

# REGIMES OF TRUTH IN THE COMMUNICATION AND REPORTING OF THE EUROPEAN UNION POST-TRUTH, POST-PROPAGANDA OR JUST...PROPAGANDA?

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## ABSTRACT

The debate on the problems and future of the EU, both in the 'anti-European' and 'pro-European' camps, is characterized by the exclusive emphasis on 'what might be true' and not on the whole spectrum of reality. Thus, there is need to problematize the supposed 'imminent threat' of 'post-truth'. Any discussion regarding the 'post-truth challenge' for today's Europe in general cannot be productive if we do not take into account the developments associated with the characteristics of information management. There is a need to juxtapose the 'post-truth' of the post-modern and post-industrial communication environment with the modernist notion of propaganda, not only to acquire the adequate theoretical evidence in order to assess whether we are dealing with a new phenomenon (post-truth), a 'new' version of an 'old' phenomenon (post-propaganda), but also to identify similarities and differences in terms of their causes, characteristics and possible implications for the EU.

Keywords: Post-truth, fake-news, propaganda, post-propaganda, information management, European Union.

## INTRODUCTION

Europe is faced with a political reality in which a complex set of assertions and claims are not in discord with established and verified facts, especially when regarding the 'truths' which serve agendas of politicians and media that are critical to the EU. Their rhetoric and narratives, which exploit the insecurity of European societies, invests on simple emotive arguments concerning 'control', 'power' and 'sovereignty', blended and set against 'the other' in the form of 'immigrants', 'foreigners', 'European bureaucrats'. Such discourses, facilitate an 'anti-European' narrative that ignores the historical reality that made the project of integration possible as the political antithesis to a nationalistic Europe and the physical and moral devastation that had emerged from the 2nd WW.

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As Quatremer (2017) indicates, this is clear in criticisms that populist political and media rhetoric have been able to exploit. The EU, for example, it is suggested was created behind closed doors. Right, but how else could European integration begin at the end of the 2nd World War. Often it is also argued that the EU is the new USSR. How can this be the case? It was not founded by a state that forced its authority on others by military force. The EU is a voluntary association of sovereign states, and Brexit shows that any state can leave the Union. There is no central European power; all decisions are made by the member states. The supreme body in the Union is the European Council, composed of heads of state or government, and the Commission only executes the European Council or the Council of Ministers' decisions. In addition, and despite the increasingly large influence of the EU upon national parliaments, Parliamentary activity, education, research, labour legislation, social security, justice, defence, foreign policy and fiscal policy are still decided by the states. Another criticism is that the EU is technocratic and disconnected. True, but one also needs to consider that the EU operates with 28 (soon to be 27) member states that bargain and nominate Presidents and Commissioners which are not only capable to deal with real problems, but also have to deal with leaders of the member states that leave all the thorniest issues to be dealt by the EU. A failing euro, unmanageable enlargement, an incoherent and costly institutional set-up, and a failing Schengen area are the problems today's EU leaders inherited.

Given the campaign that led to Brexit in June 2016 (as well as the election of Trump to the Presidency of the USA in November), the Oxford Dictionary in 2016 brought to light the notion of 'post-truth', defining it as relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Economist 2016). Characteristic is the decision of the of the Hungarian government to hold a referendum on the reallocation of refugees across the EU in 2016, (which would mean Hungary receiving 1,294 asylum seekers), a decision which inundated public spaces and the media with the following messages: that the Paris terror attacks were carried out by immigrants, that nearly one million immigrants want to come to Europe from Libya alone and that since the start of the refugee crisis, harassment of women has increased in Europe. Indicative is also the debate on the amount of money the UK gives to the EU during the referendum debate of 2016. The argument was the EU cost the UK over £350 million every week – nearly £20 billion a year. EU membership does come at a financial cost, but it's not £350 million a week. The UK's discount, or rebate, reduces what we would otherwise be liable to pay. In 2015, The UK paid the EU an estimated £13 billion, or £250 million a week. Some of that money came back in EU payments funneled through the government, so the government's 'net contribution' was around £8.5 billion, or £160 million a week. The EU also spends money directly – in grants to British researchers, for instance.

