doi: 10.55207/GXDI1320

The Myth of the Vulnerable Audience: Exploring Counter-Intuitive Approaches to Post-Truth Populism in the New Mass Media

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Abstract: This paper interrogates the liberal policy discourse surrounding populism, which is often characterised as a communicative style linked to 'post-truth' politics. Analysing grey literature and scholarly sources, the study critiques the liberal policy discourse on post-truth populism, examining how it is framed as a communicative style that threatens scientific truth by exploiting emotional appeals. The research situates this critique within communication theory, arguing that 'post-truth' and populism are conceptually intertwined, both premised on a neo-modernist pursuit of positivist truth. The paper challenges the liberal critique's tendency to essentialise populist audiences as politically illiterate and passive, devoid of agency and critical capacity. Such framing, it contends, risks reinforcing polarisation rather than facilitating meaningful dialogue. By focusing on the limitations of this policy discourse, the paper advocates for a reassessment of the audience's agency, emphasising the need for a more nuanced understanding of media reception. It concludes that fostering dialogue requires moving beyond a structural critique of media manipulation and recognising the complex and active nature of digital audiences. The study suggests that this shift is essential to address the root causes of distrust in mainstream institutions and to broaden the epistemological scope beyond the constraints of Western modernity, acknowledging the plurality of populisms in the digital age.

Keywords: Populism, Post-truth, Western Modernity, Audience, Agency, Mass Media

Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, an extensive body of research has been produced in Media Studies and Political Communication which addresses the increasing popularity of right-wing populism. These critiques of populism emerged against the backdrop of a broader debate on public trust and the erosion of the political centre. They identify one of the characteristics of right-wing populism as a binary rhetoric that tends to oppose the nationalist frame of the 'virtuous people' to that of the 'corrupt

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elites' (Waisbord 2018). This scholarship notably shows that populist leaders present themselves as the authentic representatives of the people, challenging the established elite who are portrayed as disconnected from the concerns of ordinary citizens (Sengul 2019). This rhetoric is reinforced by a rejection of liberal democratic institutions, which populists often accuse of perpetuating the status quo. Populists indeed rely on this anti-elitist posture to claim that they represent the true voice of the people, invoking a form of 'common sense' over expert knowledge (Suiter 2016; Fischer 2022). By highlighting these processes, contemporary literature on populism reflects on the challenged credibility of legacy media, exposing a climate of anti-intellectualism that is believed to create fertile ground for disinformation to thrive. It shows how populist media narratives divert public deliberation away from complex socioeconomic challenges, redirecting it towards antagonising identity politics. Such critique of populism seeks to explain the alarming rise of right-wing nationalism and its appeal in the era of mass self-communication (Castells 2007; Gerbaudo 2018).

However, this approach arguably supports a primarily liberal critique of populist media, which tends to disregard its audience, implicitly framing it as media illiterate, gullible and deprived of agency. This paper addresses this gap by reflecting on the limitations of this scholarship and considers its implications for the broader policy discourse on disinformation and post-truth populism. The study critically examines the epistemological foundations of 'post-truth' as a concept commonly associated with populism. It explores how these two forms of political rhetoric have been conceptualised and examines their points of intersection within recent academic debates in media studies and political communication. This article specifically argues that much of the existing literature, by focusing on the rise of right-wing populism, tends to portray these distinct communicative styles as intertwined in a symbiotic relationship. It examines whether this conceptual framework obscures the plural and complex nature of populisms, effectively delegitimising them as unreliable or detrimental to positivist truth through their association with post-truth rhetoric. Rather than seeking to re-legitimise an ideal of objective truth, this paper reconsiders the relevance of a social constructivist approach that emphasises dialogue as instrumental to pursuing truth and recognising non-mutually exclusive truths.

