Stop Talking about Fake News!

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Abstract

Since 2016, there has been an explosion of academic work and journalism that fixes its subject matter using the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. In this paper, I argue that this terminology is not up to scratch, and that academics and journalists ought to completely stop using the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. I set out three arguments for abandonment. First, that 'fake news' and 'post-truth' do not have stable public meanings, entailing that they are either nonsense, context-sensitive, or contested. Secondly, that these terms are unnecessary, because we already have a rich vocabulary for thinking about epistemic dysfunction. Thirdly, I observe that 'fake news' and 'post-truth' have propagandistic uses, meaning that using them legitimates anti-democratic propaganda, and runs the risk of smuggling bad ideology into conversations.

Introduction

There are two kinds of approach that one can take when theorising with natural language.

One approach is to be a *gardener,* who respects the complexity and organic unity of natural language. The gardener takes pains to understands subtle distinctions, and takes a conservative attitude that is wary of drastic change. The paradigm example of this methodology is ordinary language philosophy. J.L. Austin stressed that ordinary language embodies the wisdom of collective experience, and took great pains to peel apart everyday distinctions, such as the difference between saying that someone did something by accident, and saying that they did it by mistake (Austin 1956).

Another approach is to be a *forest manager*, who tries to maintain a traversable linguistic landscape by trying to control and shape language. Whereas the gardener prioritises natural order, the forest manager focuses on the utility of language as a tool for co-ordination and talking about the world. The forest manager is happy to propose changes to natural language, including proposing that we *abandon* certain ways of talking. Sometimes the only way to maintain a forest is by starting a controlled forest fire. Examples of the managerial attitude can be found in explication projects (Carnap 1950), ameliorative analyses (Haslanger 1999, 2000), and conceptual engineering (Burgess and Plunket 2013a, 2013b, Cappelen 2018). Although abandonment is something of a nuclear option, there are several proposals for wildfires, including proposals to stop using the generic construction (Leslie 2017), to

abandon 'conspiracy theory', (Coady 2007, 2012: C5, 2017), and to abandon metaphysical language (Carnap 1959).

In this paper, I want to make the case that we should completely abandon the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth'.[1] I will focus on three problems with this terminology:

- 'Fake News' and 'Post-Truth are *linguistically defective*: they do not have stable public meanings, and it is not clear what is expressed by sentences that contain them.
- 'Fake News' and 'Post-Truth are *unnecessary*: they do not add any useful descriptive resources to our language.
- 'Fake News' and 'Post-Truth' are *propaganda*: both 'fake news' and 'post-truth' have been weaponised for political ends, and are closely connected to bad ideology.[2]

These arguments are largely independent, and I think that taken individually each provides sufficient reason for abandonment. Although I won't press this point, similar arguments could be made for other neologisms like 'alternative facts', and for analogue terms in other languages.

Before we begin, a couple of clarificatory points.

This paper is primarily a response to an explosion of academic work which fixes its topic using the terms 'fake news' or 'post-truth'. This includes work in psychology (Lewandowsky, Cook, and Ecker 2017), political science (Lazer et al. 2017b, Lazer et al 2018, Guess, Nyhan, Reifler MS), economics (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), law (Klein and Wueller 2017), education (Peters et al. 2017), communication (Farkas and Schou 2017, Jack 2017, Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, Tandoc et al 2017, Janowski 2018, Mejia et al 2018), and philosophy (Denith 2017, Rini 2017, Levy 2017, Gelfert 2018, Faulkner 2018, Aikin and Talisse 2018, Quinn forthcoming, Coady MS, Mukerji MS, Jaster and Lanius MS). There have also been a number of interdisciplinary conferences on 'fake news' (Lazer et al 2017a Annenberg school for Communication 2017) a slew of popular books with 'post-truth' in the titles (D'Ancona 2017, Ball 2017, Levitin 2017, Wilber 2017, Davies 2018, Fuller 2018, McIntyre 2018, Prado 2018), and too many opinion pieces to begin to count. This body of academic and popular work is the primary target of the paper. Although I think it would be good if public discourse were completely expunged of 'fake news' and 'post-truth', my primary aim to persuade academics and journalists who are using these terms to stop.

The title of this paper is in the imperatival mood, which is often associated with commands. This might give the impression that the function of this paper is to *tell* folk to stop using certain terms, or to advocate for a ban. I don't have any right to legislate linguistic

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[1] For other advocates of abandonment, see (Oremus 2016), (boyd 2017, (Jack 2017), (Sullivan 2017), (Staines 2018), (Talisse 2018), (Wardle 2017), (Zuckerman 2017), (Finlayson MS), (Coady MS).
[2] I will use 'ideology' as a neutral term, meaning that there can be good and bad ideology (see section 3).

usage, and I am loath to propose banning terms. When I use the imperative, I intend it as *advice*. 'Stop talking about fake news!' should be read in the same tone as 'be careful cycling in London!' or 'wear green, it goes great with your eyes!'. I do not claim to have any special access to the problems with 'fake news' and 'post-truth': sometimes the point of advice is to remind you of what you already know.