Right, but the denial to understand the historical and political forces that are at play within the EU must not only be attributed to 'post-truth' discourse and politics, as mainstream politicians and media have repeatedly invested on the selfish quality of perceived realities, through the implementation of propagandistic campaigns. In fact, the narratives of the mainstream media and 'pro-European' politicians, for example, (mis) represented the debt-crisis as a predominantly economic one, rather than addressing the political concerns of European citizens. As studies have shown (Tamsin

Murray-Leach 2014:3-4) “the framing of the EU is one that discursively rules out alternatives to the prominent executive actors and their prescribed solutions, and which maintains political Europe as a distant ‘other’ to the majority of Europeans. The crisis is portrayed as an abstract given, virtually a ‘supernatural phenomenon’, and almost exclusively as an economic one, and as a consequence rules out discussions of agency, of causes, or of how the crisis might be overcome. Furthermore, in analyzing the sources of these narratives, these studies have also found that there is a frequent misreading of ‘media discourse’ as ‘public discourse’, which both assumes that there is a dialogical relationship between European citizens and European policy makers where none exists, and leads both researchers and policymakers to overlook genres of discourse that have the potential to revitalize the European project from the bottom-up. The result is a de-politicization not only of the crisis, but of the European institutions that are seen to manage it. ‘Politics’ becomes remote machinery, led by executives, which the average European has no chance of affecting. It is a narrative that perpetuates the opinions of the actors’ interviews in our first study: that formal politics have failed, and that Europe, as a political space, is invisible.”

In fact, in a study of the ARENA EuroDiv project (Michailidou & Trenz 2014:214) it was found that the political actors in decision-making positions dominate media coverage of the Eurocrisis in professional news platforms and their public statements virtually never contain any critique or hint of doubt of their own actions. This combined with the seemingly ‘neutral’ crisis framing that news reporters adopt – namely, most frequently simply presenting the actions of various decision-makers as facts rather than provide commentary or analysis of those – leaves the technocratic hegemony discourse virtually unchallenged. The study, which included the two most popular online news media in France, Germany, Greece, Norway, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK, focused on coverage of the agreement on Greece’s ‘bail-out’ and establishment of the EFSF in May 2010, the 2011 announcement by then-Prime Minister George Papandreou, of a referendum on whether Greece would accept a second loan agreement and the ratification by the German parliament of the second loan agreement for Greece in December 2012. Of the 3,405 actors found in the analyzed news items, 87 per cent (2,962) were decision or policy-makers in political or technocratic roles. Nearly a quarter of all actors found in the selected news items (24 per cent or 809 actors) were Troika institutions or their representatives (European Central Bank, the IMF and the Commission). In addition, 40 per cent of the articles analyzed (462 articles) presented the crisis and/or the specific crisis event in a neutral manner, i.e. without providing an evaluation of the reported actions or attributing responsibility to any actors. Only 374 of the analyzed articles contained some type of analysis or commentary.

Indicative is how the media framed the Italian Referendum vote in November 2016. The main argument, spread with great effectiveness was that a No vote to the Italian constitutional reform would mean a victory for populists in Europe, thus fatally damaging an already vulnerable European democracy. With a few exceptions, international media coverage has constantly compared the Italian Constitutional referendum with the Brexit vote (or the catastrophic election of Trump). As Brevini (2016) has shown, most of the coverage coming from news outlets opted for variations of three messages; coincidentally the strongest slogans spread by the Italian government. First, the idea that the constitutional reform proposed by Prime Minister Renzi was the that this constitutional reform was the only way to secure more efficient and stable governance,

sustained economic growth and foreign investments. In supporting this narrative, the media not only forgot to underline that the Italian constitution was born as a major political compromise after twenty years of fascism, and as such resulted in a very modern and flexible Constitution that can easily adapt to the needs of current national decision-making processes, but also to take into account highly authoritative arguments expressed by of Italian constitutional experts that stressed that the reform left too much power in the hands of the executive and extended parliamentary immunity to the new members of the reformed senate. Second, that if the that if a NO vote was to prevail, Italy would have inevitably exit the EU. To begin with, however, not only the Italian constitution forbids any referendum on international treaties, but also, as surveys indicated, 58% of the Italians favored the EU (compared with 50% in Germany and 44% in the UK and 27% in France). Third, that the political upheaval which would be created by a potential No victory would impinge on plans to recapitalize the country's problematic banks. An argument that was diffused especially by business media outlets, although they knew that Italy's debt and banking problems are well documented and would not have been solved by the current proposed constitutional reform.

