporadic, while in the second, it may create a cluster or snowball effect. It can be diffused through many channels at the same time or in sequence, with different dosages of information manipulation. This bombardment of manipulated information generates a sort of 'nebulous phenomenon', capturing a potentially vast audience that can be a target to various waves of fake news attacks. When a flow of fake news reaches its target concomitantly, there is only a short time in which the recipients can stop to elaborate and discern the nature of the information they have been flooded with. This means that recipients, besides awareness, might also lack time and attention to rightly detect what has been transmitted.

The disruptive force of fake news has been widely recognised and already historicised. It is quite telling that two anti-Brexit fake banknotes claiming to be from the "Bank of Brexit lies" and declaring themselves to be "for the privileged few" have been deemed of such historical value they have been added to the collection of the British Museum (BM).² Tom Hockenhull, the museum's curator of modern money, said the notes belonged to its collection because "we capture history. By displaying fake banknotes, the British Museum recognises the relevance of the fake as testimony and protagonist of current politics" (Addley 2019). The BM's decision follows its previous acquisition of a Banksy artwork that depicts an equally fake banknote, designed in 2004 and displaying an image of Princess Diana. If even museums have transformed the falsification of reality and the diffusion of fake news into something to be exhibited, this means that the phenomenon is ubiquitous, powerful, and routinised.

In politics, fake news is already so widespread to be acknowledged (although not publicly recommended) among the available tools for the politicians willing to obtain consensus and to seek power within the domestic, as well as the international, political arena. The deployment of fake news may help the rise of a certain faction/party or leader, while causing the decay or the defeat of its political adversaries/enemies. Those who manipulate information and diffuse it might remain unknown, and the absence of a single responsible person or group of people renders the faking activity less biased and condemnable; moreover, it discourages possible reactions because of the lack of a clear target. The difficulty to neatly identify responsibility in such instances therefore makes the use of fake news an extremely powerful instrument of political influence and meddling.

In their public statements, politicians in power generally tend to condemn fake news and the unfair and illicit gain in terms of consensus that it produces. However, the fact that people are so accustomed to fake news seems to allow both authoritarian and democratic leaders to deploy it quite often (Farhall et al. 2019;

Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019) in order to pursue their political goals: *inter alia*, to delegitimise troublesome journalists and media, to discredit political opponents or leaders of foreign states – as in the case of the Covid-19 crisis which will be mentioned later in this introduction – or even to contribute to the justification of especially grave decisions, such as the one taken by the US and the UK to invade Iraq on the basis of the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction (later revealed to be unproven).

Post-truth politics

In order to portray the complex contemporary relationship in which reality, falsehood, and power interact and mix in the world of media and social networks, many scholars, commentators, and politicians employ the expression ‘post-truth politics’ (Hannan 2018; McIntyre 2018; Corner 2017; Hopkin and Rosamond 2017; Rose 2017). This expression indicates a political phase in which people are inclined to accept arguments based on their consonance to their own emotions and beliefs rather than based on facts, and consequently important political decisions such as a vote in political elections or in a referendum are more related to emotional or ‘ideological’ impulses and superficial impressions rather than to the rational selection based on policy evaluations and economic considerations. The weakening of the relevance of rational reasoning opens up to the easy installation of counterfeit information. In this perspective, a lie is not necessarily something that is opposed to truth; it is rather a derivate of a distorted version of it, so that the boundaries between truth and lies are blurred.

As Bufacchi (2020) explains, “While a lie subverts a specific truth, post-truth tries to subvert truth itself” and the “prefix ‘post’ in post-truth refers to the claim that a specified idea has become redundant and therefore can safely be discarded. Post-truth is the belief that truth is no longer essential, that truth has become obsolete.” Fake news does not necessarily negate facts or what can be defined as truth, but rather suggests misleading interpretations or invents facts that do not exist but are nonetheless plausible or close to what the public could expect. Fake news can be anticipated by the spread of some information/soft fakes (closer to misinformation) in order to prepare the terrain for the fake news to be credible and able to produce long-lasting effects; a sort of “political astroturfing” (Keller et al. 2020).