The paper then analyses a sample of sources from the grey literature to explore how post-truth populism is conceptualised in policy discourses. Drawing on this analysis, the paper proposes that such a conceptual framework inadvertently reaffirms normative expectations around public deliberation that rely on a structural approach to mass communication. It argues that this perspective involves a paternalistic lens, which overlooks the agency of the audience and often dismisses legitimate aspects of populist sentiment. Finally, the paper considers whether such liberal critique of post-truth populism compromises opportunities for dialogue, and it advocates for the

development of a new active audience theory when conceptualising populism in the digital age.

Conceptual Framework: The Intersection of Populism and 'Post-Truth' Politics

Contemporary liberal critiques of right-wing populism can be situated within the broader discourse of 'post-truth' politics – a concept frequently invoked to address public distrust and its impact on liberal democratic institutions (Newman and Conrad 2024). The phrase gained significant prominence following the 2016 Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump – key political events that marked a paradigmatic shift evidencing the popularity of right-wing conservative rhetoric. Post-truth (or 'post-fact') politics refers to a deliberate erosion of factual accuracy, whereby public discourse becomes centred on manipulating emotions rather than adhering to objective reality (Braun 2019; Fischer 2022). In this context, factual information becomes secondary, and narratives driven by emotional appeal gain precedence. Within contemporary debates around right-wing populism, post-truth politics is characterised by the undermining of traditional epistemic authorities such as the media, universities, and scientific institutions. This paradigmatic shift is in part attributed to media fragmentation in the digital age, a phenomenon that has allowed alternative sources of knowledge to circulate widely and unchecked (Ylä-Anttila 2018). Along with populism, 'post-truth' politics is said to affect the public's ability to engage in rational debate and consensus-building, which the liberal approach understands as key components of a functioning democracy.

Opposing facts and expertise to emotions and common sense

Communication theories around 'post-truth' highlight the mechanisms by which self-proclaimed populists exploit popular sentiment (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). This concept typically describes an era in which facts are subordinated to feelings, with political actors increasingly appealing to emotion over reason to sway public opinion (Harsin 2018; Fischer 2021). These political actors are said to manipulate emotionally charged narratives, often deploying 'rumour bombs' to exploit public discontent (Harsin 2018, 35). Harsin (2018) indeed argues that post-truth politics involves a deliberate exploitation of emotion, with populist rhetoric frequently relying on the mobilisation of fear and anger to galvanise support. Similarly, Fischer (2021) defines 'post-truth' as 'a fusing of emotion with information', whereby 'appeals to emotion – disconnected from factual details – are (...) becoming more important in the forming of public opinion than is demonstrable evidence' (2021, 13). The assumption here is that such appeal to emotion contrasts sharply with earlier models of public deliberation, which assumed a

rational and informed citizenry as the basis for democratic participation. Pomerantsev (2019) indeed defines post-truth as a tool of political control, where the very notion of what constitutes truth becomes a battleground. Populists may accordingly use terms like 'fake news' to discredit opponents and delegitimise dissenting views, framing themselves as defenders of the 'real' truth. This process is described as an excessive relativism that promotes anti-intellectualism and anti-establishment rhetoric, introducing a democracy in crisis.

Within this conceptual framework, the relationship between 'post-truth' and populism is described as symbiotic. Right-wing populists leverage post-truth strategies to dismiss inconvenient facts and manipulate public opinion by appealing to emotion rather than evidence: 'Populist leaders exploit a growing distrust in public institutions and established facts, presenting their own narratives as the "real truth" in opposition to the perceived lies of the elite' (Galston 2018). As a result, the populist audience is expected to be easily manipulated and more vulnerable to misinformation. Empirical studies conducted by researchers from Queen Mary University, for example, suggest that 'supporters of right-wing populist parties are prone to showing higher levels of political misinformation' (Queen Mary University 2020). The 'post-truth' climate, which favours personal belief over empirical evidence (Galpin and Vernon 2023), thus offers populists a fertile ground to advance their anti-elitist narratives (Ylä-Anttila 2018; Prior 2021). Right-wing populism on that account intersects with post-truth politics through the weaponisation of the term 'fake news' (Waisbord 2018; Sengul 2019) – a terminology used to challenge the credibility of legacy media.