Many writers habitually enclose the phrases 'fake news' and 'post-truth' in quotation marks, which often obscures whether the quotes are used as devices for mentioning or as scare quotes.[3] I will employ quotes to mention terms, avoiding scare quotes. In the interests of following my own advice, I will not *use* the phrases 'fake news' or 'post-truth' (excepting the title and some quotations), although I will frequently mention them.

It is a delicate issue exactly what the abandoner thinks should be abandoned. As a first pass, we might think that the goal is to reach a situation in which no-one communicates using sentences that include the words 'fake news' or 'post-truth'. This can't be quite right. The arguments below don't speak against naming your cat 'fake news', and a sentence that merely mentions these terms (like this one) includes the relevant words. I think we can fudge the issue by saying that the abandoner thinks that we should stop using the phrases 'fake news' and 'post-truth' to talk about the epistemic health of democracy.

Although there are interesting general questions about when we should abandon parts of language, I want to set these questions to one side. Arguments for abandonment will depend on a host of situation-specific historical, social, and political factors, and it will be difficult to say anything general about this topic. My goal is to advocate for a specific abandonment, and indirectly for the general project of abandonment.

1. 'Fake News' and 'Post-Truth' are Linguistically Defective

I suspect that a lot of speakers of English have a sense that they don't know exactly what 'fake news' and 'post-truth' mean. In this section, I will argue these suspicions are well-placed: knowing what a term means requires that the term *does* mean something, and there is a real possibility that 'fake news' and 'post-truth' do not mean anything.

1.1. Meaning

In order to think clearly about meaning we need to clarify some distinctions. This is a little tricky to do in a theory-neutral way, so I will introduce some stipulative terminology for

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[3] Mentioning quotes refer to a word (as in 'the word 'dog' has three letters'), whereas scare quotes are used to express skepticism, or non-standard usage (as in 'I believe that 'national character' does not explain football results').

thinking about different aspects of meaning. Setting to one side disagreements about priority and what counts as the meaning of a term,[4] I hope that all views about the nature of meaning can agree that words have these different kinds of content.

The *extension* of a term is the set of things that it correctly applies to. The extension of a name is what it refers to ('Jane' applies to the person Jane), and the extension of an adjective is what can be truly ascribed to ('politician' applies to all people that are politicians).[5] The extension of a term does not exhaust its meaning: two terms can have the same extension, but different meanings (consider 'renate' and 'cordate'). To explain this let's introduce the notion of *descriptive content*. The descriptive content of a term is the property it expresses: for example, 'politician' expresses the property of having been elected to political office. The extension of an adjective is determined by its descriptive content: 'politician' applies to the set of politicians because the term expresses the property of having been elected to political office, and the members of that set possess that property.[6]

There are various ways of thinking about how descriptive content is determined, which will be important later when we think about nonsense. According to the most popular views, the descriptive content of a term is determined by: a community's beliefs about content, a community dispositions to apply a term (Burge 1979), expert use of the term (Putnam 1970), and the history of a term (Kripke 1972). I will remain neutral on which of these theories are correct: 'fake news' and 'post-truth' come out as nonsense on any of these approaches.

When I label a term as *nonsense*, I mean that it lacks descriptive content, allowing that it might have other kinds of content. I will often talk about the descriptive content of a term as if this were timeless and general. This is a simplification: terms can have different descriptive contents in different communities, and at different times.

A term's *evaluative content* is the set of normative evaluations which are typically activated when one applies the term to some object. For example, in the context of political discourse the term 'inauthentic' in the sentence 'Boris Johnson is inauthentic' does not just apply the property of inauthenticity to Johnson, it also conveys that his possessing that

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[4] For example, expressivist theories of meaning may think that expressive content is the meaning of a term, and that expressive content is explanatorily prior to descriptive content.

[5] 'Fake news' and 'post-truth' occur both as adjectives and as noun phrases. Consider:

    1) The Froome story is fake news.
    2) We are living in a post-truth era.
    3) Fake news is a huge political problem.
    4) Post-truth is a complex phenomenon.

I will assume that both 'fake news' and 'post-truth' are primarily descriptive phrases (as in (1) and (2)), and that uses as noun phrases are derivative.

[6] Things get much more complicated with names. For some, the meaning of a name is just its extension and descriptive content is relegated to the pragmatics (Salmon 2007), for others names have both extensions and descriptive content which matter in different contexts (Frege 1892), and for others the descriptive content of a name determines its extension (Russell 1905).

property is a bad thing.