As we have underlined, the rise of post-truth politics has been propitiated by the sheer ease of creating and diffusing fake news. Besides technological facilities, systemic changes that may have favoured post-truth politics have also occurred. The disappearance of well-established comprehensive and coherent worldviews or ideologies concomitant to the end of the Cold War has brought a period of fluidity and diffusion of power that has bolstered the emergence of new actors, both formal and informal. World politics has become more and more hectic and unpredictable. At the same time, flows of refugees, global movements, virtual groups, and networks have all contributed to moulding a de-territorialised form of citizenship,

while states have progressively lost control over money flows, investments, information, security, and even warfare, which is becoming more and more hybrid.

During the last part of the 20th century, the progressive erosion of sovereignty seemed to be a prelude to the end of the traditional state, opening to a neo-medieval phase in politics marked by fragmentation of power, with many different legacies (Bull 1977). Instead, the 2008 financial and economic crisis, which caused the deterioration of the standard of living, therefore accentuating a sense of precariousness, has allowed a reinforcement of states, which have mostly intervened in the economy to remedy the negative effects of the crisis. States have, however, become the cradle of divisive politics: populist discourses and policies, the delegitimisation of competence, hate and resentment politics, the demonisation/enemisation of political adversaries, the personalisation and spectacularisation of politics, and processes of securitisation have now become common traits in both democratic and autocratic regimes (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). In order to master all these techniques of divisive politics, access to information as well as multi-media communication skills are crucial. Thus, we suspect that if the political conflict raises, we may see an intensification of the recurrence to the practice of fake news as a political weapon. In principle, easy access to data and information can contribute to vitalising the public sphere and encouraging citizens' participation in public decision-making, introducing new voices to the public debate and mobilising new actors willing to find alternative paths for political participation (see, for instance, the early stage of the so-called Arab Springs), but it can also be exploited to toxify the political and social sphere. Citizens would then become partisan of one side against another, or rather abandon any kind of civil and political engagement.

We are also witnessing an increasing use of information manipulation and spread of fake news by external actors in order to interfere, especially in the occasion of important political elections or referenda, in third countries' politics, emptying the concept of borders and eroding the principle of state sovereignty as a result. This is not simply about invalidating what should be a free and fair electoral competition but also the independency and security of states with serious implications for inter-state relations. When fake news is diffused by one country against another one, especially if the diffuser and amplifier is a high-ranking politician – such as President Trump, the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, or the foreign Minister of China, Wang Yi – then the perceived distance between truth and untruth dramatically contracts, with serious risks of tensions and conflicts among the countries involved.³

There is also another sensitive point to consider: in some countries (e.g. India, Nigeria, Brazil), fake news has circulated prevalently through WhatsApp, the most popular messaging app in Africa, Latin America, and many Asian countries (with 1.6 billion active users monthly, in 180 countries), which is mainly used to share information with family and friends (Chinchilla 2019). Unlike other platforms such as Facebook, whose content can be monitored, encrypted peer-to-peer messaging platforms, for example WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, and Signal, escape any kind of formal control. While it is important to protect users'

privacy, this easily enables criminal activity and the cynical spread of falsehoods and mass manipulation (*ibid.*).

We need also to pay attention to crises, because they produce both information voids and high demand of information. This combination further stimulates the construction of fake news and its dissemination, as the experience of Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates. World Health Organization (WHO) officials themselves introduced, for instance, the term ‘infodemic’ to describe the flood of information circulating online about the virus. People might find it difficult to discern which information sources are trustworthy, especially when scientists are also providing different explanations and solutions. Moreover, while on complex specialistic issues such as pandemics the production of precise and detailed information can be expensive and time-consuming, fake news can cheaply and quickly fill the gap and satisfy the public’s demand for information, at least for a wide target. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic has, in a way, reinforced the idea that there is no certitude, even when scientists are charged with tackling a sanitary emergency.

The delicate link between science itself and politics has blatantly surfaced; although the former is still considered as a reliable source of information, its trustworthiness is questioned by a variety of truthers and conspiracists. Presumably, accurate scientific information can be the ground for taking tough but legitimate political decisions that restrict citizens’ freedom. But to what extent can science declare a state of emergency and justify the adoption of extraordinary measures? Furthermore, on the basis of the same scientific studies, different governments have adopted different measures for the containment of the virus. Such a diversity might be the outcome of different political decisions, despite the common ground on which they are based, but also of a manipulation of scientific information for political purposes. The latter approach clearly poses threats to democracy.

