Motivated cognition, conspiratorial epistemology, and bullshit: A model of post-factual political discourse

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Abstract

We propose a definition of post-factual political discourse as a discursive attitude that consists of three components: Motivated reasoning, conspiratorial epistemology, and bullshit. Motivated reasoning means that any piece of new information will never weaken pre-existing beliefs; it is a form of confirmation bias. Conspiratorial epistemology occurs when information that contradicts pre-existing beliefs is automatically dismissed because it was allegedly manufactured by some conspiracy; evidence for that conspiracy and for the falsity of the dismissed information is not presented. Bullshit is a speech act with which the speaker aims to achieve only some instrumental goal; whether the uttered speech act is true or not is of no consequence to the speaker. Post-factual political discourse is a challenge for democracy because it erodes the epistemic dimension of democracy (thereby making it difficult, if not impossible to identify and solve societal problems) and because it erodes bridging social capital (thereby increasing polarization and tribalization).

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1 Introduction: A post-factual crisis?

The truth matters. Most people probably agree with this proposition. After all, as children, we are taught that there is a moral quality to the truth: Telling the truth is what one *ought* to do. As we age, we learn that there is also an instrumental value to the truth: The better our beliefs match reality, the more successful we are in achieving our goals. We might disagree on what exactly the truth, what exactly the pertinent facts are, but we all believe that there *is* such a thing as the truth.

At least, that is how it used to be, if concerned political commentators are to be believed: In politics, a domain of society in which truth should matter a lot, the rise of “post-truth” or “post-factual” tendencies is being described as an alarming and perhaps uniquely threatening development [1, 2, 3]. It would seem, according to the concerned and concerning diagnoses of post-truth or post-factual politics, that Western democracies have entered an epistemic crisis of sorts in the second decade of this millennium, fueled by the explosion of online communication and evidenced by historic events such as Brexit (the decision by voters in the UK to leave the European Union) [4] or the election of Donald J. Trump as 45th President of the United States [5].

Is it really so? Is there really such a thing as a post-factual crisis in the West? Various concepts such as “post-truth”, “populism” [6], “fake news” [7], “disinformation” [8], and “propaganda” [9] that are currently floating in the academic as well as the public discourse with regards to the state of Western democracy might, as a kind of conceptual amalgamate, indicate that something is rotten not just in the state of Denmark, but in Western democracies in general. However, unless we clearly define the concepts we are using to evaluate the (epistemic) status of Western democracies, our conclusions are, at the very least, uncertain: Before we can confidently diagnose a “post-factual” crisis in the West, we need to have a solid understanding of what “post-factual” politics is actually supposed to mean.

The goal of the present article is twofold. *First*, we propose a definition of “post-truth” or “post-factual” politics as post-factual political discourse. *Second*, we address why post-factual political discourse is problematic from the normative point of view of democratic politics.

2 Existing conceptualizations of post-factual politics

The observation that something akin to “post-factual” attitudes and dynamics can be problematic for politics is not especially new. For example,

in light of the (early) research on the institutional and ideological properties of news-making has, the term “post-factual” has been employed to point out that journalistic news are not neutral and objective purveyors of facts [10]. In a more general sense, the relevance of truth and the problems of “post-truth” are a long-standing topic of propaganda and propagande research [11, 12, 13].

The meaning of the current concept of post-factual or post-truth, however, seems to be a more specific one. In the emerging literature on post-factual or post-truth politics, the phenomenon in question is treated as a phenomenon *sui generis* with some distinctive properties.

Post-factual politics has been described as both strategic [14] as well as targeted [15] in nature. This means that post-factual politics is not an accidental phenomenon, but rather a deliberate activity. In a similar vein, post-factual politics has also been described as (more or less) professionalized [16], adding to the strategic dimension. Furthermore, post-factual politics has been described as a primarily discursive phenomenon [17] whereby the goal is not necessarily to explicitly spread lies, but to value achieving one’s goals more than adhering to the truth [18]. Two general factors have been described as being conducive to the spread of post-factual politics: The fragmented and centrifugal nature of online communication [19] on the one hand, the limitations of our cognitive apparatus (in the sense of cognitive biases) [20] on the other. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, post-factual politics has been described not as a trivial fringe phenomenon, but as a correlate of a large wave of political populism across Western countries [21].

