

The politics of truth in the digital age

Thursday, June 16, 2022 4:45 PM (1h 30m)

In this panel, scholars will discuss the impact of digitisation on the politics of truth. How some actors have been taking advantage of it to articulate conspiracy theories as truth? Has it given shape to new realities? To what extent do the digital politics of truth pose challenges to the future of democracy? How modes of alternative truth can offer new opportunities for resistance? How Asia has experienced the post-truth phenomenon? These are some of the questions that will be explored in this panel.

Beatriz Buarque

The dangerous impact of the digitisation of international politics: The Alt-Right Conspiratorial Regimes of Truth

The conspiratory nature of the alternative right was noticed by a number of scholars. Nevertheless, the way conspiracy theories such as the great replacement and the white genocide have been produced, consumed, and circulated as truth remains largely overlooked in the literature. By examining this digital political phenomenon as a multitude, this paper exposes how and why the alternative right has managed to trigger its own regimes of truth. It argues that digital media has facilitated the appearance of novel ways of claiming authority, which have contributed to make the leap from “stigmatized” to “legitimate” knowledge. The multimodal critical affect-discourse analysis of nine YouTube videos containing authoritative articulations of the great replacement, white genocide, deep state and cultural Marxism (narratives found in alt-right circles) illuminates how authority is discursively constructed, recognized through comments and likes, and further reinforced through shares across different platforms. This paper makes two important theoretical contributions. To political studies, it presents a new way of examining digital political phenomena by focusing on what is shared as commonality in digital spaces. To international relations, it demonstrates how amorphous political bodies have found on the internet a space to produce and disseminate their own truths.

Seb Bierema

Imagining Reality into existence: Castoriadis, Qanon, and the War on Terror

Conspiracy theories and post-truth politics have figured prominently in the popular consciousness since the Brexit referendum and the American elections in 2016. These conspiracies have been broadly dismissed in both academic and media circles as being paranoid and divorced from reality. I attempt a slightly more generous reading of conspiracy theories by drawing on Cornelius Castoriadis’s work on the role of the imagination in bringing the world into being. Castoriadis’s social imaginary bears some resemblance to Foucault’s Regime of Truth, which has recently been gaining prominence in critical readings of conspiracy theories. Rather than conceiving of conspiracies as attempting to provide a narrative which explains an underlying reality, however, Castoriadis highlights a double hermeneutic whereby the imagination is central to creating reality. From this perspective, conspiracy theories can be understood as radical instituting imaginaries which attempt to undermine the givenness of reality as instituted imaginary. This approach does not go as far to exonerate conspiracy theories tout court—some conspiracies, such as the Qanon movement, undoubtedly follow Benjamin’s logic of fascism as the aestheticisation of politics. Instead, it takes the proliferation of conspiracy theories as an impetus to recognise the contradictions and absurdities within our instituted reality. In particular, this paper will explore this process of reality being imagined into being with reference to the Qanon movement and the War on Terror.

Peter Stuart Robinson

Contemporary Epistemic Resistance: Modes of Alternative Truth-construction after Occupy London

The crisis-ridden early 21st Century arguably represents a critical historical juncture, relatively susceptible to active interrogation of dominant ideas and institutions, as well as the social movements forming its vehicle and catalyst. Their long-term prospects for mobilising social resistance hinge on their capacity for critical reflection that at least appears to offer a deeper truth and fuller ground to human aspiration. A case-study of the residual social network generated by Occupy London explores the conditions of – and obstacles to –

such capacity. A deep-rooted radical-egalitarian, anarchist-influenced sensibility energises and democratises its 'co-creative learning' project. At the same time, an increasingly digitalised, networked and algorithmically tailored 'knowledge environment' is especially conducive to eclectic modes of interpretation, and susceptible to the intellectually satisfying reconstruction of imperfectly hidden elite conspiracies. Such a conspiracist tendency is a product of (i) the available materials and tools of oppositional speech-acts, and the forms of cognitive processing they favour, (ii) the regressive amplification of algorithmic filtering, (iii) a penchant for the eclectic per se borne of anarchist sensibilities, and (iv) the unconscious reproduction of hegemonic codes of interpretation presupposing extraordinary individual autonomy and instrumental rationality.

Linda Monsees

Information disorder, fake news and the future of democracy

The terms 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' have lost their shock value in today's public discourse and seem to have become part of our normal political vocabulary. Fake news, mis- and disinformation are not a problem of a particular country but are found in politics around the world. In this paper, I look at how disinformation appears as a problem for democracy. Empirically, this paper explores dominant patterns of argumentation with a focus on the US, Germany and Czechia. I discuss the themes of media literacy, hybrid warfare and the emergence of fringe media. This paper argues that more attention needs to be paid to the affectual dimension of why people share fake news. Even though there is no easy solution for dealing with fake news, a first step is to stop denouncing people for believing in fake news and putting all our hope in media literacy.

Anam S. Kuraishia

Insights from South Asia – 'Post-truth' Discourse and Truthfulness

Despite the numerous conceptualisations of post-truth, a gap in literature remains with regards to empirically illustrating it. I introduce the 'post-truth' as a discourse, drawing from the psychoanalytic elements of lack and fantasy along with the fantasmatic logic of explanation, to identify and measure it. In this framework, emotionality is necessary to structure lack and fantasy, and a 'post-truth' discourse embodies lack, fantasy, and emotionality, co-occurring to present a fantasmatic logic. I test the 'post-truth' discourse to Pakistan in a two-step design. First, I employ a qualitative text analysis to national newspaper articles to detect 'post-truth' accounts. Based on this categorization, I design a vignette survey experiment to test the causal relationship between 'post-truth' narratives and truthfulness. I surveyed a random sample of 800 respondents from five urban districts in Pakistan. I find that the persuasiveness of post-truth narratives varies across issues but the impact of trust in the source is constant. I also report that trust is mostly associated to politicians than political columnists. Despite an overall null results are present, I highlight how the correlation between emotions and truthfulness for a 'post-truth' discourse paves the way to further study the interplay between emotions and political support.

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