Post-truth and the political: constructions and distortions in representing political facts

Abstract

Post-truth has become a buzzword in recent years, as a shorthand for strategic constructions and distortions by all parties in political communication. According to Gibson (2018), the endless reflexivity of late modernity and a loss of faith in institutions interactively give rise to a ‘post-truth double helix’. Facts are reduced to ideological claims to be discursively contested, giving rise to such notions as ‘true facts’ and ‘alternative facts’. The features of the online media environment further accelerate this dynamic. Journalism – as one of the traditionally authoritative institutions – plays a leading part in this spiral of dwindling trust. The perspectivist view on journalism increasingly has led audiences and journalists themselves to believe that there are no facts but only interpretations. Nevertheless, many journalists are still driven by the objectivity ideal which has traditionally sustained their authority as ‘truth-speakers’ (Tuchman 1978). Others, however, call for transparency and multiperspectivalism (Gans 2011) in order to limit inaccuracy and distortion as much as possible. This special issue of Discourse, Context & Media brings together a number of contributions exploring the discursive relation between political communication, news media and factuality. Mapping the eroding trust in true facts and the strategies of participants to deal with this ‘post-truth era’, this kind of research can provide valuable insights into evolutions which have a profound impact on every citizen, and democracy at large.

Keywords

Post-truth, (discursive) construction, political communication, journalism culture, social media

Observing Grice’s cooperative principle and his maxim of quality (Grice 1975/2006), language users should speak the truth if they pursue felicitous interaction. In politics and journalism, this might always have been an ideal rather than an accomplishment, but in recent times of fake news and post-truth, it seems to be more unattainable than ever. The old journalistic adage ‘comment is free, but facts are sacred’ honoured by C.P. Scott, the editor-in-chief of The Guardian around the turn of the twentieth century, seems to have been reversed in our digital information society highly influenced by social media.
This special issue of Discourse, Context & Media topicalizes the notion of ‘true facts’ (in every sense of the word) and assembles analyses of representations of politically contested concepts and movements.

Nowadays, the veracity of a lot of political information is questioned and conspiracy theories are omnipresent. The notion of ‘truth’ in politics and journalism has gained renewed attention. Recent research in political and mass media communication contends that ‘truth’ is a porous and intangible concept, even if it is the topic of the communication and thus acquires situational meaning in a certain context (Schudson 2009; Hutchby 2016). Frameworks are being developed to examine the value of truth in policy texts (Talib & Fitzgerald 2016), to ‘decode’ hidden meanings (Stoegner & Wodak 2016) or to evaluate the ways in which populist politicians, such as Donald Trump, discursively replace ‘truth’ by ‘authenticity’ (Montgomery, 2017).

However, the phenomenon of political actors spreading false information – as a strategy in the pursuit of support or as a smokescreen to divert attention away from unwanted information or unpopular policy actions (Alterman, 2004; Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook 2017) – is not new. Schudson (2009) discusses the term truthiness which was introduced in a Comedy Central satirical tv-show and which at first referred to the way the Bush administration justified the invasion in Iraq. He points out that the concept of truthiness was not new either, and refers to Hannah Arendt’s essay Lying in Politics (1971) in which she accused the administrations of the presidents Johnson and Nixon of defactualization. Similarly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) discuss a number of historical examples of partisan conspiracy theories, like those concerning the assassination of Martin Luther King (1975) or the denial of Nazi extermination of millions of Jews (1994).

While terms like defactualization and truthiness have become common in the study of political communication, the new terms post-truth and alternative facts seem to indicate that new lines are being crossed and that politicians do not even pretend to communicate truthfully anymore. The 2016 U.S. presidential campaign is no doubt one of the best known illustrations of post-truth politics. According to the independent fact checking website PolitiFact, 70% of the statements by Donald Trump were (mostly) false. His opponent, Hillary Clinton, was found to deviate from the ‘truth’ in 26% of all cases (Politifact n.d.). Gibson (2018) argues accordingly:

[T]he path to a Trump presidency was forged out of a series of racist slanders, demonstrably false statements, and unproven conspiracy theories: Barack Obama was born in Kenya. Immigrants are criminals and rapists. Climate change is a hoax. Mexico will pay for the wall. The falsehoods, exaggerations, and demagoguery flow like water from a firehose. They stun and bewilder. Worse, they distract and immobilize—which, of course, is precisely the point (3168).
With the Brexit debate in the U.K. as second high profile example, 2016 saw a spike in the usage of ‘post-truth’ (and related terminology). This made Oxford English Dictionaries decide to name ‘post-truth’ word of the year 2016.