The existing work on post-factual politics is still somewhat preliminary in nature and therefore offers no consensus on the definition of the concept that is of interest. Nonetheless, the extensional picture painted by the current literature is useful, because the picture is largely a coherent one. This means that it can serve as a starting point for a more explicit intensional definition of post-factual politics. The definition we propose in the following section is incorporating the broad definitorial strokes of the existing work, with the goal of sharpening our understanding of post-factual politics.

3 A model of post-factual political discourse

We propose to understand post-factual politics as post-factual political discourse. Post-factual political discourse is a discursive attitude that consists of three components: Motivated reasoning, conspiratorial epistemology, and bullshit. We describe these three components in the subsections that follow. Before doing so, we discuss two implicit aspects of our proposed definition:

The fact that we refer to post-factual political *discourse* and not just to post-factual politics, and to the meaning of the prefix “post” in post-factual.

3.1 Preliminaries 1: Why discourse?

In our proposed definition, we refer to post-factual politics as post-factual political discourse. We do so because the main locus of post-factual politics is the political discourse taking place in the public sphere. That is not to say that the causal antecedents and the consequences of post-factual politics are only discursive in nature. Rather, we understand post-factual political discourse to be a mode of making propositions about the world, and that discursive mode can have non-discursive, concrete impact. In essence, we regard post-factual political discourse as a particular form of *speech*, and speech can, of course, have tremendous real-world consequences.

3.2 Preliminaries 2: The post in post-factual political discourse

In the existing literature on post-factual politics, it is not entirely clear what exactly the prefix “post” refers to. Since post-factual literally means “after-factual”, post-factual could be understood as a chronological demarcation: There were factual politics, and at some point in time, politics became post-factual.

Even though defining the term post-factual in such a chronological manner is somewhat tempting (because it is a straightforward definition), such an understanding is problematic. If there really is some point in time at which factual politics became post-factual politics, that point in time would need to be explicitly named and described. We doubt there is an actual historical trigger event that can plausibly be described as the beginning of post-factual politics. Furthermore, not all politics in all democratic countries is identical – even if some event were to permanently change politics in, say, the United States, that same event would not necessarily have any consequences for, say, European countries.

We propose to understand the term post-factual not in a chronological sense, but as a descriptor for a certain kind of political discourse within democratic politics. In such an understanding, post-factual politics is political discourse that has some specific traits (the three components we discuss below) that make it “extranormal”. This proposed understanding of the term post-factual, then, has two necessary conditions: It refers to a kind of political discourse within *democratic* discourse, and those traits make it *incompatible* with regular democratic discourse.

3.3 Component 1: Motivated reasoning

The fallibility of human cognition due to so-called cognitive heuristics or cognitive biases is a robust and well-documented phenomenon [22]. One of the most prominent cognitive biases is our tendency for *motivated reasoning* [23]: We tend to access, construct, and evaluate beliefs not in a completely neutral and objective manner, but rather in a motivated manner so that we manage to accommodate our pre-existing beliefs. In other words, our tendency for motivated reasoning results in a confirmation bias [24] with regards to our pre-existing beliefs.

The confirmation bias has the generalized form of

$$\Pr(p \mid i) \geq \Pr(p)$$

where p stands for some proposition and i for some hypothetical new piece of information regarding that proposition. In other words, if new information about the truth of some proposition p cannot even in principle reduce the degree of belief in that proposition, we are dealing with confirmation bias. If there is no confirmation bias, the posterior belief (the updated belief given the new piece of information) can change in any direction relative to the prior belief.

Motivated reasoning can also be described from a linguistic perspective in terms of direction of fit [25]. A regular, rational belief has a *word-to-world* (or *mind-to-world*) direction of fit: We want our belief to fit the world. When there is motivated reasoning at play, the direction of fit is reversed to a *world-to-word* (or *world-to-mind*) direction of fit, whereby we want the world to fit our beliefs.