It is clear, therefore, that the debate on the problems and future of the EU, both in the 'anti-European' and 'pro-European' camps, is characterized by the exclusive emphasis on 'what might be true' and not on the whole spectrum of reality: what 'feels right' or 'should be true' (Economist 2016). This way of thinking is not new. In the 1950's Senator Joseph McCarthy's invested on 'anti-American' activities. After 09/11 many Americans believed that the attack was an 'inside job', which spread far and wide among left-wingers, and became conventional wisdom in the Arab world. As Lloyd (2017) has written "lies, persuasion, hypocrisy and flattery have always attended public life; alternative facts and fake news have been part of the feedstock of politics and journalism for centuries." As he argues,

*"In Britain's 1945 general election campaign, the then Conservative prime minister Winston Churchill warned that a Labour government "would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo" to subdue resistance to its socialist programme. Three years later Aneurin Bevan, hero of Labour's left and political midwife of the National Health Service, said at a rally in Manchester that he considered the Conservatives "lower than vermin. They condemned millions of first-class people to semi-starvation . . . they have not changed, or if they have, they are slightly worse." Those who voted Conservative in 1945 — and lost — mostly did not think that Labour, led by the modest, bourgeois Clement Attlee, would transform itself into the Gestapo. The majority who had voted Labour did not think the Tory supporters (a sizeable number of whom were working class) verminous. Both groups looked past lying abuse to what they saw as the truth: that their leaders had signalled, dramatically, which side they were on. Like the Americans who voted for Donald Trump as president last November, they took their candidates not literally, but seriously."*

Thus, there is need to problematize the supposed 'imminent threat' of 'post-truth' to the EU. Any discussion regarding the 'post-truth challenge' for today's Europe in general cannot be productive if we do not take into account the developments associated with

the characteristics of information management. There is a need to juxtapose the 'post-truth' of the post-modern and post-industrial communication environment with the modernist notion of propaganda, not only to acquire the adequate theoretical evidence in order to assess whether we are dealing with a new phenomenon (post-truth), a 'new' version of an 'old' phenomenon (post-propaganda), but also to identify similarities and differences in terms of their causes, characteristics and possible implications for the EU.

### **INFORMATION MANAGEMENT**

Modern societies have been information societies since their very beginning (Giddens 1987: 27). Contemporary western societies are 'information societies', since their information structures have become the basic sources of productivity and power, due to the new technological achievements (Gleick 2011) and the orientation of the financial activity in immaterial symbolic commodities (Lash & Urry 1996: 204-210). According to Castells, the networks created within the digital space have re-enforced the conquest of information (Castells 1998: 338). Regarding the production and exchange of messages (and thus information), the network infrastructure 'opposes' -in communication terms- the rationale of the unilateral and concentrated, as regards its sources, traditional massive communication. The most prevalent cultural effect of the network society is the ability everyone has for customized interaction and access to information. Key players in this information frenzy, either in or out of the digital world are the mass media. The information circulating through the mass media contain 'values' and 'ideology', occupy the majority of the public sphere and contribute to its constitution (Meyer & Hinchmann 2008: 24, 53).

The mass media focus on specific issues and disseminate specific standards of social behavior. At the same time, the mass media are social institutions, which include and exclude, unite and divide people. In this way, the mass media familiarize people with a system of common beliefs and expectations (Berkowitz 1997: 397 onwards). The mass media in both historical and contemporary terms have been major actors in the formation of social reality (Burr 2006). The cardinal contribution of the mass media to the formation of modern culture has led to an increasing control of the information flows, on behalf of the information managers. The control and management of information are considered to be of utmost importance and the practices ensuring the pluralistic coverage of events are being restricted or even eliminated (Williams 2003: 221).

Among the most important characteristics of the 20th century is the intensification of persuasion efforts. Through the evolution of the audiovisual electronic media (radio, television), the 'conscience industry', hence the public opinion formation industry, has become the pacemaker of the socio-financial evolution of late/post-industrial societies. The so called 'information management' is a fundamental characteristic of contemporary societies and defines the elaboration and dissemination of specific information -mainly from professionals of communication management-, aiming at influencing the public opinion in terms of politics, consumption and culture in specific ways. Information management is the nodal point of the methods followed by contemporary political and financial power mechanisms to maintain or enhance their cohesion and reproduce their power structures (Tumber 1993). Due to the prevalence of the mass media in the production and dissemination of information, information is not just the event that takes place outside the media and is simply reported by the media, but the event modified and represented by the media, since the mass media (traditional and new) are the main

dissemination channels for advertisement and public relations, political actors, corporations and any other interest groups (Webster 2006: 168).

Information management is part of perception management. Perception management includes the -aligned with specific interests- attempt to influence the public opinion and the adoption of the influence tactics to the rationale of media used to disseminate the pre-managed information. Under this scope, information becomes a specific means of (re)orientation of power structures, a means for constructing reality (Terranova 2004: 37). In the communication domain, there is a high percentage of unreliable information production and dissemination. Nowadays, a major part of information is actually misinformation, due to various interests –political and financial- that have created and formed its presentation (Webster 2006: 162). Those messages not only try to persuade us through interaction and the analytical presentation of arguments (persuasion), but through the use of symbols and techniques causing sentimental reactions, the one-sided presentation of evidence, the selective presentation of the aspects of a certain issue as well, even with lies. Such actions, driven by specific vested interests, may well lead to propaganda (Edelstein 1997, Webster 2006: 168).