A number of societal trends presumably have contributed to the development of a ‘post-truth era’. Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook (2017) refer, among others, to increasing political polarization, the decline of civic engagement, a loss of trust in public and scientific institutions and, notably, evolutions in the media landscape. Summarizing this, Gibson (2018) introduces the more comprehensive concept of a ‘post-truth double helix’:

Post-truth politics refers to the specific political and rhetorical strategies that emerge from, and take advantage of, the circular relationship between the endless reflexivity of late modernity and a loss of faith in institutions that anchor truth claims, a dynamic amplified (but not created) by an emergent and participatory digital media ecology (3170).

As Gibson (2018) argues, based on Giddens (1990), the constant rational examination and questioning of incoming information may be profoundly unsettling as it never allows for complete certainty. Accordingly, authoritative institutions have developed systems of expertise, employing strategies to encourage public trust in their ability to tell true and false apart. However, the ability of these institutions and professionals to make truth claims is under increasing pressure, in the context of modernist reflexivity. This ‘demise of symbolic efficiency’ (Žižek 1999) is, at least partly, caused by the loss of (i.e. questioning of) big ‘master narratives’ in human culture.

The features of the digital media environment have further accelerated these evolutions. The digitization, in particular, has helped to break down many of the barriers – including economic limitations or limits on media literacy – which have traditionally prevented broad public access to the media (Atton & Hamilton 2008; Bruns 2003). Nowadays, the (online) media landscape is characterized by a plethora of competing voices, all of which – from the ideologically-driven Breitbart News Network or the non-professional blogger to established media organizations like BBC or CNN – are claiming (journalistic) validity (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017). Yet, this tangled web – with an ‘alternative fact’ available for every single fact – does not only undermine the efficacy of knowledge claims, but also ‘the possibility of knowledge and credibility as such’ (Dean, 2010: 103). Besides, as people become ‘produsers’ (Bruns 2003) in a collaborative media context, they also become more aware of the constructed character of information, and thus more skeptical about truth claims of others (Andrejevic 2013). Put differently, trust in facts gets eroded until facts no longer matter or are even expected to exist.

Moreover, social media have the potential to facilitate increased group polarization and ‘echo chambers’, in which pre-existing beliefs and attitudes are reconfirmed (Garrett, Weeks & Neo 2016; Grömping 2014). According to Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook (2017), this
polarization often goes hand in hand with political discourse that aims to evoke strong audience responses by focusing on sensationalism, partial truths or inaccurate information (Sobieraj & Berry 2011). Accordingly, allowing for the differential targeting of political messages, echo chambers are also said to create a reward structure for politicians to engage in strategic extremism (Glaeser, Ponzetto and Shapiro 2005; Montgomery, 2017).

Following Dean (2010) and Andrejevic (2013), Gibson (2018) summarizes three rhetorical strategies which emerge from, and take advantage of, the ‘post-truth double helix’: (1) ‘the proliferation of narratives’, which may produce confusion, uncertainty and, ultimately, democratic fatigue and immobility, (2), ‘the politicization of expertise’, rendering all forms of knowledge (including science) subject of endless debate and (3) ‘the cultivation of conspiracy’, as an attempt to reconstruct order in the chaotic context of claims and counter-claims. In short, a context that renders it increasingly difficult for the audience to distinguish between facts and disinformation and trustworthy and unreliable voices, allows for the most deceptive forms of political persuasion (see Alterman, 2004).