Post-truth populism in other words draws a parallel between two sets of binaries, opposing legacy media to populist rhetoric, and facts to emotions. Yet this typology may inadvertently reinforce polarisation by over-simplifying the terms of these antagonisms. These attempts to compartmentalise facts and emotions sustain the myth of a sharp division between the rational, well-informed public (Habermas 1962) and the unpredictable crowds (Tarde 1901, 1962; Le Bon 1896) driven by emotions and susceptible to the influence of a charismatic leader (Freud 1998; Anzieu 2001). These gendered concepts are embedded in a body of social theory characteristic of Western modernity, which informed the work of Habermas (1962) and Lippmann (1998), shaping the liberal view on public deliberation and the need to 'manufacture' public opinion.

Towards theory of agency: audiences in the new mass media

The contemporary discourse on post-truth populism alludes to these tropes by contrasting liberal expectations of a well-informed public with a populist mass audience. This discourse is particularly relevant given the relatively recent transition of digital

communication into the mainstream and its recognition as the new mass media. Simultaneous to the rise of post-truth populism, social media have increasingly been linked to surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). Digital connectivity is accordingly expected to operate as a centralised, well-regulated, and widely commodified network of communication. This shift introduces a techno-dystopian lens, which views the media as system of political control over the masses – one that relies on a traditionally top-down, structural approach in media and communication studies. Such a perspective is admittedly not limited to the liberal framework of Habermassian deliberation (1962). Marxist critiques of the media typically apply a systemic perspective, which focuses on the sphere of power, and the political economy of the media (Hermann and Chomsky 1995; Benjamin 1935). This critical lens likely permeates contemporary debates on populism, as populist rhetoric is by definition designed to appeal to the masses.

In communication theory, audiences of populist content have historically been positioned as the opposite of a politically literate, informed public. However, this binary often essentialises the mass audience in the same way that populist rhetoric relies on an essentialist notion of 'the people'. Drawing on the legacy of late nineteenth-century crowd psychology (Stäheli 2011), it assumes that the audience is driven by emotions, lacks self-awareness, and is subject to deterministic psychological forces. Debates on post-truth populism may be reviving these tropes by emphasising how contemporary systems of media control influence the behaviour and psychology of the audience.

With the mainstreaming of digital communication, scholars have begun examining echo chambers and 'filter bubbles' (Flaxman et al. 2016; Mahrt 2020), where users are increasingly exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, further distancing them from official news sources. They demonstrate that – in the fragmented market of the digital mass media – individuals are inclined to trust information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, often at the expense of factual accuracy (Southwell and Thorson 2015; Thorson 2016). These deterministic processes are referred to as 'tribal epistemologies' (Harsin 2018, 35) and 'belief echoes' (Thorson 2016). Empirical research in the field of journalism resorts to similar deterministic theories in social psychology to explain the polarisation of social media debate in the so-called climate of 'post-truth' (Ball 2017; d'Ancona 2017; Pomerantsev 2019). Ball refers to realistic conflict theory, stating that news consumers identify themselves in opposition to an out-group and position themselves by processes of 'virtue signalling' (2017). In the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, this climate of distrust is described as compounded by the appeal of 'contagious' conspiracy theories 'spreading' on social media, further eroding confidence in traditional news outlets – a phenomenon coined 'infodemic' (Pai et al. 2023). As much as this body of literature

contributes to challenging the political economy of digital media, it applies a top-down perspective that overlooks the complexity of the audience and its degree of agency. While it raises relevant questions about media fragmentation and polarisation in the digital age, this structural approach inadvertently essentialises news readers and media consumers as part of a mass, whose psychology is depicted as reactive rather than proactive, heavily conditioned by its environment.

The critique of 'post-truth' in contemporary debates around populism

Examining the centrality of 'post-truth' or 'post-fact' within the liberal discourse on populism allows us to scrutinise its deeper epistemological implications. Feminist and postcolonial critiques have already challenged the concept of 'post-truth' for perpetuating a gendered binary that opposes the public and private spheres. These critiques highlight how such frameworks continue to obscure the ways in which knowledge production is shaped by exclusionary logics.