Another challenge linked to the diffusion of fake news is that of ‘social justice’: while almost anyone with access to technologies and social media can forge fake news (although her/his social status and know-how can affect the reach and impact of the fake news’ spread), the activity of recognising and interpreting fake news requires knowledge, expertise, and the capacity to use technological instruments. Therefore, there is a clear imbalance between the accession and detection phase, producing a situation of inequality. The risk here is that a weaker and less prepared part of the public might easily fall in the hands of professional fakers: a serious threat for any democracy. The advent of technology and social media has weakened traditional media gatekeepers, changed incentives for content providers, and promoted the rise of unprofessional and/or unscrupulous outlets capable of drawing large audiences at a low cost. The modification of the rhythms and language of information experts (Carlson 2018; Waisbord 2018) has accelerated the production of information, which impinges on people’s emotional sphere, and people do tend to rely on debunked falsehoods when these portray their own view (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Lewandowsky et al. 2012). So, even after fakes are denounced as such, they have already produced effects at a subconscious level that tend to persist, despite their possible disapproval.

Finally, we have to be careful about the use of fakes as a scapegoat for events which are actually determined by other factors. To put it more simply: is it realistic to assert that President Trump was elected thanks to the Russians (through hacking and leaking operations targeted at the Democratic Party, personal attacks on Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, cyberattacks on voter databases),⁴ or is it plausible to claim that the Russians have helped the pro-Leave faction prevail in the Brexit referendum (anti-immigrant and pro-Brexit messages spread, narratives presumably spread by Russian bots and accounts)?⁵ Even if these actions were to be proved, the question is to what extent this kind of external interference can be deemed responsible for phenomena caused by a multitude of other factors. In other words, while not underestimating the political impact of the use of the technological tools available, we should avoid falling into the trap of oversimplified explanations of complex political events. To assess the impact of information manipulation, therefore, we need a perspective that can account for the complexity of politics. It is also very difficult to establish a correlation between the surge of fake news and the consequent change of the recipients' political behaviour. The possible impact of fake news on actual electoral outcomes remains a highly contested issue, while it seems clear that electoral behaviour still depends primarily on socio-economic factors or people's positioning within social systems. In one of the first academic studies about the consumption of fake news, researchers at Princeton, Dartmouth and the University of Exeter estimated that about 25% of Americans visited a fake news website in a six-week period around the time of the 2016 US election; nevertheless, the researchers also found that the visits were highly concentrated – 10% of readers made 60% of the visits. Crucially, the researchers concluded that “fake news does not crowd out hard news consumption” (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2018). Further research in this field would be very valuable indeed.

Contrasting fake news

The debate on how to react to the omnipresence of fake news is lively, and solutions are very diversified. They range from legislating news media, to tweaking algorithms and moderating content, to adopting ‘softer’ approaches such as fact-checking, debunking, and investing in media literacy education (Fioriglio 2019; Friesem 2019; Graves 2018; Council of the European Union 2016; Select Committee on Communications 2019). Automated verification of rumours using machine learning algorithms (Vosoughi, Mohsenvand and Roy 2017) and real-time fact-checks (Bode and Vraga 2015; Sethi 2017) are also tools available for unveiling fake news. Recent scholarship has evidenced that false news spreads quicker and deeper than true information (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018). Therefore, *a posteriori* debunking and fact-checking tools might not be adequate to stop the flow of online fake news (Chan et al. 2017; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017). Some researchers are now considering pre-emptive ways of mitigating the

problem (van der Linden et al. 2017; Roozenbeek and van der Linden 2019). The main thrust of this research is to prevent false narratives from taking root in memory in the first place, focussing specifically on the process of pre-emptive debunking or so-called ‘pre-bunking’.