**Journalists as truth-speakers?**

Constituting one of the authoritative institutions referred to by Žižek (1999) and Gibson (2018), professional journalism defends its legitimacy by emphasizing its ‘ability to provide an indexical and referential presentation of the world at hand’ (Zelizer 2004: 103). That is, ‘objectivity-as-a-value’ (Carpentier & Trioen 2010) has long been – and still is – considered as a nodal point of ‘good journalism’ (Deuze 2005). Schudson (2001: 150) provides a definition of objectivity that is, nowadays, generally accepted:

> The objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts. Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone. Objective reporting takes pains to represent fairly each leading side in a political controversy. According to the objectivity norm, the journalist’s job consists of reporting something called ‘news’ without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way.

Yet, just like other public institutions, journalism too has had to deal with growing reflexivity and distrust in more recent years (e.g. Pew Research Center 2017, May 9), accelerated by developments like increased commercialization and digitalization (Lewis, Williams & Franklin 2008; Turcotte et al. 2015).

The perspectivist view on journalism increasingly becomes accepted and has led audiences and journalists themselves to believe that there are no facts but only interpretations. This way of thinking goes back to philosophers like Nietzsche (1873), who have introduced the idea of perspectivism: all our ideas, observations and judgments are determined by our perspective and thus are inherently subjective. That is, we perceive the world through our lenses, based on culture, position, interests, experiences, ideologies... (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). Accordingly, Nietzsche (1873: 456) states that there is no ‘correct’ view of the world
and that our description of factual truth is a construction: ‘one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius of construction, who succeeds in piling an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation’. An even more complicating factor is that we need language to express our views and language – still according to Nietzsche – is inherently metaphorical and thus not able to capture reality. Indeed, as Lakoff and Johnson (2003) point out, the metaphors we use to describe reality, strongly influence the ways in which we think and talk about and possibly interact with this reality: the ways in which we approach other people or living beings, the institutions we build, the policies we apply, the people we allow to govern. Similarly, Detmer (2003) posits that value judgements are an inherent part of observation. Journalism, then, is the act of continuous judgements on inclusion or exclusion, of the stories to cover, the angles to take, the voices to foreground, the details to emphasize, the words and pictures to frame the event or issue with (see Fowler 1991, 2005). As Fowler (1991) points out in Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press: ‘it is the essence of representation that it is always representation from some ideological point of view’ (85). As extensively described in the literature, this journalistic construction work is always affected by multiple influences, ranging from the personal and routines levels to the ideological level (Gans, 1979; Herman & Chomsky 1988; Shoemaker & Reese 2014).

Journalism, as the fourth estate, has always considered it its duty to check the veracity of political communication and to bring deception and falsity to the surface. In the perspectivist view however, journalism is inherently incomplete, non-neutral or even partisan and subject to manipulation by parties seeking power. Journalists like the Dutch Joris Luyendijk have come to the conclusion that ‘the filters, distortions and manipulations’ in journalism are ‘not incidents, but patterns’ (Luyendijk 2006: 193 [translation ours]) and that a detached, impartial approach is sheer impossible. Accordingly, some authors even draw direct links between the ‘failure of professional journalism’ and post-truth politics. For Alterman (2004), for instance, post-truth is the result of the inability of journalists to hold politicians accountable for their deceptions. As Wijnberg (2015: 65) observes, contemporary journalism has run up against its limits by starting to believe that there are no facts but only interpretations. Wijnberg (2015: 67) continues this line of thinking in stating that it is impossible to define objective moral truths as well. Good and bad have been categorized by man and moral truths are attempts to present one’s own beliefs as true and to impose them on others.

In spite of the above, journalists generally hold on to objectivity as a ‘strategic ritual’ (Tuchman 1972: 660) in an attempt to protect their authority and role of ‘truth-speakers’ (Tuchman 1978). Objectivity claims are supported by a number of discursive strategies. This is what Carpentier and Trioen (2010) call ‘objectivity-as-a-practice’. Clayman and Heritage (2002) introduce, for instance, the notion of neutralism to indicate the attitude journalists adopt to seem neutral: journalists quote other sources in order not to foreground themselves but they use these quotes to build up their own stories, or frames (e.g. Moernaut, Mast & Pauwels 2017). Elites and official sources are thereby preferred. Being
considered as more trustworthy sources, they may provide news reports with a sense of authority and impartiality (i.e. the rhetorical ‘argumentum auctoritatis’). Balance – telling both sides of the story as a strategic ritual which must allow the consumer to decide what is the ‘truth’ – is also a typical strategy (Gans 1979; Shoemaker & Reese 2014; Tuchman 1972/1978; White, 2012; Zelizer 2004). Summarizing, reporters continually attempt to uphold the (professional) “web of facticity” (Tuchman, 1978, p.86) they have constructed.