Motivated reasoning withing post-factual political discourse means that the participants of the discourse are not trying to rationally update their beliefs according to the best possible evidence, but rather that they are trying confirm and solidify their pre-existing beliefs. However, motivated reasoning alone is not a sufficient condition for post-factual political discourse. After all, motivated reasoning is a more or less constant companion of politics and political discourse [26, 27] and not a phenomenon unique to post-factual political discourse.

3.4 Component 2: Conspiratorial epistemology

No matter how strong our motivated reasoning is, there is always a chance that we will be confronted with information that is not compatible with our beliefs, resulting in the uneasy feeling of cognitive dissonance [28]. Such a

state of mind is neither pleasant nor desirable, so we generally seek to resolve cognitive dissonance and conflicting pieces of information. In the case of post-factual political discourse, a generalized tactic for doing so can be described as *conspiratorial epistemology*: An epistemological attitude whereby information that challenges our beliefs can be routinely discarded because it is understood to be the result of a malign conspiracy.

Conspiratorial reasoning is generally not a pathological or maladaptive trait, but rather a universal cognitive heuristic for dealing with events and information that are, or that seem, rather unlikely [29]. Within the context of post-factual political discourse, conspiratorial reasoning has the similar function of dismissing *en passant* information that is perceived to be incompatible with one’s pre-existing beliefs. One explicit manifestation of conspiratorial epistemology within post-factual political discourse are foundational criticisms of journalists and media organizations that do not criticize specific journalistic content and work but instead dismiss journalists and media organizations in principle as part of a concerted conspiratorial effort [30]. Another prominent manifestation of conspiratorial epistemology within post-factual political discourse is the rise of conspiracy theories that do not directly attack particular political actors and opinions, but rather discredit them *in toto* as an orchestrated conspiracy. An example for this kind of conspiracy theories are conspiracy theories about the alleged influence and motives of George Soros, a wealthy investor and donor to political causes [31, 32].

This kind of foundational criticism is a conspiratorial narrative that, perhaps most prominently, the administration of President Trump began to employ almost as soon as President Trump took office in 2017 [33]. According to one survey [34], around 28% of US citizens seem to have adopted a similar conspiratorial epistemology, in that they deem any unfavorable journalistic reporting on politicians or political groups to be “fake news” – even then the reporting in question if factually accurate.

Motivated reasoning and conspiratorial epistemology are two necessary conditions of post-factual political discourse, but they are not sufficient conditions. The mere combination of motivated reasoning and conspiratorial epistemology is already problematic from a democratic point of view, but it is probably not uncommon. As the existing literature on post-factual politics suggests, there is an additional component to post-factual politics that has to do with the explicit attitudes towards the truth.

3.5 Component 3: Bullshit

Post-factual politics is commonly discussed in terms of lies and lying. In the context of post-factual politics, the argument goes, political actors lie

either more or more effectively or both. The relation of speech acts uttered by discourse participants and the truth is indeed an important component of post-factual political discourse, but we believe that the main problem at hand are not actually lies.

From a linguistic perspective, any speech act can have three kinds of effects in the world [35]. The first is *locutionary*. When we physically speak, for example, we are creating vibrations in the air that can be perceived by other people. The second effect is an *illocutionary* one. The illocutionary effect of a speech act is its performative dimension. For example, when John says that the sky is blue, John is implicitly asserting that the conditions for the validity of his proposition are met. The third effect of speech acts is a *perlocutionary* one. Perlocutionary effects are strategic effects of speech acts. A common perlocutionary goal that we all pursue is persuasion: When we are talking to other people, we want them to be convinced by our point of view.

Any regular speech act has effects on all three dimensions. Speech acts withing post-factual political discourse, we argue, do not: The *illocutionary* dimension of speech acts within post-factual political discourse is either not stressed or completely absent. Speech acts within post-factual political discourse are primarily concerned with the perlocutionary dimension, whereby the goal is to affirm one's pre-existing beliefs (and possibly to convince others of those beliefs).