A term's *expressive content* consists in the attitudes which are typically expressed when one uses it. This idea is most familiar from A. J. Ayer's expressivist theory of moral language, which claim that moral language has no descriptive content, but only functions to express attitudes of approval or disapproval (the so-called boo/hoorah theory). While I don't want to rule out terms which only have expressive content, we might think that terms with descriptive content can also have expressive content. The term 'tragedy' in the sentence 'the Grenfell fire was a tragedy' functions not only to apply the property of being a disaster to the fire, but also to express the sentiments of sadness, concern for victims, and feelings of solidarity.

Many terms have conventional association with *speech acts,* that is certain actions which one can perform by using a term in the right kind of context (Austin 1965). When a politician cutting the tape at a hospital says 'this hospital is now open' she is not (just) making a claim about the hospital, she is making it the case that the hospital is open: her act counts as opening the hospital. When I say 'I promise to take the bins out' to my partner, I am not (just) making a claim about my obligations, I am performing the act of promising. Speech acts have a dark side, and they can be used to do evil things. For example, gendered, classist, and racialised slur terms function to derogate and insult their targets, and to incite hatred toward them (Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson 2012), (Maitra 2012).

1.2. 'Fake News'

One might have thought that the meaning of the phrase 'fake news' can be read off from the meaning of 'fake' and 'news'; the phrase just refers to *news* that is *fake*. This compositional treatment is implausible. 'Fake news' seems to have an idiomatic usage that refers to some distinctive and special phenomenon. On the face of it 'fake news' is not synonymous with 'false news', 'fraud news', or 'sham news'. Non-English languages are split in their translations: some languages use a 'fake' analogue (such as *fopnuus* (Afrikaans), *naucht bréige* (Gaelige), or *nepnieuws* (Dutch)) while others use a 'false' analogue (such as *fausses informations* (French) or *false nyheter* (Norweigan)). 'Fake news' seems like a neologism: it has a distinctive meaning that goes beyond the meaning of its constituent terms.

Let's start out by considering the extension of 'fake news'. When the term is introduced, we are typically presented with egregiously false news stories from the 2016 US election: the Pizzagate conspiracy, reports that the Pope endorsed Donald Trump, and reports that Democratic senators wanted to apply Sharia law in Florida.[7] Presumably the hope is that

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[7] See, (Hunt 2016)
Craig Silverman does the best job of constructing a robust set of cases, compiling listicles of the top 50 fake news stories in 2016 and 2017. However, I think it is better to think of this list as advocating

readers will be able to generalise from these cases to get a grip on the extension of 'fake news'. I must admit that I struggle to make this leap: these examples instantiate too many properties to easily generalise.

Adding to this confusion, many speakers use 'fake news' as a catch-all term for all bad information. Ben Gomes of Google uses the term in this way in an announcement of a change to Google's search algorithm:

> Today, in a world where tens of thousands of pages are coming online every minute of every day, there are new ways that people try to game the system. The most high profile of these issues is the phenomenon of "fake news," where content on the web has contributed to the spread of blatantly misleading, low quality, offensive or downright false information.[8]

This combination of specificity and generality leaves open many questions:

1. Does 'fake news' apply to only to news spread by online news media, or can it occur in traditional media?
2. Can 'fake news' apply to an individual posting on social media without doing so on behalf of a news outlet? For example, can we apply 'fake news' to WhatsApp messages?[9]
3. Does satire or news parody fall under 'fake news'?
4. Does 'fake news' apply to completely false stories, to partially true stories, or to stories that are true but spread with malicious intent? Can true stories that are part of a flood of indistinguishable true and false stories count as fake news?[10]
5. Does 'fake news' only apply to acts performed with certain kinds of intentions?
6. Does 'fake news' only apply to claims which are spread widely?

I don't think that the ordinary usage of 'fake news' settles any of these disputes. I suspect that if we were to carry out a proper study of linguistic usage, we would find speakers applying it in various incompatible ways. In Tandoc et al.'s (2017) survey of academic usage, we see 'fake news' being applied to news satire, news parody, fabricated claims, photo manipulation, and to advertising. Farkas and Schou (2018) point out that 'fake news' is used as a political tool for a number of different projects, including giving a typology of types of false information, critiquing digital capitalism, critiquing right-wing politics and media, and critiquing liberal and mainstream media. One would hardly expect folk who are using 'fake news' as a tool to undermine establishment media and those who are using it to critique digital capitalism to agree on the extension of the term.

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for a definition rather than providing a neutral list. (Silverman 2016, Silverman, Lytvynenko, and Pham 2017).

[8] (Gomes 2017)

[9] (Waterson 2018)

[10] Michael Lynch aptly calls this phenomenon the internet shell game (Lynch 2016).

The picture is even more complicated when we explore the history of 'fake news'. The term seems to have originally meant just 'news that is fake' (Gelfert 2018 cites (Montgomery-McGovern 1898)), before coming to be associated with satirical news shows (such as the Daily Show, and the Colbert Report), before coming to be associated with profit-driven clickbait producers (Silverman and Alexander 2016), finally acquiring its use as a catch-all for bad information. Each usage has a radically different extension, going some way toward explaining the current confusion around the term.