In more recent years, in particular, the sense of objectivity has also increasingly been supported by the visuals that accompany news reports. ‘Visual truth’ – as pervasive and long-standing myth – may be transferred to the content of stories, it is presumed. For instance, photo editors scare away from manipulating pictures or focus on denotation (i.e. naturalistic pictures providing ‘direct visual evidence’ of people, places, events) (Daston & Galison 2007; Newton 2000). Another example is the way television news items are edited to create the coherent story journalists have in mind (Ekström 2001). Discussing conventionalized television news formats and a number of standardized shots, Griffin (1992) argues: ‘The construction and use of visual symbols provides a relatively unquestioned “reality” base, which enhances the perceived validity of specific reports and legitimates the authority of reporters and anchors as arbiters of the “facts”.’ (133)

Transparency

Transparency in journalism and alternative media is increasingly advocated for reviving journalism and for changing the crusted methods of traditional media. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007), for instance, criticize the widespread contemporary practices as hollow devices which need to convince the audience of the objectivity and trustworthiness of journalism while obscuring actual verification methods or even deceiving the public. As the authors contend, journalists can never be objective, but their methods can be. Accordingly, they argue that journalists should be more open, transparent and skeptical regarding methods, sources, motives, expertise, interpretations or assumptions. That is, objectivity should be a means to deal with unavoidable subjectivity (i.e. to prevent biases from undermining accuracy) rather than a goal in its own right. Balance (i.e. the inclusion of various viewpoints), for instance, ought to be approached as a method for gathering information rather than simply for presentation. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) point out, balance is especially pivotal in the pursuit of coherence, as the most profound level of ‘truth’. Coherence means ‘making sense of the facts’, providing broader contexts and fair and reliable interpretations of possible meanings. The goal is the ‘best obtainable version of the truth’. Coherence is often a process, which takes place over various articles, op-eds, contributions, and thus in interaction with various groups, including the audience. Similarly, Gans (2011) calls for multiperspectival journalism (see Craft & Heim 2009; Detmer 2003), summarizing this ideal as follows:

One of the prime purposes of general representation is to make sure that as many voices as possible are heard in the public discourse, especially that
which shapes the political climate. In addition, the widest range of people and interests ought to be heard or shown figuratively in the public sphere. That sphere needs to be broader than the one originally conceived by Habermas (1989). (7)

As Hermida (2012) argues, networked social media tools facilitate collaborative verification, collective intelligence, contextualized knowledge and emerging news, challenging ‘the individualistic, top-down ideology of traditional journalism’ (659). Yet, traditional journalism still seems to be wary of exploiting the full potential of these online networks. Meanwhile, however, many of these ideals are already enacted in the context of more alternative media outlets (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). Discussing the Dutch journalistic platform De Correspondent as example of slow journalism, Harbers (2016) demonstrates, for example, how transparency and multiperspectivalism can be operationalized. The author argues, among others, that the reporters turn away from the idea of one ‘given (top-down) truth’, but do not lapse into complete relativism either. Rather, they are concerned with aggregative truth(-seeking), with overt moral grounding:

Based on thorough reporting and in-depth background research, they ultimately choose sides in a certain matter or determine what the best point of view is. The authority of the accounts is thus inextricably bound to the individual behind it (500).

In this special issue of Discourse, Context & Media, we have brought together a number of contributions exploring the discursive relation between political communication, media and ‘true facts’. The authors focus on the constructions and distortions of information by all parties involved in media news coverage. The insights offered by the studies may contribute to more transparency as regards to the context, status and nature of (post-)truth on the politics-media nexus, and how journalists and audience (can) deal with it. Hopefully, this may help to counteract the eroding trust in facts and the credibility of news media, which – as discussed – has major impacts on individuals and democracy at large.