Speech acts that disregard the illocutionary dimension are not automatically lies. It is entirely possible that such speech acts are occasionally epistemically lucky [36] and thus “accidentally” true. The fundamental problem with such speech acts is that they are not at all concerned with the truth. All that matters is the perlocutionary dimension of achieving goals by uttering the speech acts; the degree to which the propositional content of such speech acts fit reality is irrelevant.

This type of speech act has famously been described as bullshit [37, 38]. Bullshit is arguably more problematic than mere lies. A speaker who lies is, in a perverse way, still obliged to reality and truth – if they were not, their speech acts would lose their perlocutionary effect. A speaker who utters bullshit-type speech acts, on the other hand, is not at all concerned with or restricted by reality and truth.

3.6 In summary

We define post-factual political discourse as discourse that is shaped by a particular discursive attitude. That discursive attitude consists of three components: Motivated reasoning, conspiratorial epistemology, and bullshit. All

three components are necessary conditions of post-factual political discourse. Each of these components might represent an undesirable cognitive tendency or active habit on their own. In combination, however, the three components form a discursive practice that is fortified against differing opinions and information; a metaphorical fortress of pre-existing beliefs.

4 Consequences and implications of post-factual political discourse

Post-factual political discourse is not only relevant from a purely academic perspective; it matters because its consequences are potentially detrimental for democracy. There are, we believe, three main consequences of post-factual political discourse: A new brand of populism, the erosion of democracy’s epistemic dimension, and the erosion of social capital.

4.1 A new brand of populism?

So far, the most salient examples of post-factual political discourse such as the Donald Trump Presidency or the Brexit decision have a strong narrative connection to populism. However, we caution against a conceptual overlap of the two concepts: Post-factual political discourse is not automatically political populism, and vice-versa. Both are discursive in nature, but they can and should be distinguished from each other.

As an object of academic scrutiny, populism probably falls into the category of essentially contested concepts [39]. In general, analyses of populism are often somewhat conceptually vague [40]. Different authors have different understandings of populism, and they provide valid justifications for their understandings. In addition, the concept of populism has also been adapted and changed due to incremental historical developments as well as more rapid events in the real world. For example, in light of South American populism in the 1980s, Weyland [41] redefined populism and introduced the term neopopulism to capture and describe the South American development.

One of the ongoing debates in the populism literature is that on the general nature of populism: Is populism a kind of political ideology [42] or is it more of a discursive frame [40]? Even though some recent works on populism regard the debate as settled in favor of populism-as-ideology [43, 44, 45], there is merit in the understanding of populism as a generalized discursive frame as proposed by Bonikowski [46]. If we regard populism as an ideology, then the co-occurrence of populism and post-factual political discourse is not easily explainable. Is that an entirely new ideology? Or is

populism always connected to post-factual political discourse? If so, why? And why is post-factual political discourse receiving academic as well as public attention only today, even though populism has been under scrutiny for decades? Populism-as-ideology means opening a can of conceptual problems, both for the concept of populism and the concept of post-factual political discourse. If we regard populism as a discursive frame, however, there are no such conceptual problems since we are merely observing and describing the co-occurrence of two independent concepts and phenomena.

The co-occurrence of populism as a discursive frame and post-factual political discourse is not coincidental, however. A common denominator of the populist is the contrast between elites and “the people” (the non-elite majority of the population) and the diagnosis of a crisis to the disadvantage of the people [47]. Actors who employ this discursive frame can additionally employ post-factual political discourse in order to fortify and amplify their message. For example, it has been observed that more extreme political attitudes correlate with greater susceptibility to conspiratorial reasoning [48, 49]. That makes post-factual political discourse a potentially effective discursive strategy because the component of conspiratorial epistemology is likely to appeal to the populist “base” of supporters and voters who hold strong and potentially extreme beliefs.

4.2 Erosion of the epistemic dimension of democracy

Democracy is inconceivable without a certain amount of epistemic common ground. Post-factual political discourse has the potential to damage this common ground and to, consequently, damage democracy itself.

In order for democracy to work, we must share the belief that, *firstly*, an objective reality exists and, *secondly*, that our political discourses should relate as much as possible to this reality. Post-factual political discourse is not, of course, a threat to reality itself; reality exist independent of our musings about it. Post-factual political discourse is a threat to the implicit consensual commitment to reality that underpins democracy [50].