Any attempt to fight fake news lies at the limen between control and freedom. Control easily provides an excuse for authoritarian states to silence dissenting voices. The fight against fakes opens up another huge political problem: the role of transnational social media companies – e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter – which, by aligning with states’ and international organisations’ instructions, or by filling an international legislative gap, create their own codes of conduct, giving rise to a sort of (informal) governance in the field. By filling the legislative gap, they could become instruments of surveillance and control without any authority or political institution supervising their activity. After having initially downplayed the potential influence of fake news, Facebook has acknowledged the importance of detection and reporting, adding warning labels to untrustworthy pages, and ensuring a crackdown on for-profit fake news pages. Twitter also reacted, developing an experimental prototype feature that allows users to report fake news, and exploring the use of machine learning to detect automated accounts spreading political content (NED 2017).

It is clear that social media companies, by deleting, demonetising or disincen-tivising content that is deemed problematic, exert a backfiring potential, since algorithms are not yet extremely accurate in deciding what counts as problematic content. Fact-checking organisations such as Snopes, or dedicated task forces who work on debunking viral fake news stories – such as the East StratCom Task Force of the EU’s European External Action Service,⁶ or the European Parliament Unit in Charge of Disinformation – are also pullulating (Roozenbeek and van der Linden 2019). Lastly, media literacy initiatives are becoming quite widespread, but they only touch upon young people who are currently enrolled in education cycles.⁷

An analytical compass for exploring post-truth politics

In the figure below, we have summarised the main features of the general phenomenon that we call information manipulation in an attempt to cover the different stages of production, diffusion, detection, and counteraction of manipulated information, and point out the nature and identity of the producers and spreaders of manipulated information. Furthermore, the chart outlines the channels and tools used for the construction, diffusion, and detection of manipulated information, as well as the effects produced and the modalities available to fight the phenomenon and neutralise its political implications. The figure should offer readers a cognitive scheme of reference for better placing the phenomenon, while at the same time highlighting the complexity of the information manipulation circuit. It is exactly such a complexity that originates what has been called post-truth politics.

An analytical compass for exploring post-truth politics

FIGURE 0.1 Post-truth politics

Outline of the book

In order to navigate our way through the dark forest of disinformation and fake news, we have gathered a group of scholars from various disciplines (political science, law, political philosophy, journalism, and computer science) and practitioners who have contributed to highlight the many aspects of post-truth politics, each inspecting the different phases involved (creation, diffusion, detection) and the challenges they pose to democracy. The volume is articulated in three parts: I) Post-truth politics and the challenges to democracy, II) From disinformation to post-truth politics: Evidences from Russia, III) Dilemmas of contrasting disinformation and fake news.

Part I helps in contextualising the phenomena investigated, offering some definitions and discussing key concepts as well as the aspects linked to the manipulation of information systems, considering in particular its reverberation on democracy. In Chapter 1, Federica Merenda proposes a reflection on relevant concepts and paradigms elaborated in Hannah Arendt's works, which contribute to clarify the relation between (the different kinds of) truth, (the different kinds of) lying and politics in contemporary democracies. In Chapter 2, Elisa Piras addresses the problem of how increasing inequalities affect the public sphere in contemporary democratic societies, reconstructing the main ideas in the ongoing discussions about the transformation of the public sphere and the implications of persistent inequalities for epistemic justice, highlighting the negative effects that spreading fake news, disinformation, and post-truth narratives can have for marginalised individuals and groups. In Chapter 3, Liza Ireni-Saban and Maya Sherman bridge two topical academic discussions, commenting on the potential heuristic value of their interplay: on the one hand, the debate about the intersectional dimension of discrimination and oppression which stemmed from the recent contributions to

feminist reflection; on the other hand, the ethical implication of the production and use of artificial intelligence.

In Chapter 4, Jennifer Cassidy shows how fake news and post-truth politics can impact on crucial decisions citizens are called to take, as in the case of the United Kingdom's referendum of 2016 on the country's place in the EU. The link between information and democratic policy-making is further explored in Chapter 5 by Matthew Loveless, who underlines that the Internet, and social media in particular, continues to undermine rather than strengthen any substantive link between information and democracy. The chapter posits that fake news is the description of strategic emotional weapons that cultivate political division in order to maintain the status quo and that, despite this, fake news is merely a covariate, rather than a determinant, of the failed linkage between information and democracy. In Chapter 6, Luigi Curini and Eugenio Pizzimenti investigate the possible impact of fake news on actual electoral outcomes. They argue that this remains a highly contested issue, with scarce empirical evidence to support the claim that the spreading of fake news changes electors' choices. The available scientific literature seems to confirm that people will tend to consume the news (including fake news) that confirms their partisan ideas and, precisely for this reason, the impact of fake news on voting choice will be negligible. Chapter 7, the last of this section, benefits from the experience of Alice Hazelton as a Science Programme Specialist at the World Economic Forum. The author discusses how the Covid-19 pandemic and the related political and economic crisis has highlighted science's vital role in society, also constituting a perfect occasion for the intense production of fake news spurring on new tensions and competition among states.