A feminist perspective is particularly relevant in deconstructing the historically gendered representation of the mass audience. Fraser's feminist critique is crucial here, as it dismantles the modern concept of publicity and interrogates the male-dominated framework of the bourgeois public sphere. Her recent work suggests that the liberal discourse surrounding post-truth operates as a pseudo-progressive critique of right-wing populism. Fraser refers to this dynamic as a 'Hobson's choice' (2017) between reactionary conservatism and 'progressive neoliberalism'. While these political projects may appear diametrically opposed, Fraser argues that they are two sides of the same coin. In deconstructing today's apparent polarisation, Fraser demonstrates how the liberal wing of the 1990s political establishment reappropriated the progressive values of the 1960s civil rights movements to promote a strictly neoliberal agenda. Using the example of the Clinton administration, she argues that this pseudo-progressive politics widened social inequalities, ultimately paving the way for reactionary populism. In her view, the relationship between these two political projects is symbiotic rather than antagonistic.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the interplay between anti-media populism and anti-populist media (Krämer 2018). Anti-media populism essentialises the relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite', feeding into anti-establishment sentiment (Mazzoleni et al. 2018). However, pseudo-progressive critiques of right-wing populism tend to essentialise the audience in much the same way, portraying it as powerless and devoid of agency.

In its effort to counter right-wing populism, progressive neoliberalism often employs a top-down critique of the media. This mirrors the same pitfalls seen in early crowd

psychology, which portrayed mass audiences as passive victims of dominant power structures. In media studies, such a structural approach has often contributed to a theory of hegemony that views the media as a tool for manipulating the masses. While this perspective enables a systemic critique of media and its political economy, it frequently overlooks the agency and bottom-up practices of communicative resistance. As a result, liberal discourse can co-opt these critiques to recentralise or securitise the media (Al-Rodhan 2017).

These critiques remind us that, in seeking to reassert a regime of truth, liberal critiques of right-wing populism often overlook the long history of epistemic violence through which peripheral voices and alternative systems of knowledge have been excluded. In their attempt to combat anti-intellectualism, liberal responses to populism frequently cling to notions of positivist truth that are embedded within pre-existing hegemonic systems, themselves products of Western modernity:

> Since the days of colonialism, we have indeed already been operating at the level of Jean Baudrillard's third simulation of reality where the deception (of subjugation) has been masquerading as (universal) truth. [...] it is ironic that today's 'experts' are routinely denigrated and their vilification is now becoming normalised. (Clennon 2017, 3)

Underlying this discourse is the assumption that the popular affects driving conservatism can be mitigated through reason and critical thinking, as these are viewed as the engines of liberal progress. This ideal of gentrified public debate yet remains fairly Eurocentric and modelled on the history and recent political developments of the Global North:

> [...] the entire contemporary rhetoric about the far-right populism is based on the fundamental assumption that the 'normal' North West is becoming 'abnormal' [...]. As this research is driven and dominated by the sociocultural, political, and economic interests of the Global North West, it continues to reproduce the power asymmetries between [...] the colonizer/colonized, and the east/west. (Masood and Nisar 2020, 163)

Admittedly, the dichotomy between the Global North and Global South is widely contested. The authors cited here argue that this distinction is increasingly irrelevant to contemporary debates on the rise of right-wing populism. Furthermore, they suggest that by framing far-right populism as a crisis of Western liberal democracy, contemporary rhetoric alludes to this divide, imbuing it with an element of self-fulfilling prophecy. This approach has been increasingly contested by postcolonial scholars, who now refer to it as 'post-truth whiteness'. Clennon (2017) and Mejia et al. (2018)

note that critiques of post-truth, much like the reactionary conservatism they aim to challenge, carry their own elements of nostalgia. By advocating for the restoration of a centralised, regulated, and normative public sphere, these critiques imply that there was once a 'golden age' of truth. Mejia et al. (2018) in fact argue that 'current scholarship and reporting often reproduces the myth that we once lived in an era of unproblematic truth, and, consequently, intersects with a neoconservative nostalgia for a post-racial past that never existed' (2018, 111).