Let's turn to the descriptive content of 'fake news'. To get clear on what property is associated with 'fake news' we might consider its proposed definitions. We can find advocates for just about every possible way of defining 'fake news':

- 'Fake news' expresses the property of being false and (presented as) news (Montgomery-McGovern 1898), (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, Oxford 2016, Levy 2017);
- 'Fake news' expresses the property of being (completely) false, intended to deceive, and created for financial gain (Silverman and Alexander 2016, Silverman 2017b);
- 'Fake news' expresses the property of being false news that is produced knowingly (Klein and Wueller 2017, Lilleker 2017, McIntyre 2018);
- 'Fake news' expresses the property of being false or misleading information that is presented as news, and circulated with the intention to mislead and to be spread (Rini 2017, Gelfert 2018: 108, McIntyre 2018);
- 'Fake news' expresses the property of being claims from fake news sources (i.e. first we define 'fake news sites', then anything they produce falls under 'fake news'), (Aiken and Talisse 2018, Lazer et al 2018);

Many of these definitions bring 'fake news' close to 'lie', so we might also want to consider analogies with misleading (Saul 2012), and bullshiting (Frankfurt 1986). This suggests the following:

- 'Fake news' expresses the property of news stories that give rise to misleading beliefs (see Jaster and Lanius MS for a definition that includes misleading statements);
- 'Fake news' expresses the property of being news that is spread without consideration for the truth (Mukerji MS).

What are we to make of this cornucopia of definitions? I think that our default position should be that *none* of these definitions provides the correct account of the descriptive content of 'fake news'. There are various views about how the descriptive content of a term is determined, which appeal to community belief, ordinary or expert usage, or to the history of a term. On any of these views, 'fake news' fails to have descriptive content: speakers have conflicting beliefs about the meaning of 'fake news', they are disposed to use it in different ways, there is no unified expert usage to defer to, and the shifts of meaning of the term cut it off from any meaningful connection to its first use.

In contrast to the messy extension and descriptive content 'fake news' often has clear evaluative and expressive content. Applying 'fake news' to a story evaluates it as bad from an epistemic point of view, and tars its source with allegations of unreliability and bias. This usage also has a pretty clear expressive content. Some commentators have noted this expressive use:

> The end of "fake news" as I knew it came on Jan. 11, 2017, when Donald Trump — master of branding — redefined the term to mean, effectively, *news reports he didn't like*. (Silverman 2017a, Italics added).

Using 'fake news' as a noun phrase (as in 'there is more fake news than ever'), also activates a set of negative epistemic evaluations, expressing concern about: political systems, news institutions, social media, or of the whole information system of contemporary western capitalism, depending on context.[11]

This combination of expressive and evaluative content is connected to the speech acts associated with 'fake news'. In many cases, 'fake news' functions as an *epistemic slur* term that insults the epistemic character of the institution that produced the story (Talisse 2018). We might think of this slurring use as enacting a form of *epistemic policing*[12] that directs the hearer to disbelieve the story, and to distrust the institution that produced it. Slurs can also signal membership of a particular social group (Tirrell 2012), (Camp 2012), and this function is also associated with 'fake news'. Calling a CNN story 'fake news' signals allegiance to conservative values, whereas calling a Breitbart story 'fake news' signals a broadly liberal or progressive agenda. Given that the term doesn't have a clear descriptive content, it is difficult to contest its extension in any specific case, making it a useful tool for insulting, for directing others' trust and signalling one's group membership.

1.3 'Post Truth'

Let's turn to 'post-truth'. The characteristic use of the term is in the phrase 'the post-truth era', so when we are thinking about the extension of the term, we should be asking when the era is supposed to have started (presumably the era hasn't finished yet). The evidence for the existence of this era consists in blatant falsehoods expressed in the public sphere, so it is

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[11] These observations might motivate a purely expressivist treatment of 'fake news' (perhaps meaning something like '*I don't like this story*'). This treatment faces some problems. An expressive semantics would have a hard time making sense of the possibility of disagreements about whether a story falls under 'fake news': if one person likes it, and another doesn't, there is no room for disagreement. This proposal would also require a solution to the Frege-Geach problem, since 'fake news' does not have its expressive meaning in logically complex expressions (consider 'if Prince Harry and Meghan Markle didn't marry, then lots of stories were fake news'). I prefer to think of 'fake news' as a putatively descriptive term with expressive force.