Part II considers the phenomenon of disinformation, fake news and post-truth politics in the context of Russia – an especially telling case for the present discussion, since it can be considered as a sort of laboratory for discerning the phases of creation and diffusion and for envisaging the ways to counteract disinformation and fake news. In chapter 8, Anna Zafesova argues that, in Russia, the monopoly of the truth is a tool of power and disrupting this monopoly amounts to demolishing the altered version of reality that the regime produces and reproduces daily. The author believes that the disclosure of an alternative truth is the main goal for the anti-Putin opposition in Russia as it was for the Soviet-era dissidents. Fighting the manipulation, the omission, and the ideological interpretation of the truth is the main weapon, not only to defend democracy from Russian attacks, but also to dismantle the Russian regime. On the same line, in Chapter 9 Francesco Bechis explains how the concept of sharp power is well suited for capturing Russia's 'information warfare' as a foreign policy tool. According to the author, government-led propaganda is one of the pillars Russian 'sharp power' stands on. It can take the shape of disinformation campaigns channelled through official media or it can be fuelled through cyber-operations led by hackers affiliated with government agencies. Mara Morini, in Chapter 10, evidences that the post-truth era is based on a variety of elements such as the spreading of fake news and cyber-space attacks that might reinforce Putin's domestic legitimacy while deteriorating

the country's external relations. Part II ends with Chapter 11, in which Giorgio Comai points out that, while Russian meddling in other countries has obtained extensive media attention and has led to increased pressure on policy makers and big tech companies to find ways to protect democracy from undue external interference, we must also acknowledge that there is little of specifically foreign (or Russian) in the vulnerabilities that made Russian meddling possible. Russian activism should, in other ways, be an opportunity for other countries to take action against structural vulnerabilities which make them more permeable to any sort of foreign interference. The author underlines that detecting and reacting to external interferences is inextricably intertwined with the broader issue of managing and regulating the privately owned online public spaces that have become a central component of contemporary democracies.

Part III investigates how disinformation and misinformation are affecting Western and Central European political systems. Comparing cases is a difficult task: complete and standard data have yet to be collected, and the complexity of the phenomena poses non-trivial methodological challenges: individuals, groups, and states can easily produce and spread manipulated information from anywhere, and this can be used in a myriad of manners. As a result, contrasting manipulated information is a difficult task and it needs well-framed strategies; those, however, should not endanger the quality of democracy. In Chapter 12, computer scientists and physicians Guido Caldarelli, Rocco De Nicola, Marinella Petrocchi, and Fabio Saracco use Twitter as a benchmark to analyse the flow of information within and between members of different communities and study the dynamics of interaction and the role of automated accounts in such exchanges. Specifically, they consider the propagation of Italian tweets concerned with two topics: migration flows in the Mediterranean and Covid-19. Their analysis shows that bots play a central role in the exchange of significant content, and that the so-called hub nodes (i.e. the most effective accounts in significantly propagating their messages and therefore the most listened to) have high numbers of bots among their followers. This is particularly evident for the migration flows scenario. In Chapter 13, Manuela Caiani and Pál Susánszky focus on how different types of radical right political organisations (both political parties and more informal groups, such as movements) in four Central European countries (Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Poland) use the web. By conducting a formalised content analysis of their websites, the authors investigate, from a comparative perspective, the degree and forms of political activism with a particular attention to visual and textual mobilisation and political engagement. The results are presented in a cross-regional perspective, as similarities and differences among the various organisations in the four analysed CEE countries are compared to the radical right cyber activism in Western Europe. In Chapter 14, Mihail Stojanoski examines the effects of recent German legislation regulating the spread of disinformation and fake news by reviewing a recent example involving a prominent German journalist, Claas Relotius, who embellished and invented stories for *Der Spiegel* for years. It then briefly presents the basic elements of the new German piece of

