Editorial: Fake news, disinformation and post-truth politics: comparing the European Union and other Western democracies

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Editorial on the Research Topic
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Recent shifts in the political and social landscape—such as the resurgence of anti-democratic and populist politics, the explosion of conspiracism, and the decline of legacy media—have prompted interest among scholars, political commentators, and the general public in the role of truth in contemporary politics. The use of the term, "post-truth," rose more than 2,000 percent over the course of 2015, prompting the Oxford Dictionaries to name it word of the year in 2016 (McIntyre, 2018). In reckoning with this political context, this Research Topic examines the impact of fake news, disinformation, and post-truth politics on the European Union in comparative politics. This Research Topic's central goal, specifically, is to analyze comparatively the extent and impact of disinformation and post-truth politics; hence, in various ways, the papers in this topic engage with (1) the role of emotion and narrative in political discourse, (2) highlight the role of populist political actors, and (3) speak to the power of media in modern contentious politics.

A central premise of the literature on social movements is that the outcomes of contentions politics are largely dependent on "institutional structure and ideological disposition of those in power" (McAdam et al., 1996: p. 5) i.e. it raises the question of when those in power are themselves in position of political dependence. Indeed, for instance, the relatively modest impact of the Occupy Movement, or anti-austerity protests across Europe, illustrates the challenges facing contentious politics in our current context, while also pointing to the potentially higher resonance of nationalistic, and Eurosceptic activist frames. Importantly, while in the second part of the 20th century there was optimism regarding European integration, Euroscepticism had risen throughout the first part of the 21st century in parts because of the 2008 financial crisis, the rise in inequality (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2020; Leconte, 2010; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018), and the move of far-right and far-left politics from the margins to the center of national politics (Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020).

This Research Topic, *Fake news, disinformation and post-truth politics: comparing the European Union and other Western democracies*, reflects on these important, and concerning, political developments. Specifically, the central goal of the Research Topic was to analyze comparatively the extent and impact of disinformation and post-truth politics in Western democracies. The papers in this Research Topic variously engage with the role of emotion and narrative in political discourse, highlight the role of populist political actors, and speak to the power of media in modern politics.

Media—both traditional and new—play a large role in the political dynamics investigated in this Research Topic. First, Alcántara-Lizárraga and Jima-González test the effects of misinformation on social media on mass mobilization. Specifically, the authors investigate the potential shortcomings of political manipulation on social media by politicians, finding that, while government disinformation on social media may quell unrest in the short term, such information manipulation has negative effects on public trust and satisfaction with the state, resulting in mass mobilizations in the long run (Alcántara-Lizárraga and Jima-González). Their interest in the relationship between media and public perception is shared by Orlando and Conrad, whose article takes up the question of media's role in driving support for Brexit.

In their article, Orlando and Conrad examine the impacts of structural factors on support for Brexit, paying particular attention to how those structural factors are being defined and communicated through the media. They show how structural factors only take on political meanings when they are assigned them, through ideologically, culturally, and emotionally salient narratives. The authors further argue that these salient narratives—for example, narratives blaming the lack NHS funding on the European Union—can be, and often are, crafted and promoted by political agents (Orlando and Conrad). Similarly, Beaupre uses newspaper coverage to study the narratives of immigration being sold to the public. In her analysis of newspaper coverage, she underlines the importance of emotion and narrative in the current political climate—in particular, their replacement of Truth as an anchor of political discourse. She shows how media coverage of the "migrant crisis" relied on tone as well as content to create meaning. Her emphasis on emotionality points to another common concern of the papers in this topic: the waning importance of Truth in political culture.

LeVan, similarly, speaks of the subjectivity at the heart of post-truth politics, and reflect on the decline of satisfaction with the status quo in Western democracies. He speaks powerfully about disenfranchisement with liberalism on both ends of the political spectrum, paying special attention to how populists pursue national homogeneity through exclusion (LeVan). LeVan, however, offers a possible solution to this difficult political moment: he argues for a vision of pluralistic solidarity as a more expansive multiculturalism, one that recognizes the rights of individuals as attached to their cultural identities, not separate or above them.

The four articles that make up this Research Topic all rest on the same premise: that there is something important and potentially dangerous about this political moment where the role of truth seems so diminished in political discourses. This is also a political moment characterized by contradictions; for example, even as Eurosceptic and far-right political parties make unprecedented gains across Europe, opinion polls show that 52% of Europeans have a positive view of the European Union, and 73% believe that the EU has delivered benefits to their country (Eurobarometer Survey, 2025; Henley, 2020). Contradictions like this one point to the polarization of Western democracies in a context of post-truth politics, and, by extension, to the need for research to understand the causes and effects of this polarization.

In response to this need, these articles form part of a larger research agenda, supported by a Jean Monnet Network Grant, *Post-Truth Politics, Nationalism and the (De)Legitimation of European Integration,*[1] based at the Höfði Reykjavík Peace Centre at the University of Iceland, with strong ties to the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria. Spurred on by the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, which restructured Icelandic politics around narratives of European integration and disintegration, this research agenda has produced two other Frontiers Research Topics: one focused on the causal conjecture of narrative participations and governance regimes (Conrad et al., 2022), and one on the prospect of European integration in the context of crisis-driven contentious politics (Carpenter et al., 2024). Through these publications, this research agenda shed light on both the extent and possible impact of the proliferation of disinformation and fake news via digital and other media, but also through more conventional mobilization and communication mechanisms, on processes of legitimation and delegitimating of European integration in the public sphere.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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1   http://ams.hi.is/en/projects/post-truth-politics/

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