[12] I owe this term to (Coady MS).

natural to set the timer with one of the great falsehoods. Going backwards, 'the post-truth era' might have started with: i) Trump's claims about the size of his inauguration, which lead to Conway's 'alternative facts' defence, ii) the falsehoods told in the 2016 US election campaign and the EU referendum campaign, which led Oxford Dictionaries to declare 'post-truth' their word of the year in 2016 (Oxford 2016), iii) Karl Rove's comments about the 'reality-based community' in 2004, iv) Blair and Bush's lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, v) the Iran-Contra scandal, or vi) the Watergate scandal (we could continue). Most popular authors connect the era to the 2016 election, gesturing toward historical roots without providing any clarity about when it is supposed to have started (see Davies 2017, Ball 2017, D'Ancona 2017, McIntyre 2018). The plethora of potential starting points suggests that 'post-truth' has no clear extension. Everyone agrees that we are living in it, but no-one knows when it is supposed to have started.

Things don't get any better when we turn to the descriptive content. We might hope that the first use of the phrase by Steve Tesich would give us a grip on its sense. Tesich uses the phrase to characterise the fall-out from the Iran-Contra scandal:

> We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world. (Teisch 1992)

This is all very compelling, but it is less than clear what Teisch takes 'post-truth to mean. We might think that 'post-truth' just refers to a lack of desire to know the truth, but it seems that Tesich is gesturing toward something deeper, some *spiritual mechanism*.

We can find a host of further definitions in academic and popular work:

- 'The post-truth era' refers to an era in which 'facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford 2016);
- 'The post-truth era' refers to an era characterised by widespread bullshit (Davies 2017, Finlayson MS);[13]
- 'The post-truth era' refers to a period characterised by 'alternative realities shared by missions' and 'alternative epistemologies' (Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2018);
- 'The post-truth era' refers to an era in which political beliefs have lost contact with reality (Finlayson MS);
- 'The post-truth era' refers to an era without truth (Baggini 2017);
- 'The post-truth era' refers to an era in which most people do not believe in truth

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[13] Davies defines bullshit as 'any form of communication — verbal or non-verbal — that is not the clearest or most succinct statement of the sincere and reasonably held beliefs of the communicator.' (Davis 2017: xx). This definition leaves much to be desired: as stated it includes mis-speaking, sarcasm, putting forward a tentative hypothesis, and being verbose.

(perhaps because of an implicit commitment to relativism) (Finlayson MS);

- 'The post-truth era' refers to an era which fails to value truth (this is one way to reconstruct the passage from Tesich).

I do not think that there is any fact of the matter about which of these definitions is correct. Each of them has just as much right to be the descriptive content of 'post-truth'.[14] Like 'fake news', 'post-truth' is associated with conflicting beliefs, divergent usage, and no coherent expert use. Taken in historical perspective, the initial baptism of the term in Tesich's piece also seems to fails to secure reference to anything.

What about evaluative and expressive content? Writers who use 'post-truth' are aware of its expressive and evaluative roles:

> As presented in the current debate the word "post-truth" is irreducibly normative. It is the expression of concern by those who care about the concept of truth, and feel that it is under attack. (McIntyre 2018: 14).

> Then along came the term 'post-truth', an expression of frustration and anguish from a liberal class discombobulated by the political disruptions of 2016. (Davies 2017: xviii)

Here McIntyre and Davies associate 'post-truth' with rich expressive and evaluative contents. They seem unworried by these observations, but I think we should be. Like 'fake news', 'post-truth' combines considerable discursive power with a lack of clear descriptive meaning to regiment its use. 'Post-truth' also appears to have a slurring use that derogates the current epistemic situation, and whoever is supposed to be to blame for it (which often ends up being the voting public) (Finlayson MS), and also functions to signal membership of the group of self-styled defenders of enlightenment values.

1.4. Linguistic Diagnoses

Having seen that 'fake news' and 'post-truth' fail to have clear extensions or descriptive contents, I want to offer some frameworks for thinking about this kind of term. There are three possible diagnoses of 'fake news' and 'post-truth': that these terms are *nonsense, context-sensitive,* or *contested*.

Nonsense terms are terms that have no descriptive content, meaning that speakers fail to say *anything* when they use the term. It is still possible to *do* things with nonsense terms (you could get someone's attention by shouting nonsense at them) and these terms can have

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[14] That said, some of these definitions seem problematic on their own terms. How are we supposed to measure the influence of facts and opinion on public opinion? Are we to count beliefs from different sources, or do some belief matter more? What is it for truth not to exist? And, for that matter, what is it to not believe in (the existence of) truth?

expressive and evaluative contents, but they are not useful for making claims about the world. Some terms are explicitly introduced as nonsense (think of 'bryllyg' in the *Jabberwocky*), but other terms may hide their nonsensicality. There is a history of philosophers diagnosing other parts of philosophy as nonsense associated with the verificationist tradition (Carnap 1959), (Ayer 1936), which has been recently revived by Cappelen (2013). Cappelen argues that nonsense ought to be a general concern: all we need for nonsense is that a term be in use without having fulfilled the conditions required for meaning. Given that we do not have privileged access to the conditions that determine meaning, it is quite possible that lots of terms that are widely used are nonsense. Nonsense terms are bad news: when a speaker utters a sentence containing a nonsense term, she fails to express any descriptive content by her sentence, and when she formulates a thought using one, she fails to think anything.