legislation which targets the spread of disinformation (NetzDG). The author suggests that individual responsibility of the news consumer should be prevalent and form the basis of any anti-disinformation policy if modern societies are to preserve and promote free press and freedom of expression, especially given the practical and legislative limitations that exist in this field. The reflection on how to fight fake news continues in Chapter 15 as Urban Larssen considers the strengthening of fact-checking routines within the journalistic ranks that is intimately linked with journalistic professional integrity. The chapter builds on ethnographic material gathered in three Swedish news rooms on local, regional, and national level which formed part of a larger project aimed at developing a digital tool that can assist journalists in their everyday fact-checking routines. Through interviews and participant observation, the study enquired about the needs and interests for this kind of tool. The journalists expressed both need and interest, but they also had reservations regarding institutionalised forms of fact-checking, arguing, for example, that it may lead to increased control over the employees from an employer's perspective. Finally, in Chapter 16, Matteo Monti offers a legal point of view on the legal instruments which are currently available for tackling disinformation and misinformation. The author analyses the legal tools enacted by the EU to cope with the spread of fake news on the Internet and to explore the limitations and risks implied. The EU's actions are discussed in light of the question of the free speech constitutional guarantees provided by the member states, which can limit the EU Commission's space of action in this field. The chapter will discuss the genesis as well as the aims of the 'Code of Practice on Disinformation' in regards to the issue of the privatisation of censorship on the Internet. Allowing Internet platforms to censor fake news without their procedure being in any way controlled by public authorities could lead to the emergence of a situation where we could have the 'privatisation of censorship,' as the regime of semi-monopoly in which Google and Facebook are acting in Europe shows.

Notes

- 1 The fundamental document, which is commonly known as the Action Plan on Disinformation, is the Joint Communication by the European Commission and the High Representative to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (5 December 2018, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/eu-communication-disinformation-euco-05122018_en.pdf).
- 2 The banknotes were produced by Bath for Europe – a grassroots group which campaigns to stop Britain leaving the EU – and have already been distributed in thousands at anti-Brexit rallies. They carry the faces of Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg; the Johnson design, based on a £10 note, carries the slogan: "I promise not to pay the NHS the sum of £350m pounds," while the "£50 guinea" Rees-Mogg version declares: "I promise to pay myself more than you," and carries the fake motto: "Arrogantus Toffo Posterium".
- 3 See the video produced by BBC, *Coronavirus: False claims by politicians debunked – BBC News*, www.bbc.com/news/av/52299689/coronavirus-false-claims-by-politicians-debunked, 16 April 2020, reporting some fake news on the origin of the virus and involvement of countries.

- 4 US intelligence and special counsel Robert Mueller, for the investigation on Russia's interference in the US 2016 presidential race, has affirmed that a broad effort by Russian intelligence and a Russian social media group, the Internet Research Agency, has helped Donald Trump and damaged Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. Mueller's report, released in April 2019, documented attempts by Trump's campaign to cooperate with the Russians.
- 5 It is said that Russian trolls sent thousands of messages with the hashtag #ReasonsToLeaveEU on the day of UK's referendum on EU membership. According to Twitter, the fake accounts tweeted 1,102 posts with this hashtag. The Russian-linked accounts tweeted the phrase "Brexit" more than 4,400 times during their period of activity, although mostly after the referendum had taken place.
- 6 The East StratCom Task Force was created in 2015 with a mandate to combat fake news emanating from Russia, which had been identified as one of the biggest proponents of information warfare against the EU. In 2017, two additional Task Forces were established, focussing on Europe's South and the Western Balkans.
- 7 There are many programmes run by the EU (see the Media Literacy programme) and other organisations, such as UNESCO (e.g. Coalition of Information and Media Users in South East Europe, www.cimusee.org/mil-resources/organizations-initiatives-projects/european-charter-on-media-literacy/) or UNICEF (www.unicef.org/georgia/press-releases/developing-media-literacy-skills-young-people).

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