In an age of managed information, hence our actions should aim to recognize propaganda for what it actually is: a form of communication (Jowett & O' Donnell 2006) and part of our everyday life (Taylor 2003: 321). Propaganda is a part of contemporary reality. It is placed within the social, political, and financial activity of modern societies. Propaganda constitutes a rational, deliberate, mainly political, communication process, exercised through the dissemination of managed information via the mass media. Propagandistic communication strategies take advantage of communication environments to spread their doctrines and influence as many people as possible. Propaganda can actually be considered as a foundation element of the 'construction' of social, political and financial 'realities' and of the exercise of influence -in favor of the propagandist- in a unilateral way to the views, opinions and behaviors of the subjects that act within these realities.

### **PROPAGANDA IN THE DIFFERENT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS OF MODERNITY**

As a socio-historical condition, modernity engulfs internal evolutions and discontinuities. For the scope of the current research, we distinguish three different phases, whose discrimination is based on qualitative criteria: early modernity and modernity -distinguishable phases of modernity- and late/post modernity, which has come to succeed modernity. The transition from one period to another is based on the development of specific tendencies in financial, political and cultural level, which replace or complement former characteristics in the structure and function of society (see Table 1).

During the financial, political and cultural context of early modernity, when coercion was the prevalent force for the implementation of the will of the divine right power propaganda had a restricted role, being implemented mainly during wartime (Taylor 2003: 87-96), through the dissemination of print media (e.g. leaflets, early forms of Press). Propaganda had a complementary role to coercion policies, since the use of (military) force against external and internal enemies of established political and financial regimes and power centers was common practice. Since modernity, political and financial

leaderships deal with a politically active audience influencing political decisions. Hence, the elites are in the need of legitimizing their policies to a politicized audience. The modernization of politics, through the generalization of political participation contributed to the generalization of propaganda, implemented mainly through the manipulation of citizens, via a network of subordinated media (Crook, Pakulski & Waters 1992: 20).

During modernity, an array of new -at that time- media came to surface. Along with the Press, whose technological advancements allowed the massive print of newspapers on a daily basis, the emergence of cinema, radio and television (audiovisual media) gave new impetus to the application of propaganda in all different aspects of social activity. Cinema, as a newly established medium, was widely used to propagate national, social and financial messages (McQuail 2010). Radio was used for propagandistic purposes as well, offering for the first time in history the ability to transmit sound messages to long distances in almost real time. The emergence of television and the gradual creation of a wide variety of entertainment and news programmes marked the radical development of new propagandistic strategies (Curran-Gurevitch 2001: 130). Given that television news is particularly susceptible to distortion, since it is structured around striking visuals and sound bite commentary, news is not neutral but the manufactured production of ideology.

The audiovisual media (cinema, radio, television) of the 20th century disseminated information in a unilateral way -their discourse was an 'unanswered' discourse (Poster 1990: 17). Their 'grammar' enabled political and financial leadership to control their content (Hanretty 2011: 46, 15-17), form the necessary conditions for the exercise of propaganda -aiming at imposing a top-down control of the public sphere- and increase the reach of propaganda messages (Jowett & O' Donnell, 2015: 391). The media of modernity (Press, radio, television) were placed under the ideological control of the nation-state, either directly (public media) or indirectly (private media) (Gans 2003: 46-49), having as their main aim to serve a specific financial, political and social organization, the hierarchical organizational rationale of the nation-state. The nation-centric propaganda aimed at the creation of a state of ideological normality, the exercise of a specific kind of social control, seeking to diminish any kind of internal -in the form of class struggle-, or external -in the form of military action- threats. The development of one-way traditional media is closely bound to the concentrating production model and the unilateral massive communication model of modernity.

Modernity has been succeeded by late/post-modernity, during which several new tendencies have emerged. In financial terms, there is an increase in the use of automation, a decrease of manual labor, an increasingly non-hierarchical structure of labor, a privatization of collective consumption and an almost total conquest of capitalism worldwide. In politics, late/post-modernity brings about the emergence of hyper-national political institutions, which partially divide the nation from the state, reduction in the concentration of the nation-state, financial streamlining of the social rights and a shift of power from the political to financial priorities. The state can no longer guarantee the prosperity of the people, thus causing a condition of social insecurity and unrest.