Key Concepts and Perspective: Post-Truth, Populism and Post-Modernism

By challenging the liberal discourse on post-truth populism, these feminist and postcolonial critiques expose its epistemological limitations, allowing us to question the notion that 'post-truth' politics is a consequence of postmodernism. Media experts who endorse the 'post-truth' narrative indeed argue that the current climate of scepticism and uncertainty stems from postmodernism (Pomerantsev 2013, 3–4; d'Ancona 2017, 92–96). This idea was in part supported by the work of Latour (2018), who attributes the so-called 'crisis of truth' to the legacy of post-structuralism, an argument which earned him the label of 'post-truth philosopher' (Kofman 2018). Admittedly, while Latour's new realism (2018) seeks to move beyond postmodern relativism, it maintains a critical stance on power. His epistemological approach suggests that post-truth populism is not simply a continuation of postmodernism but rather a distortion of it. In some of his latest work, Latour (2017) critiques the liberal rhetoric surrounding populism, identifying a neo-modernist elitism within post-truth critiques that fails to address the deeper causes of eroded public trust:

> When political analysts try to grasp the current situation, they use and abuse the term 'populism'. They accuse 'ordinary people' of indulging in a narrow-minded vision, in their fears, their naïve mistrust of elites, their bad taste in culture, and above all, in their passion for identity, folklore, archaism and boundaries – let alone a culpable indifference to the facts. [...] This is to forget that 'ordinary folk' have been callously betrayed by those who have abandoned the idea of truly bringing about the modernization of the planet [...] for lack of a planet big enough for their dreams of limitless growth. (Latour 2017, 83)

It is therefore worth considering whether the policy discourse around 'post-truth' has regressed too far towards Western modernity in its attempt to 'save' the audience in distress from the influence of evil populists.

This question calls for a theory of agency that recognises how dissent and deliberation operate at the peripheries of the public sphere (Fraser 1990). A feminist and postcolonial perspective remind us that poststructuralism remains relevant when interrogating self-legitimising claims of positivist truth. Giraud and Aghassi-Isfahani (2020), for example, argue that while Latour's work aims to transcend divisive critiques around post-truth and modernity, it often fails to address the persistent inequalities that feminist and postcolonial scholars foreground. Though innovative, his approach overlooks the need for a situated understanding of knowledge, thereby reinforcing the very exclusions it seeks to dismantle.

Methodology: A Critique of the Grey Literature on Post-Truth

This study contributes to this critique by exploring how the populist audience is characterised in policy discourse on post-truth populism. Beyond academic literature, it examines the framing of this concept in a sample drawn from the grey literature on 'post-truth'. The corpus selected for this study features policy reports, think tank publications, working papers, and handbooks released by governments, nonprofits, consultancies, research institutes, and international organisations. The sources sampled for this research apply a broader terminology relevant to the liberal critique of post-truth populism to address specific concerns around media regulations, journalistic practices, and media literacy. They notably focus on preventing and regulating harmful disinformation, which is here treated as a manifestation of the 'post-truth' climate.

This sample from the grey literature enables us to explore how liberal critiques of post-truth populism are reflected in policy discourse concerning media, public trust, and citizenship within the context of digital mass media. The dataset covers various empirical studies and policy recommendations on disinformation, applying both regional and international perspectives. The sources selected were published between 2018 and 2024, in the years following the polarised 2016 Brexit referendum and US election. This timeframe offers some insights into the policy discussion surrounding the rise of nationalist populist rhetoric, against the backdrop of the Covid-19 crisis and the media warfare associated with the war in Ukraine.