In the first contribution, Peter Bull presents four empirical studies of political journalism. His analysis studies social interaction through the examination of videotape recordings of communicative behaviour. He contends that by studying the ‘nuts and bolts’ of social interaction, we gain a much deeper insight into interpersonal communication. Analysing question-answer sequences and threats to face, he applies a micro-analytic technique to show how face aggravation has become central to the interaction that takes place between journalists and politicians in television interviews. Three aspects of political facework are identified, relating to the individual face of the politicians, the face of significant others and the face of the party which they represent.

He sketches the evolution of interviewing styles from ‘neutralistic’ via adversarial to aggressive and even hostile. Referring to situational theory of communicative conflict and to
politeness theory, Bull shows how politicians in the interviews under study are mostly addressed as if they are intrinsically untrustworthy. This leads to evasive behaviour on their part. They are blamed for their equivocal communication by which they try to evade critical questions, but it is shown that political journalists also ask equivocal questions which are at times impossible to answer. For each political journalist analysed, a ‘level of threat’ is established. The complementing audience survey which measures the perception of ‘journalistic toughness’ correlates with the behaviour analysis.

Furthermore, Bull has studied the difference between the nature of questions asked by journalists and by the general public. The general public asked less conflictual questions, which led to less evasive answers by the politicians. The fourth case is on television news bulletins and studies how edited clips from different events are de-contextualized and put together or re-contextualized in a new, highly interpretive narrative by journalists. Thus, threats to positive face can arguably occur through conflictual questions, accusatory questions, and questions that embed negative formulations, as well as through editorial techniques on the television news of both de-contextualization and re-contextualization. Threats to negative face are also omnipresent in the political interview. In the context of broadcast interviews, interviewers usually have the upper hand, setting the agenda and defining the domain in which interviewees can act (Ekström, 2001). However, it is in news broadcasts that threats to the politicians’ negative face are most severe: through judicious editing, politicians’ answers may be de-contextualised and re-contextualised without any immediate right of reply. This practice of journalism may result in widespread political disenchantment and cynicism about both politicians and the whole political process.

Jeremy Collins provides an essayistic approach to the terms post-truth (mainly used by journalists to indicate distortions of the facts by politicians) and fake news (mainly used by politicians to refer to the unreliable coverage of the news by journalists). He argues that the notion of post-truth should be understood not as an explanatory term for a newly emerging socio-political (or journalistic) phenomenon but rather as a reflexive response by journalists to a perceived loss of authority. He starts out with a history of the term, which has emerged in UK newspapers since 2011 but which saw a sudden leap in frequency in 2016, when it was applied in references both to the US election debates and to the EU referendum in the UK. He compares it to the notion of ‘bullshit’ as defined by Frankfurt (2005) and he analyses the use of the term in three case-studies: one on the influential argument in the Brexit debate of the National Health Service losing money to the EU, one on the issue of Turkey becoming a EU member and one on the statements Justice Secretary Michael Gove made denouncing (EU) expert knowledge as elitist and lacking common sense. In all three cases the arguments are emotional rather than factual, which shows that post-truth thrives on emotion. It remains difficult to define it as an operational concept for analysis. It is vague and imprecise but Collins goes on to argue that it is also less novel than the current interest in it implies. The vast domain of propaganda studies shows that politicians in all era’s and places have tried to shape perceptions and to achieve responses in their own interests.
On the other hand, the preoccupation with emotion can also be found in the way journalists cover the news. Attempting to engage the values and the feelings of the audience is a long-standing tradition in journalism. Viewed from this point, the accusation of journalists towards politicians of contending post-truth facts might not have to do so much with a concern for safeguarding the ‘truth’ but rather with the defeat of their monopoly on reality construction.

Another example of how the news media can contribute to the construction of social reality is provided by Kate Torkington and Filipa Perdigão Ribeiro in their paper about the terminology and representation of ‘people on the move’, viz. immigrants, migrants and refugees, in the Portuguese press. In the context of the so called ‘Mediterranean migrant crisis’ of 2015 they show how journalists and politicians engage in daily struggles over meaning in a discursive arena to bring across their ideological messages. They consider news media as a powerful social (and ideological) force, as they believe that the way people like immigrants, migrants and refugees are labelled and framed does not only have policy implications, but also influences how news consumers perceive these social actors as well as how people interact in society.