In addition, a technological communication revolution has taken place. Information exchange is not subject to temporal or spatial restrictions anymore. Information is instantly available and can be stored and retrieved whenever and wherever needed. The internet is the epitome of this information revolution. The new way of information circulation and its personalized reception has influenced the rationale of propaganda

within the new informational space. Propaganda seeks to create a critical mass of interlocutors/followers that spreads propagandistic messages, using both sentimental and (one-sided) 'rational' argumentation. This allows propagandistic messages to gain multiple presence in different web places (news sites, blogs and social media), where they will try to prevail against a variety of antagonistic messages. In the multifaceted web universe, propagandistic information cannot totally undermine opposing messages (McNair 2006: 9). In contrast to the 'propaganda-exclusive' media of modernity, the post-modern internet is a 'propaganda-inclusive' medium. In that sense, it engulfs the production and dissemination of multiple -in ideological terms- (propagandistic) messages/opinions within a single (but not homogeneous) communication space.

In the internet, due to its interactive character and the increased expression of personal subjective opinions, we encounter an increased amount of subjective interpretation concerning the financial, political and cultural aspects of society. The fragmentation of news sources has created an atomized world in which lies, rumor and gossip spread with alarming speed. Lies that are widely shared online within a network, whose members trust each other more than they trust any mainstream-media source, can quickly take on the appearance of truth. The equation of all participants in online communication -any single user can openly express her/his own opinion on something and send it to hundreds, thousands, even millions of others almost instantaneously (Jowett & O' Donnell, 2015: 394)- facilitates propaganda, since the verification of the source's identity can become a difficult, if not impossible -in several cases- task. The active role of the online users 'forces' propaganda to become more specific. Online propagandistic discourse must appear to be less generic compared to traditional media and focus on facts, in order to increase its persuasiveness and fight the extensive counter-argumentation. The news 'apparatus' includes nowadays literally millions of channels, websites, social media feeds, in addition to the golden age network news channels and national newspapers. The news is composed of millions of beeps and vibrations, revolving tickers that shape-shift and/or disappear by the second, and news unfolds in a highly affectively charged attention economy of constantly connected cognition. Within this communication context, unreliable information, which is deliberately intended to deceive (misinformation), stands among the biggest issues. The difficulty for the verification of the information source along with the expression of personal opinions brings forward a 'new propaganda', expressed mainly through personal opinions, which seeks to spread as widely as possible, in order to avoid isolation (Barber 2017).

Table 1: Propaganda characteristics per period of modernity

Propaganda characteristics			
Propaganda and...	Early Modernity (nightwatch state, limited political participation, unorganized capitalism, print media)	Modernity (intervening state, generalized political participation, politicized public opinion, organized capitalism, print and audiovisual media under direct/indirect state control)	Late/post Modernity (decreased state power, generalized political participation, 'cynical' public opinion, electronic media/convergence of print, audiovisual and electronic media)
Social organization	Fragmented- instrumental rationale, subject to coercion	Ingredient of the social, financial, political structure (perception management)	Ingredient of the social, financial, political structure (perception management)
Factors forming propaganda	Fragmented control, by secular power, by the church, by the publishers	State controlled (through the control of the media) + rationale of the medium (the 'grammar' of each medium forms the way information is being broadcast)	Propaganda + rationale of the medium (the 'grammar' and the policy of each medium forms the way information is being broadcast)
Main aim	Enforcement of the decisions of elites	Justification of the hierarchical structure of society	Management of insecurity caused by the deterioration of hierarchical social structure
Relationship to political power	Complement of coercion towards a limited politically active group of society	Justification of policies to a politicized audience	Justification of policies to a non-politicized/'cynical' audience
Content of public mass communication	Diversification of news from comments, fiction from facts, opinion article from research	Entertaining characteristics in political news content	Blending of information and entertainment in fragmented and with reduced political orientation content, conquest of personal opinion

### PROPAGANDA METHODS

The first organization to systematically analyze propaganda methods was the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), which named seven propaganda methods: name calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking and bandwagon. Based on the rationale of the IPA, Conserva (2003) presented 89 different propaganda methods, dividing them into seven general categories (faulty logic, diversion or evasion, appeal to the emotions, falsehood or trickery, playing on human behavioral tendencies, methods of style and methods of reason and common sense). According to Snow (2002: 40), basic propaganda characteristics are its intentional communication practice, planned to influence the behavior of the target audience and the dissemination of unilateral information. Propaganda techniques include the selective publication of evidence or partly presented facts, the stressing out threats or dangers, the 'demonization' of the 'enemy', the interpretation of facts in very specific ways and taking

advantage of methods and arguments aiming at both the rationale and the sentiments of the receivers. Among the variety of propagandistic methods, one can encounter:

1. Lies and the deliberate construction and dissemination of specific, usually unilateral, information.
2. The use of exaggeration aiming at the distortion of either positive or negative (for the propagandist) information.
3. The direct or indirect evocation to feelings (e.g. fear or desire).
4. The use of rhetoric frames to promote generic notions (e.g. trust, discreetness) and to organize the meaning and values in ways that favor the scopes of the propagandist.