The epistemic foundation of democracy, then, can be understood as the basic orientation of political discourses towards reality. This reference to reality is constitutive for democratic politics on a normative-conceptual level independent of a specific understanding of democracy: If there is no shared idea of reality, there is in principle no common world that could be shaped or regulated through democratic politics [51]. Generally speaking, democracy then lacks the central object of reference and becomes meaningless.

The consequences of an erosion of the epistemic foundation can be described more concretely if an instrumental perspective is adopted. From this

point of view, democracy stands for a process of collective *decision-making* – politics, therefore, is primarily a matter of making collectively binding decisions and not of educating selfish egoists to become virtuous citizens or of other postulated beneficial effects of political participation [52].

Decisions are *political* when their goal is to solve problems of coordinating action among residents of a shared polity, and they are *democratic* if they are the result of a process designed to express the principle of political equality (by, among other aspects, taking into account the idea of equal inclusion or participation). At its core, the process of democratic decision-making can be understood as a discursive process that consists of discovering politically relevant social problems and of publicly justifying solutions for those problems [53].

By potentially eroding the epistemic foundation of democracy, post-factual political discourse is both undermining the discovery as well as the justification function of democratic decision-making, thereby ultimately reducing democracy’s capacity to produce reasonable (i.e. effective) solutions. With regard to the processes of *justification*, the presence of post-factual political discourse makes public deliberation based on factual information more difficult or even impossible. Without reference to reality of reasons or arguments for or against certain proposed solutions, political discourses lose “epistemic rationality” and the resulting decisions of democratic legitimacy [54, 55, 56].

From our point of view, however, the consequences of post-factual political discourse appear more normatively severe – because they are more “fundamental” in the literal sense – with regard to the process of *discovery*. The process of discovery refers to the function of public discourses to produce a range of issues that can be perceived as potentially relevant social problems at all [57, 58]. Even though the process of justification is of great importance to democracy, it is rendered useless if its antecedent, the process of discovery, is defective.

This means that under the conditions of post-factual political discourse there is a danger that democracy is not only failing to produce *good* solutions (that it will not be able to solve certain problems effectively, sustainably and justly), but that democracy is not able to find *any solutions at all* for problems that exist in reality. Both of these potential developments undermine the problem-solving capacity of democratic politics and thus, from an instrumental perspective, the legitimacy of its institutions, processes and outcomes as well.

If post-factual political discourse prompts us to abandon our commitment to a shared, common reality, democracy loses its fundamental anchoring point. If participants in public discourse, be they “regular” citizens or important and powerful political actors, do not feel bound by reality, political

discourse threatens to become a meaningless exercise anchored to little more than biases and pre-existing beliefs. Democracy without commitment to reality is neither able to discover problems nor to justify solutions for them. By threatening to undermine the legitimacy of democracy as a problem-solving mechanism, post-factual political discourse could contribute to the already observable disenchantment with democracy [59, 60].

Apart from damaging democracy’s problem-solving capacity, post-factual political discourse is likely to also contribute to political *polarization*. Without the epistemic foundation of a common idea of the world, differences in political opinion are more likely to escalate, and political “adversaries” are more likely to become “enemies”. When we see our political adversaries as enemies who are fundamentally different from us, we are more likely to abandon peaceful and inclusive means of making political decisions [61]. We explore this potential consequence in the following section.

4.3 Erosion of social capital

In order for a formally democratic society to be peaceful and prosperous, clear-cut factors such as the rule of law, free and fair elections, and civil liberties matter, but they are not necessarily sufficient. There are also intangible factors that are at least conducive to, perhaps even necessary for a successful society. One such factor is *social capital*; generalized trust that acts as a social “glue” in society [62, 63].

Social capital has at least two functions. Social capital increases *bonding* within different groups in society. Additionally, and at least as importantly, social capital creates metaphorical bridges between different groups that do not have overlapping memberships [64]. In other words, social capital helps to keep our tendency for intergroup bias [65] in check.