Cappelen suggests various diagnostics for nonsense (2013: 35-40). One is that speakers defer to community or expert usage to specify the meaning of a term, without realising that there is no single community or expert usage. It seems plausible that lots of people who use 'fake news' and 'post-truth' do so without any specific referential intentions, passing the buck onto the community or experts to determine the meaning of the terms. We have seen from sections 1.2 and 1.3. that there are many different patterns of usage of 'fake news' and 'post-truth' in both academic and public discourse, and. This means that 'fake news' and 'post-truth' are pretty good candidates for nonsense.

Context-sensitive terms have no *general* descriptive content, but can have content in particular linguistic contexts. A simple example is the word 'I', which behaves syntactically like a noun, but does not have any stable referent, instead picking up a referent from context: when used in a sentence 'I' refers to whoever is uttering, writing, or signing that sentence. We might think that although 'fake news' and 'post-truth' do not have general descriptive contents, they do have content in context. For example, when Lazer et al (2018) use 'fake news' it might mean 'fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process of intent' (Lazer et al. 2018: 1094) because they explicitly define the term as having this meaning.[15] Although this diagnosis is partially vindicatory for users of the terms, a contextualist theory still raises some substantial challenges.

First, contextualism leaves the door open to nonsense. 'I' is a simple example because the rule is simple, always secures a content (utterances need a speaker), and users of the term are generally aware of the rule. Any contextualist theory of 'fake news' and 'post-truth' will be much more complicated, and there may be no guarantee that context will provide suitable material to resolve meaning. Consider the toy theory that the meaning of 'fake news' in a context C is *whatever the speaker in C intends 'fake news' to mean*. What happens when the speaker does not have any particular meaning in mind? I suspect that the contextualist will have to say that this usage is nonsense

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[15] It's an interesting question whether all the co-authors on this paper would agree on the extension of 'fake news'.

Secondly, contextualism makes communication difficult. If a speaker in one context uses 'fake news', when talking to a hearer in another context, whose context determines the meaning of the term? (This is easier to imagine with written communication). Does the term shift meanings when used by different speakers, do we construct some super-context, or is the meaning indeterminate? These are general issues for contextualist theories of meaning, but they do demonstrate that a contextualist theory is not without costs.

Contested terms have content which are in some sense *up for grabs*. The notion of a contested term goes back to (Gallie 1956), although I will follow more recent work which characterises contestation in terms of *metalinguistic negotiation* (Plunkett and Sundell 2013), (Plunkett 2015). A metalinguistic negotiation occurs when two speakers use a term in two different ways in order to express a dispute about what that term *ought* to mean. Imagine that two speakers are engaged in a metalinguistic negotiation about whether the racehorse Secretariat is an athlete. They might disagree about the claim 'Secretariat is an athlete', whilst agreeing on all the facts about Secretariat's species, the species of other athletes, and so on, because their disagreement is really about the best way to use the term 'athlete' (Ludlow 2008). Because these disputes use terms rather than mentioning them, and do not involve explicit metalinguistic ascent, they look similar to first-order factual disputes, and the participants may be unaware of the true nature of their disagreement. Metalinguistic negotiation is connected to meaning change. If the advocates for a particular meaning get sufficient uptake to change usage, they may change the ordinary meaning of a term.

Diagnosing 'fake news' and 'post-truth' as contested terms is the most optimistic option.[16] Because contestation is not a semantic phenomenon, this diagnosis is compatible with 'fake news' and 'post-truth' having a determinate meaning (although it may be that no-one knows what those meaning are, and that everyone is trying to advocate to change the meaning of those terms). This diagnosis also construes supporters of different definitions as engaged in a legitimate dispute, opening the door to reclamation projects.

According to all these diagnoses, communication using 'fake news' and 'post-truth' is problematic. If the terms are nonsense, any communication using these terms simply fails. If they are contested we face problems with talking across contexts, and if they are contested, we face the possibility of mistaking metalinguistic disputes for first order disagreements. 'Fake news' and 'post-truth' are perhaps better off than 'bryllg' – we do at least have some sense what kinds of things might constitute their extensions – but they are very different from established terms with clear meanings like 'cat' and 'blue'. Some basic questions about the extensions of these terms are up in the air. I haven't come down on which diagnosis is correct – people with different views in the philosophy of language will be attracted to different diagnoses – but I think that because it is the worst outcome, we should take extremely seriously the possibility that 'fake news' and 'post-truth' are nonsense.[17] This suggests a short

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[16] (Farkas and Schou 2017)

[17] One might think *all* terms of natural language lack determinate meaning (Carnap 1937), are

argument for abandonment: if we want to be sure that we are saying something by our sentences, we should avoid using 'fake news' and 'post-truth'.