### **PROPAGANDA AND POST-TRUTH**

The sudden and dramatic increase of the articulation of the term 'post-truth' in the public sphere is similar to the outburst of the discussion concerning propaganda in the aftermath of World War One. The extensive research on propaganda was initiated by the concerns of several prestigious academics of the early 20th century about the unilateral support of the Press -the powerful mass medium of that period- to President's Wilson choice to lead the United States in WWI. The consequent high number of deaths, caused by the War, led to the thorough examination of the unilateral, and thus propagandistic, support of the Press for the pro-war participation policy of the governing. The triggering event in the beginning of the 20th century was the communication policy of President Wilson concerning WWI, while nowadays the communication strategies of the BREXIT campaign and President Trump are the main reasons behind the extensive public discussion on post-truth (Davis 2017, D' Ancona 2017, Bull 2017).

'Post-truth', as noted above, is defined by the Oxford dictionary as an adjective "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". In its journalistic dimension, post-truth describes articles, which actually constitute an assemblage of facts, information, rumors, statements, rumors of statements, officials' estimations and predictions of future. Hence, post-truth signifies the existence of various grades of truth. Similarly, in post-truth politics truth is of secondary importance. Feelings, not facts, are what matter in this sort of campaigning. This definition of post-truth is directly equivalent -or even identical- to the approaches of propaganda, since it denotes an attempt to influence public opinion in favor of the producer and disseminator of post-truth information, through the use of specific discursive practices (opinions over facts, emotions over rationalism, half-truth or even lies -fake news- instead of research, rumors instead of cross-checked information). This condition describes conditions in the diachronic function of both the political and journalistic field.

Within this post-truth/propagandistic informational context, we encounter a specific category of pre-managed disseminated information, fake news. The word fake means not genuine-a forgery or a counterfeit. It implies an intent to deceive. Fake News is news items that are invented or distorted intentionally. Fake news grew out of the 2016 American presidential campaign and efforts by propagandists and pranksters to spread fabricated stories to exploit readers' biases. These stories imitated the style and appearance of real news articles, and they were published on sites designed to look like established newspaper websites or political blogs. These practices are not at all new in

the articulation of public discourse and the diachronic attempt of political elites to influence public opinion. As shown in the aforementioned theoretical approach, propaganda -the attempt to influence the opinion and behavior of the public, through the management of publicly disseminated information- is a strategy used by political actors since the ancient days and in a systematic way at least since the early modernity.

'Fake news' is nothing new. The so called yellow journalism goes back more than a hundred years. However, in October 2016 the term Fake News fell into the everyday language of the world. In theory, Fake News may be divided in two basic categories: fake news, which is made for profit and fake news functioning as propaganda meant to influence. Both these categories suggest an intentional dissemination of fabricated pieces of information, thus we have to pay attention to the intent, not the 'news'. In this rationale, fake news implies misinformation, which has been diachronically among the most prevalent techniques of propaganda. Thus -in many cases- the propagandistic use of the term stands for fake news as well. Due to the differentiation in the uses of the term, fake news has become imprecise, and partly drained of value. Several different things as political propaganda, falsified information, shoddy journalist work, things we don't like, get the label. For example, Trump and his surrogates quickly repurposed the phrase as a cudgel to bash truthful stories and credible outlets they disliked, and eventually 'fake news' has come to be applied, to everything from Breitbart News to Donald Trump's tweets to the media commentary of CNN. The varying conceptions of 'fake news' and how they are employed both as shields and swords, to protect the public discourse and to attack outlets and journalists have blurred the public perception of the term.

Just like propaganda, which because of its historical uses by totalitarian regimes acquired negative connotations, post-truth as a term incorporates an inherent negativism, due to its emergence in the public sphere after the propagandistic campaigns of Trump and BREXIT political representatives. Hence, the very use of the term post-truth -just like its predecessor, propaganda- has been propagandistic. Propaganda and post-truth, therefore, are closely connected to the (20th) century-long development of professional political and media communication, which -as a response to the modernization of politics- has figured masses of citizens, in democratic and totalitarian regimes, as 'risks' to be managed (for a brief comparative presentation of propaganda and post-truth, see Table 2). In addition, one should always bear in mind that the term propaganda and its contemporary equivalent, post-truth, denote the fight of ideologically different sides for the hearts and minds of the people, especially in times of politics that are characterized by deeper changes.