Methodologically combining a critical discourse analysis and a framing analysis this paper explores how different migration-related terms are used in the headlines on Portuguese news websites about vulnerable people who do not have any power over their own representation and are largely seen as belonging to an outgroup. Torkington and Perdigão Ribeiro’s analysis shows both similarities and differences with corresponding studies set in other countries. On the one hand, they identified discursive strategies of impersonalization, genericization and passivation in the representation of migrating people. Moreover, such social actors are seldom given a voice. They also point out that journalists contribute to the terminological confusion surrounding the notions of immigrants, migrants and refugees in the public sphere, as these terms are often not used in a legally correct way, but rather vaguely and alternately as synonyms to refer to different categories of ‘people on the move’. On the other hand, they also discovered metapragmatic comments on the use of the different labels, illustrating that news makers are sensitive to different shades of meaning. What is more, they did not find a dominant negative framing of immigrants, migrants and refugees in the studied Portuguese headlines, contrary to earlier studies in other countries. In the Portuguese press these people were mainly framed in terms of solidarity.

Torkington and Perdigão Ribeiro draw the conclusion that it is quintessential to take contextual factors into account when studying the (re)construction of social groups and identities in news discourse. In their case the sociopolitical climate was positive to immigrants, migrants and refugees. Since Portugal at that time was not heavily affected by the ‘migration crisis’ with only a limited number of people coming in from abroad, and since both in politics and in society Portugal’s self-image of a tolerant nation was promoted, it is argued that the Portuguese press took the opportunity to reinforce a positive ‘us’
representation in contrast to the constant oppositional positioning of ‘other’ EU countries who were hostile towards migrants. As such, Torkington and Perdigão Ribeiro conclude that ‘the mass media will generally focus on ‘facts’ that are consistent with elite political interests, thereby influencing the knowledge and representations of their audiences and ultimately being a major instrument of ideological control’.

Next, Robin Reul, Steve Paulussen, and Pieter Maeseele discuss newspaper coverage of the Belgian internment policy as a way of examining, broadly, how (news) media operate as forums for debate, opening up the public conversation to a diverse range of perspectives or closing it around a particular set of (seemingly) ‘commonsensical’ positions while excluding alternatives. The focus, then, is on investigating the scope and the form of the mediated debate on this contentious issue – or, which perspectives are represented and how. As such, the analysis is premised on an ‘agonistic pluralistic’ approach, which conceives of news reporting as a space of symbolic struggle, where different, equally legitimate viewpoints on matters of societal interest are normalized or contested through ‘discursive strategies’ of ‘positioning’, ‘de/legitimization’, and ‘de/naturalization’. The main purpose of this study, still, is to develop and explore an analytical framework that integrates these insights and those derived from a ‘performative’ approach to journalistic ‘truth-telling’. Informed by speech act theory, the latter complements the ‘agonistic pluralistic’ perspective by relating journalistic conventions of form and style to ‘ritualistic’, discursive constructions of authenticity and credibility.

The multi-layered framework is subsequently applied to three cases of internment controversies – the 2013 ‘babykiller’ trial of a potential internee, the 2014 Internment Act, and the 2015 euthanasia request of a long-time internee – which are considered as ‘critical discourse moments’ and pertain to different aspects of the central theme (e.g. forensic psychiatry and the judiciary, socio-economic dimension of internment policy, human rights). In doing so, the coverage of two mainstream Dutch-language quality newspapers with diverging politico-ideological profiles is subjected to a fine-grained discourse analysis of elements of ‘manifest form’, style, scope, and ‘discursive form’.