2. 'Fake News' and 'Post-Truth' are Unnecessary

Someone who uses 'fake news' and 'post-truth' might accept that these terms lack descriptive content, but want to hold onto the terms. They might think that nonsense is just part of the growing process for a new term, and that we need these terms to play important functions for us. Presumably nonsense is undesirable, but there are some ways around it. One might stipulate a suitable meaning for the terms in one's papers,[18] or one might start a reclamation project that tries to change what the terms mean in public discourse (Gelfert 2018, Lazer et al 2018). There are two ways to think of folk engaged in these projects. We might think of them as gardeners who think that 'fake news' and 'post-truth' just need some trimming to reach their natural shape, or we might think of them as optimistic forest managers who think that these terms can be drastically changed to reach their useful meaning.

In this section, I will offer some considerations that speak against stipulation and reclamation. I will argue that 'fake news' and 'post-truth' do not add anything to the descriptive resources of ordinary language, that trying to define them or stipulate their meanings risks confusion, and that terminological disputes over politically charged terminology can be problematic.

2.1. Against Stipulating and Reclaiming

A first problem with the projects of reclamation and stipulation is that it is not clear what the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth' add to our descriptive resources. We already have plenty of words for talking about deceit, miscommunication, and epistemic dysfunctions. We can talk about lies, misleading, bullshitting, false assertion, false implicature, being unreliable, distorting the facts, being biased, propaganda, and so on. These terms have perfectly good meanings in ordinary language. We might think we can describe our current predicament perfectly adequately using these terms. It is true that these terms lack the explosive impact of 'fake news' and 'post-truth', and do not function as epistemic slur terms. However, we already have plenty of swear words, and we might be better off with a clear

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context-sensitive (Travis 1997), or are up for negotiation (Ludlow 2014). One might also think that all political terms have one or other of these linguistic defects (it is easy to come up with examples: consider 'progressive', 'neoliberal', and 'conservative'). I hope that someone who thinks that these linguistic defects are general will either admit that there is some special linguistic problem with 'fake news' and 'post-truth', or will be persuaded by the arguments in section 3.

[18] How can speakers stipulate the meaning of a nonsense term? We might think that nonsense terms that do not contribute to sentence meaning can still contribute to *speaker meaning* if the speaker's communicative intention is clear (Grice 1957).

division of labour between descriptive and slurring vocabulary.[19]

A second problem is that focusing all our efforts on deciding how to define two terms flattens out our understanding of the problems faced by contemporary western democracy. The writers who use 'fake news' and 'post-truth' are concerned with a massively heterogeneous set of issues, including but not limited to:

- The effects of digital capitalism on the internet;
- The quality of information on social media sites;
- The epistemic quality of news provision;
- Biases in news provision;
- The quality of public discourse;
- Fragmentation and polarisation of public discourse;
- Misplaced trust in news sources.

These are all legitimate concerns, and ought to be given airtime. Associating just one of these problems with 'fake news' or 'post-truth' would give us the resources for thinking about that problem, but it would leave out a bunch of other problems which we should be taking seriously. Furthermore, given that the public has focused its concern and anxiety on the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth', the definition that wins out will immediately gain attention and political cachet. The winners will be able to use 'fake news' to slur their political opponents, and the losers will have no analogous tool ready to hand. Perhaps we do need one catch-all term for the epistemic disorders of democracy (I'll use 'epistemic dysfunction' as a stand-in below), but this term should not privilege one kind of problem, and it ought to be accompanied by a set of precisely defined terms for different kinds of problem.[20]

A third issue is that debating what 'fake news' and 'post-truth' should mean runs the risk of dressing up substantive practical issues as merely semantic. The debate about what these terms should mean will depend on first-order disagreements the nature and significance of the problems facing contemporary democracy. Someone who thinks that we should use 'fake news' to talk about media bias will think that media bias is among the most important epistemic issues facing contemporary democracy, whereas someone who thinks that we should use it to talk about false news stories will think that the proportion of true to false beliefs is among the most important issues. Dressing up these disputes as merely terminological backgrounds these substantive empirical and political issues, running the risk that advocates of different definitions of 'fake news' will be able to smuggle in their background views in without proper consideration.

A related issue is that terminological disputes run the risk of excluding non-academics.

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[19] Do we need *any* epistemic slur terms? On the one hand, we might think that epistemic slurs are a useful shorthand for dismissing obvious falsehoods. On the other hand, we might think that the difficulty of ascertaining the truth, combined with group-level benefits from epistemic diversity (Zollman 2010) should make us extremely tolerant of differences of opinion.

[20] See (Jack 2017), (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017)

Debates about the epistemic health of democracy ought to take place in open public discourse and involve a diverse range of viewpoints. By contrast, terminological debates typically occur within academic contexts, and make use of specialised intellectual tools that exclude non-experts. If debates about the epistemic health of democracy take place inside the academy, then they are no longer in their proper home. Academics do not have proprietary rights to determine the meaning of the terms of public discourse.