**Table 2: Comparative presentation of key aspects of propaganda and post-truth**

	Propaganda	Post-truth
Definition	Deliberate, mainly political, communication process, exercised through the dissemination of managed information via the mass media. Seeks to influence in a unilateral way views, opinions and behaviors	Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief
Communication environment	Unilateral mass communication/ interactive communication	Unilateral mass communication/ mainly interactive communication
Main aim	Influence public opinion	Influence public opinion
Discursive Characteristics	Emotion Personal opinions/beliefs Lies and the deliberate construction and dissemination of specific -unilateral- information	Emotion, Personal opinions/beliefs fake news
Approaches to the notion (+/- /0)	Predominantly negative	Negative

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU**

Although the EU has created a sense that collective action is needed on dealing with contemporary challenges, it has also exposed the difficulty it has when having to deal with them. Signs of this reality are everywhere in the EU: the impact of the USA financial bubble on European economic growth and debt accumulation, the impact of the refugee crisis, have, among other issues (ageing populations, rising social & technological inequalities), created a confidence crisis on the merits of the European integration. The main result of this development is that many citizens in member states of the EU attach little value to the opinions of experts, politicians and journalists as they failed not only to warn them about the risk of the 2008 financial crisis, but also because they disregard or minimize the effects of globalization, low economic performance and the skewed distribution of technological benefits.

Thus, by singling out 'post-truth' as a danger to the EU, does little to explain why a major section of the public in the United Kingdom appeared not to care about the deceit of the Brexit representatives (Martinson 2016). The public didn't take much notice of what the mainstream media had to say about the 'truth' and 'facts' of the EU. The mainstream media, stuck in their own bubble, are unable to properly connect with the frustration and anger of people and communities. Crouch (2004) has used the phrase 'post-democracy' to describe a model of politics, where a society continues to have and to use all the institutions of democracy, but in which the energy and innovative drive pass away from the democratic arena and into small circles of a politico-economic and media elite. Political debate certainly exists, but debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of experts in the techniques of persuasion. The global financial crisis, the consequent euro crisis, and growing evidence of the political power of giant

mass media corporations all suggest that the dominant forces in today's politics are not those of democratic will.

As the study of Kaldor & Selchow (2012) indicates, there is a fundamental mismatch between the narrative of 'crisis' in Europe held by policy-makers and discussed in the mainstream media, and the concerns of actors engaged in what she calls 'subterranean politics' – new political initiatives, and various forms of grassroots activism and protest that are not usually visible in mainstream political debate. While many of her interviewees regard themselves as European in terms of life experience, and many are concerned with and aware of global issues, Europe as a political community or a public space only seems to exist for a small 'expert' minority. In fact, the 'pro-European' initiatives for changing/reforming the EU come almost exclusively from what can be described as 'expert activists' – actors who tend to be institutionalized, working within elite policy-making circles in a top-down approach, following a logic of action referred to as 'the way of reason' – compared to the prefigurative, experimental, creative, bottom-up 'way of subjectivity' practiced by the majority of subterranean actors.

Thus, the misreading of what is currently going on in Europe discursively rules out alternatives. Instead of facilitating and cultivating a debate on the problems and future of European integration, the mainstream media communicates the policy choices of the EU as the 'only available alternative'. As Michailidou & Trenz (2013) indicate the policies of the EU are understood as 'facts' or 'functional imperatives', particularly in times of crisis when the leaders find it extremely impossible to reconcile crisis management with accountability. In fact, and as noted above, in a study of the ARENA EuroDiv project it was found that the political actors in decision-making positions dominate media coverage of the Eurocrisis in professional news platforms and their public statements virtually never contain any critique or hint of doubt of their own actions. This combined with the seemingly 'neutral' crisis framing that news reporters adopt – namely, most frequently simply presenting the actions of various decision-makers as facts rather than provide commentary or analysis of those – leaves the technocratic hegemony discourse virtually unchallenged.

Thus, in an environment where policy decisions are framed as 'inevitable', the critics of European integration invest on their own 'truth' of national sovereignty and the 'fact' that the EU is illegitimate. These critics diffuse a rhetoric that is particularly powerful in digital ecosystem in which individuals have growing opportunities to shape their media consumption around their own opinions and prejudices. However, mainstream parties also offer and implement policies that are clearly incompatible with each other (as for example austerity and development). This is not to agree with populism neither to deny its chauvinistic elements. Neither it is to deny that the EU today is more necessary than ever. As analysts, however, we do suspect that it is more than convenient for mainstream politicians and media to construct the narrative 'populists versus the rest'. Thus, we have to move beyond the argument of the 'ignorant' and 'disastrous' choices of the people who voted for Brexit on the basis of 'post-truth'. This argument facilitates the divide between 'good' and 'bad' Europeans, 'friends' and 'enemies' of the EU, 'progress' and 'regressiveness'. Rather, the imperative must be to unpack the different dynamics that are at work in today's anti-establishment surge truth. The term 'post-truth' as noted above is problematic and the analysts who perceive it as a 'threat' might be nostalgic for certainty. However, we live in a world of diversity, difference and disruption.