By eroding a common epistemic baseline in society and by enabling confirmation bias within groups, post-factual political discourse has the potential to erode social capital by eroding generalized trust between groups. Mistrust is a direct function of conspiratorial epistemology, and not trusting people whose political opinions differ from your own is therefore an expected consequence of post-factual political discourse. This mechanism of social capital erosion through generalized mistrust is possibly amplified by modern online communication which tends to induce disinhibition [66] and deindividuation [67] effects.

It is not obvious how great the overall damage done to social capital by post-factual political discourse can be. Post-factual political discourse is likely to chip away at bridging social capital, but, at the same time, it is likely to *strengthen* bonding social capital. Post-factual political discourse

might therefore not lead to an overall erosion of social capital, but instead, ingroup social capital might rise and intergroup social capital might decline. The consequence of such a development is an increase in polarization and tribalism.

The tangible outcomes of increased polarization and tribalization are likely to be gradual developments rather than singular (catastrophic) events. In principle, the culmination of polarization and intergroup bias is genocidal violence [68, 69]. The (relative) erosion of social capital in democracies is unlikely to result in that kind of large-scale societal and moral breakdown. Instead, a more likely consequence is that political attitudes will tend to ossify and intensify within different political tribes. For example, an escalation of the intergroup bias through post-factual political discourse could lead to an increase in radicalization and adoption of extremist beliefs [70, 71, 72]. In terms of politics, radicalization means that political reconciliation and consensus-building could become more difficult, and politics might increasingly become a winner-takes-all contest.

5 Research outlook

Research on the phenomenon of post-factual political discourse can either be theoretical or empirical in nature. Theoretical research, such as this contribution, are necessary in order to serve as a conceptual foundation. On top of that foundation, empirical research is necessary in order to estimate the prevalence, dynamics, and effects of post-factual political discourse. Conducting empirical research on post-factual political discourse, however, is difficult, because not all aspects of post-factual political discourse are readily observable.

Our proposed model of post-factual political discourse consists of three elements: Motivated cognition, conspiratorial epistemology, and bullshit. Not all of these elements are readily observable from an argument (or speech act) that somebody utters. Assume, for example, the following statement to have been made by a person engaging in post-factual political discourse:

The investigation is just a witch hunt.

Given only this argument, we can infer, with a reasonable degree of confidence, the presence of conspiratorial epistemology. Motivated cognition, however, is not directly observable; it is merely implied, but not logically required by the presence of conspiratorial epistemology. Bullshit, finally, can

be neither directly inferred nor is it implied. The fact that post-factual political discourse cannot be confidently measured by analyzing real-life discourse is a challenge for empirical research, but not an insurmountable one.

First, post-factual political discourse can be tested and measured in *experimental laboratory settings*. Many aspects of human cognition cannot be directly observed from real-world behavior, but they can be isolated in experimental settings. Measuring and testing post-factual political discourse through experimental research would offer many valuable insights, such as estimations of its prevalence, causal antecedents, and potential countermeasures.

Second, in order to analyze real-world instances of post-factual political discourse, research designs that are more *pragmatic* in nature could offer valuable insights. Pragmatic here refers to the notion of pragmatics used in linguistics, whereby the contribution of context and contextual factors to meaning is considered [73]¹. Qualitative, case-study based designs, for example, might be able to integrate the pragmatic factors of discourse.

Third, conspiratorial epistemology, the most directly observable aspect of post-factual political discourse, can be analyzed quantitatively and on a larger scale, for example through automated content analysis. Even though the presence of conspiratorial epistemology does not always necessarily indicate the presence of post-factual political discourse, drawing empirical maps of conspiratorial epistemology in different kinds of discourses is still welcome. Assessing conspiratorial epistemology in this manner could serve both as a starting point as well as an extension to more qualitative, case-study based research.

Empirical research on post-factual political discourse, challenging though it may be, is important. If we fail to collect empirical evidence on post-factual political discourse, we risk inflating its importance through speculation and hyperbole. Or, perhaps even more dangerous: We might risk underestimating the extent of and the damage done by post-factual political discourse because the phenomenon is empirically elusive.

¹Speech act theory, the theoretical context in which the concept of bullshit is embedded, belongs to pragmatics.

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