A critical discourse analysis was applied to assess the framing of the populist mass audience across this corpus. The study focuses on conceptual definitions of populism in media policy and practice and examines how digital audiences exposed to disinformation are represented. An inductive and interpretative approach was applied focusing on both explicit and implicit references to these audiences, their psychology, and their potential for critical insight when dealing with the issue problemat-

ised as post-truth populism. Three common themes were identified through an iterative process, namely (1) the imperative of resilience, (2) deterministic psychological processes, and (3) the limitations of a Eurocentric legal framework around disinformation and its implications for media freedom. By outlining these themes, the study examines whether the audience of populist content is essentialised as a mass, similar to how populist narratives construct an essentialised notion of 'the people.' It contributes to deconstructing the assumptions underpinning such a structural approach to the new mass media and shows that this may be counterproductive to our research and understanding of populism. Simultaneously, emphasising preconceptions around the psychology and vulnerability of the populist audience, the analysis demonstrates the relevance of the feminist and postcolonial critique in demystifying 'post-truth'. In doing so, the paper highlights two areas for dialogue, exploring how to reconcile perspectives on populism in both policy discourse and communication research.

Findings: Post-Truth Populism in the Policy Discourse around Disinformation

The grey literature aligns with contemporary academic debates in defining 'post-truth' and populism as two mutually reinforcing political styles. Throughout the corpus, declining trust in legacy media is seen as creating favourable conditions for disinformation, and vice versa: 'Fake news sources often target mainstream media organisations by accusing them of bias and incompetence' (Ognyanova et al. 2020, 4). However, while embracing this conceptual framework, grey literature sources do not sufficiently explore the underlying causes of public distrust in specific contexts. This discourse fails to thoroughly investigate the factors contributing to the decreasing credibility of legacy media, instead viewing it merely as a characteristic of populist sentiment. Conversely, it reduces populism to a communication style, detaching its rhetoric from the underlying ideology. This blurs the distinctions between various forms of populism, all of which are perceived as radical compared to the reassuring status quo of the liberal political centre. This complex conflation of ideologies and rhetoric is partly evident in the portrayal of *the* populist audience – a construct that conveys several stereotypes about the psychology of the masses. By conflating 'post-truth' and populism, this policy discourse insidiously co-opts the structural critique of media, while shifting the discussion away from its political economy towards the presumed illiteracy of the audience.

Teaching 'resilience' to the media illiterates

Across the dataset, the audience exposed to post-truth populism is expected to filter information through the scope of identity politics. As such, it is assumed to identify

with the behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes of a designated in-group (Ball 2017). The grey literature in fact alludes to the herd mentality of the mass audience, an idea reminiscent of nineteenth-century crowd psychology and its theory of imitation (Le Bon 1896; Tarde 1962; Freud 1998). The semantic around the 'spread' of fake news implicitly refers to processes of contagion by imitation. In this corpus, the imperative of countering disinformation is, for example, described as a necessary 'inoculation' (Bontcheva and Posetti 2020, 11). UNESCO, for example, advocates for 'media and information literacy programmes designed to "inoculate the herd" against disinformation' (Khan 2021, 7). This language is recurrently used to promote media literacy initiatives designed for 'vulnerable' groups or communities said to be either exposed or targeted by harmful online content: 'The research encourages (…) Media and Information Literacy (MIL), especially through educational interventions targeting children, young people, older citizens, and vulnerable groups' (Bontcheva and Posetti 2020, 7).

Such discussions on media literacy sometimes invoke the terminology of 'resilience' (CIR 2024) – a concept which has already been extensively critiqued in development studies as a notion that stigmatises communities experiencing repeated or prolonged crises (Anderson 2015; Derickson 2016; Hutcheon and Lashewicz 2014). In Reid's (2012) terms, 'resilience' implicitly calls for a neoliberal framework of governance, which normalises the expectation that individuals and communities must perpetually adapt to adverse conditions, thus ensuring the maintenance of the status quo. The same can be said here about the expectation of 'community resilience to disinformation', which assumes audiences to be otherwise passive, ill-equipped, and deprived of critical thinking:

> UK citizens, especially those from more vulnerable groups such as children and people from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, are left exposed to online harms due to this skills deficit. (…)The government has a role to play in developing users' resilience to these risks, to ensure they have the skills and critical thinking needed to navigate the internet more safely. (RSM 2021, 6–7)

As much as this discourse acknowledges systemic issues in the political economy of the media, the policy recommendations derived from this critique fail to engage with the nuance and complexity of media reception. The emphasis on media literacy admittedly acknowledges structural mechanisms of political manipulation. Like the academic literature on media populism, the grey literature critiques a form of political consumerism heightened by a fragmented digital media environment, where the attention economy drives profit-oriented news production practices. However, the argument of resilience ironically diverts policy discussions away from a structural

reform of the media market, while legitimising tighter media regulations and recentralisation.

Deterministic psychological processes

This view of the user is reinforced by deterministic notions about the group psychology of the populist audience. Under 'psychological impact' the 2024 UK Parliamentary report on disinformation, for example, states that 'frequent exposure to mis/disinformation can hinder the ability to identify credible information. A consequence may be distrust of all information, including from sources traditionally considered reliable (such as regulated media)' (2024, 11). Here, it is the audience, not the media, that is portrayed as corrupted. The focus is not on the reliability of the media but on the gullibility of the public.

In other instances, the grey literature evokes deterministic theories from social psychology alluding to the behavioural effects of *belief echoes* amongst audiences exposed to online disinformation (Lai and Ladav 2023). Audiences are thus framed as easily manipulated and 'uncritical', despite the acknowledged scepticism they express towards official news sources:

> 'Powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by States, populist politicians, and dishonest corporate entities, as they are shared by uncritical publics.' (UNESCO 2018, 15)

Media reception is described as a helpless exposure to 'negative influences'. Today's mass audience is, in other words, portrayed as driven by sheer conformism, an inclination that threatens 'democratic processes and societal debates' (ERGA 2020, 8). Such a framing reasserts a gendered dichotomy, contrasting the threat of an erratic crowd with the reassuring rationality of a well-informed public. This image of a subjugated populist audience further resonates with the binary opposing the liberal concept of publicity to the informality of an unregulated private sphere. This reductionist trope not only affects our understanding of populist sentiment, but also perpetuates paternalistic ideals of civic engagement, primarily based on the limited framework of Western liberal democracies.

'Fake news' regulations: a neo-colonial framework of media governance

Much of the grey literature on disinformation applies a similar logic to promote a security lens, which resonates with earlier policies designed to prevent hate speech and 'extremist' content. The use of bots in political campaigning, along with the risks

associated with deep fakes are, for example, presented as significant threats that may justify a broader securitisation of the online space. The implementation of these tighter media regulations yet raises questions about the freedom of the press in legislations with high levels of media ownership concentration. This aspect of the policy discourse reveals the Eurocentrism of liberal 'post-truth' criticism, questioning its relevance beyond the Global North. Some legal experts accordingly express reservations about the development of a legal framework around disinformation (Mchangama and Fiss 2019; Garbe et al. 2021). They warn us about the fact that this framework is likely to be modelled on the case of Western democracies and eventually reapplied in contexts, where the national media market is already highly centralised. Experts refer to the example of Germany's Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), initially designed to limit far-right content by enforcing stricter censorship against hate speech and disinformation. This legal framework was exported to other countries, where its implementation is further limiting freedom of expression (Mchangama and Fiss 2019, 3–6). As is the case for hate speech and 'extremism', the legal and conceptual definitions of the term remain problematically vague. Such terminology may be applied to question the trustworthiness of alternative (i.e., unregulated) communication networks in legislations where political dissent has been marginalised to the peripheries of the public sphere.