### **SO, WHAT IS TO BE DONE IN COMMUNICATING THE EU?**

In a crisis stricken European Union, it is necessary for the media to connect to deeper debates about the future of EU integration. The European Commission's series of 'citizens' dialogues' across Europe underline an acknowledgement of this need. However, it would not be wrong to suggest that such initiatives do not facilitate a broader set of open EU public consultations, involving a wide range of civic actors. This is clear in the European Citizens' Initiative, which is limited in scope. To move forward not only does it need to have an EU legal base, but even if a million signatures are collected, member states are not obliged to respond in any particularly tangible way in terms of actual policy change. Moreover, even the campaigns that manage to collect the required one million signatures could not reach their political goals, with the European Commission deciding against further action (Weisskircher 2017).

In fact, the debate among the mainstream politicians and media recycle older policy reform proposals. In the reports and suggestions put forward by member-states or the institutions of the EU. The proposals discussed (the increase of the European Parliament's powers, the creation of an economics minister, the selection of the Commissioners from the national parliaments, the direct election of the President of the EC) underline that they perceive the problem of legitimacy functional and not political. Revitalizing the EU, however, requires democratic debate, and not only focus on institutional innovations (Youngs 2012).

To focus on the relevance of the EU the media need to:

- Communicate the EU in a non-institutionalized fashion. With that in mind, the media need to tap into varied and horizontal channels through which citizens, governments and the EU can communicate more effectively and qualitatively. The challenge is to ensure European citizens do not choose to express their justified frustrations in a manner that 'closes their minds' but in a way, that nourishes representative democracy.
- Communicate EU in a strategic discursive manner. Strategic refers to the need to refocus the thematic orientation of the EU communication strategy. In today's critical global juncture, meta-issues, such as climate change, growth and development, immigration and terrorism have ascended in importance in and should be increasingly targeted by the media. Discursive refers to the need to create hubs for discussion, argumentation and counter-argumentation, and feedback. Strategic communication will work in the trajectory of not only enhancing the legitimacy and efficiency of the EU, but and thus also the efficiency of the EU. It can be applied across a wide spectrum of issues and can have three specific functions: (1) create space for alternative theorizations to mainstream paradigms, aiming to shape conducive ground for alternative, potentially groundbreaking, policies to follow, as well as enlightening the discussion on the optimal policy, (2) function in the direction of existing policies, making them more efficient, and (3) criticize current policies and discuss new potential paths to action.
- Invest on new ways of analysing European developments and understand that a useful source of information, or even the most likely catalyst of policy change and stability concerning an array of important issues, does not come only from the state. Universities, NGOs, advocacy organizations, generate important

information. The media can and should do turn to these alternative sources of information and, in the process, participate in the production of information. This will weaken the instrumental use of media by political actors/institutions and in so doing nurture a more encompassing approach.

The conditions are there. European civil society has long organized cross-border mobilizations and debates, involving trade unions and political forces, to build consensus among public opinion and challenge governments to change undesired and unjust policies. In fact, as a study by Fazi (2016) indicates, since the crisis began in 2008, an intense European discussion has challenged official policy priorities. The accuracy of many civil society evaluations, critical scholars and poorly funded civil society organizations have predicted the (negative) outcome of several European economic policies with a much greater accuracy than the official forecasts of bodies such as the European Commission, ECB or IMF. Many of the criticisms made by civil society in recent years and initially ignored or dismissed by governments and mainstream academics – on issues such as the impact of austerity, the rise of inequality, too-big-to-fail banks, etc., to name just a few – are now steadily shared by mainstream organizations, think tanks and government agencies. Finally, yet importantly, on the issues of environmental sustainability and action on climate change, the arguments that 'green' organizations have developed for decades have obtained a significant recognition in the policy agenda emerging from the conclusions of the COP21 conference held in Paris in late 2015, where the European Union played an important role. Such developments are encouraging lessons also for other domains. Thus, there is a need to envision new forms of political contestation when communicating or reporting the EU. The state of the EU today stems from the lack of debate and alternative policies to official goals and policies. What is "required is 'intelligent populism'. [...] (Ridley 2016). Political activists, academics, community organizers, all have an important role to play in helping recreate such public spheres of inquiry...".

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