The analysis reveals meaningful differences between the two newspapers’ approaches to the three cases under study. Whereas the centrist newspaper is characterized by a more ‘conservative’ approach to journalism and largely adheres to official narratives and dominant legal-political perspectives, the progressive title adopts a more ‘reflective’ stance (i.e. more opinionated, persuasive), aligns to some extent with a ‘care’ perspective, and appears to be more open to ‘expand discourse’ and ‘cultivate debate’. Only in the 2015 case do the authors find indications in both newspapers of ‘ politicization’, as alternative positions defined in terms of ideologies or opposing political values are allowed into the debate. Nonetheless, in line with the ‘agonistic pluralist’ premise, the authors also draw attention to the ‘exclusionary mechanisms’ shaping the internment coverage in both newspapers: non-elite sources, such as internees and advocacy groups, are conspicuous by their near absence.
in the reporting. This may follow from journalistic routines of objectivity, it is argued, but most notably, it demonstrates that a mere diversity of sources does not necessarily translate into a pluralist debate between a variety of equally legitimate voices.

Finally, Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg’s analysis is set against the background of a broader contemporary concern with the impact of tendencies of polarization and misinformation on civic discourse, and the role of social media platforms, like Facebook, in this regard. It starts from the observation that public and academic debates on this issue are typically premised on a primary, or singular, focus on how personalization algorithms effect so-called ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’, in which social media users are isolated and only selectively exposed to information and opinions which align with their preexistent dispositions or beliefs. However, such technological determinism, the authors argue, tends to gloss over the agency of individual users in shaping online communicative environments and purposefully adapting the technology to suit particular preferences or uses. Therefore, this study proposes a user-oriented approach which shifts critical focus to the meaningful contribution of human actions and (navigating) strategies to the circulation of news and opinions on social media platforms and the room for diversity and debate that ensues.

In doing so, Seargeant and Tagg draw on data from a two-year project, Creating Facebook, in which over a hundred members of the platform where questioned through an online survey and a number of follow-up qualitative interviews about their uses, experiences, and emergent normative conceptions of appropriate conduct on the social networking site. Focusing on interactions emerging from content generated or shared by users themselves (e.g. status updates, comments, shared news), this paper more specifically examines how users perceive, experience, and respond to ‘offending’ behaviour occurring in their ‘ego-centric networks’. Users’ negotiations of their interactions in this particular context, so it is argued and demonstrated through a thematic discourse analysis, articulate broader themes of ‘media ideology’, ‘intradiversity’, and ‘context design’ as conceptualized by the authors.

The study finds that ‘offending’ content is typically understood both in terms of political disagreement and factual inaccuracy, and that, notwithstanding the personalizing algorithm, it is an issue experienced by a majority of the research participants due to the ‘intradiverse’ and hybrid nature of (their) communicative spaces on Facebook. In response to these online offences, normative conceptions of suitable conduct on social media as well as coping strategies, such as measures of avoidance and critical awareness, develop. Interestingly, in this regard, users’ ‘media ideologies’ and efforts at ‘context design’ interact with offline relationships and settings. By elaborating the human factor behind what is described as ‘online conviviality’, or ‘the desire for non-confrontational co-existence through negotiating or ignoring difference and avoiding contentious debate’, Seargeant and Tagg complicate and nuance our understanding of the affordances of social media as forums for civic discourse and public debate beyond what technological deterministic positions typically allow for.
From this overview, it is clear that the notion of ‘truth’ is a complex concept, especially in relation to the intricate interface between journalism and politics. Truth is constantly subject to public debate and discursive struggles to such an extent that some scholars descry a ‘post-truth Zeitgeist’. Many of the above papers also seem to hint at journalists as ‘ideological brokers’ (Blommaert 1999), as they interpret the world, while contributing to the construction of social reality. This means that the work of journalists is not free of engagement, as their ‘will to facticity’ (Allan 2010: 80) and ‘truth work’ (Head & Wihbey 2017) has an impact on society. From a cognitive psychological perspective, Harris and Sanborn (2013: 417) put it this way: ‘[m]edia affect our minds: they give us ideas, change our attitudes, tell us what the world is like’. Are journalists really capable of representing the world, or do they promote a ‘non-representative truth’ (Goldstein 2007), and is there always an alternative truth? Journalists, especially those touching on political issues, often have an ambiguous relationship with the ‘truth’. Journalistic processes of construction and deconstruction of ‘truth(s)’ are therefore worthy of investigation. This special issue gives an impetus to this kind of research.
References


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