In countries like Egypt (Mahlouly 2023), Malaysia, Lesotho and Uganda (Garbe et al. 2021), governments have implemented new laws exposing individual users to fees and penalties when circulating online content deemed 'fake news'. As for European jurisdictions, the new legal frameworks designed to tackle the spread of disinformation by far-right networks have been shown to have collateral effects for diasporas and minority voices (Human Rights Watch 2018; Radsch 2017). The case of Germany's media policy responses in monitoring antisemitic content demonstrates that such a security-driven approach to disinformation is, ironically, likely to further restrict the expression of diasporas and ethnic minorities in its effort to combat far-right nationalist rhetoric (Jamal 2022). The terminology of post-truth thus carries significant legal implications and risks recentralising public discourse around the authority of the modern state, thereby perpetuating a neo-colonial approach to media regulation.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that the liberal critique of post-truth populism is shaping policy discourses around public engagement in the digital mass media. This approach tends to promote a paternalistic lens and calls for elitist processes of public engagement, which are rooted in Western modernity. Such mechanisms have already been challenged by a feminist and postcolonial critique, which expresses reservations

about the epistemological implications of 'post-truth' criticisms and their rejection of post-structuralism. Rather than a tightly regulated debate, this postcolonial perspective evidences the relevance of dialogue as a cultural practice and a context-specific form of communication (Carbaugh 2013). Future policymaking should draw on this critique to reconsider the legal framework around disinformation, attending to its context-specific implications across national media markets, where varying legislations and communication practices present distinct challenges for media freedom.

From a communication perspective, this paternalistic undertone transpires from the framing of *the* populist audience – a construct that conveys common negative stereotypes about the masses. In the context of disinformation and post-truth populism, these digital crowds are typically viewed as vulnerable and easily manipulated by media narratives designed to appeal to their affects. In this context, the postcolonial and feminist critiques remind us that the epistemological tools of poststructuralism remain relevant, when it comes to challenging any essentialist narrative labelled as truth. Crucially, the policy discourse around 'post-truth' also relies on a predominantly structural view of media and mass communication which disregards audience agency. In doing so, it appears to co-opt a traditionally Marxist critique of the mass media and its political economy, while diverting the debate away from structural change. Yet, a theory of agency may offer a more productive response to the current climate of public distrust and polarisation.

These findings introduce two areas for dialogue allowing us to reconcile perspectives on populism in both policy discourses and communication research. On the one hand, they invite us to apply a bottom-up perspective that acknowledges a subaltern *decoding* of the media (Hall 2007) and recognises organic pathways to critical thinking and media literacy. Such a theory of agency overcomes the paternalistic undertone of post-truth criticisms, validating a sometimes-legitimate populist sentiment.

Most importantly, it refrains from positioning truth as a prerequisite for dialogue. Rather than emphasising a pragmatic realist notion of unconditional universalistic truth as an *a priori* standard (Habermas 2014; Habermas and Cooke 2000), this perspective reexplores the communicative aspects of truth-seeking as embedded in deliberative praxis. As such, it acknowledges dialogue as instrumental to the pursuit of truth, understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed endpoint. This idea aligns with the conceptual framework of dialogue as an evolutionary process based on reciprocity as well as a site of power negotiation (Hammond et al. 2003). It also resonates with Kelly's definition of dialogue as a constructive and reflective practice, which contrasts with debate (2013). In other words, a communication theory of agency applied to the study of populism aligns with Habermas's ideal of communic-

ative action, while also addressing the real-world challenges posed by power asymmetries in dialogical practices – framing these negotiations as essential to the pursuit of mutual understanding and truth.

On the other hand, such a counter-intuitive approach supports dialogue, calling for a re-conceptualisation of populism in the field of political communication. It stems from the realisation that a structural critique of the mass media – as much as it originates from critical theory (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002; Benjamin 1935) – unwillingly legitimises a liberal and rather elitist framework of public deliberation (Habermas 1962). By focusing on the political economy of the media, critical media theory overlooks the audience, supposing that it is primarily subjugated to higher powers. Such a perspective inadvertently supports a liberal discourse around media securitisation and re-centralisation. This conundrum introduces new avenues for dialogue insofar as it highlights points of intersection as well as contradictions (Hammond et al. 2003) which are directly relevant to the conceptualisation of populism as a practice of political communication.

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