A fourth issue is that a multiplicity of definitions of 'fake news' and 'post-truth' is just confusing. A reader trying to understand the literature that fixes its topic on these terms will have to keep track of multiple stipulative definitions and proposals for reclamation, and authors in this literature will run the risk of engaging in fruitless verbal disagreements that can be traced back to different definitions of key terms. We might think that things would just be simpler if we dropped the terms.

A final issue for reclamation projects is that meaning change is just hard (this is a theme in Cappelen 2018). Changing the meaning of a term requires large-scale sociolinguistic changes, either in the way people use terms, or in their beliefs about what these terms mean. Getting people to co-ordinate on this scale is costly and time-consuming. Even in cases where there is some success the social changes may take decades: the reclamation of 'Queer' started in the late 1980s, and it is not obvious whether it has fully succeeded. Achieving meaning change in a divided political context, where many different actors have a stake in a meaning of the terms raises a host of further issues. This is not to say that reclamation projects are impossible or a bad idea, but just to put the burden of proof on the proponent of reclamation to provide us with good reasons why we need to reclaim.[21]

3. 'Fake News' and 'Post-Truth' are Propaganda

So far, we have been focusing on the linguistic defects of 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. I want to shift gears now, and consider the political problems with this terminology. I will argue that both 'fake news' and 'post-truth' are associated with bad ideology, and that both are used as propaganda. If we want to avoid legitimating propaganda, and importing problematic ideology into our everyday discussions, we need to abandon 'fake news' and 'post-truth'

Before we begin, we need to introduce some more terminology.

I will use 'propaganda' to refer to contributions to public discourse that aim to manipulate people in the interests of political aims or ideals, and 'ideology' to refer to any cluster of mutually supporting beliefs, practices, habits, and affective dispositions that is reasonably

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[21] One might think that reaching complete abandonment would be just as hard. I agree: as noted in the introduction, the primary goal of this paper is to persuade academics to stop using 'fake news' and 'post-truth'.

temporally persistent and socially extended (Swanson MS). Both definitions are intended to be catch-all. This notion of propaganda allows for different kinds of linguistic manipulation, for propaganda in the service of good or bad ideals,[22] for propaganda which both supports and undermines ideals (Stanley 2015: 53-66), and that propaganda claims can be spread unwittingly (Stanley 2015 41, 131-46). This notion of ideology allows that ideologies can include true and false claims, can mask or reveal the truth, and that ideologies can have good and bad effects. I will use '*bad* ideology' to pick out ideologies which are false, mask reality, and are harmful (see (Stanley 2015: C5, Swanson MS, Haslanger 2017)).

Allegations of propaganda are easy to throw around, but can be difficult to substantiate.[23] Part of the complexity arises from the existence of many mechanisms of manipulation, which include:

- Cultivating public emotions via the use (and construction) of emotionally charged terms associated with certain groups[24];
- Influencing public actions via covert or overt directives or permissives;[25]
- Spreading ideological claims and dispositions, using ideologically-charged terms to introduce *not-at-issue content* (Langton and West 1999), (Stanley 2015: C4), or more generally to *cue up* an ideology (Swanson MS).[26]

Although these mechanisms may be employed by demagogues, one of the most worrying features of propagandistic speech is that ordinary speakers can trigger these mechanisms without intending to. A speaker who makes a joke involving the word 'bitch' without explicitly intending a misogynist message content will still activate a host of sexist ideology and communicate that a range of sexist claims are acceptable. To diagnose speech as propaganda, we need to look to the linguistic, social, and political context, not to a speakers' intentions.

Another reason why political manipulation can be difficult to detect is that it often involves *undermining propaganda,* which Stanley defines as:

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[22] I take it that propaganda that aims to repair the conditions for open and rational public discourse is still manipulative (Stanley 2015: C3)

[23] One might worry that 'propaganda' can easily be stripped of its descriptive content through use as an epistemic slur. I hope to assuage this worry by associating the term with a clear descriptive content, and by distinguishing good and bad propaganda.

[24] For example, consider Rwandan radio presenters' use of 'inyenzi' (cockroach) and 'inzoka' (snake) to refer to the Tutsi in the period before the 1994 genocide (Tirrell 2012). Dehumanisation is a persistent theme in violence-inciting propaganda (Smith 2011). On May 21st 2018 the White House website published an article entitled 'What you need to know about the violent animals of MS-13'. (Whitehouse, 2018)

[25] For example, Trump's second amendment comments, which gave his supporters permission to attack Clinton (Carasaniti and Haberman 2016)

[26] For example, consider the way that 'welfare' can cue up thoughts like 'Blacks are lazy' in the US context (Stanley 2015: 123-4), or the way a generic like 'Muslims are terrorists' can introduce an essentialising generalisation about the group targeted (Leslie 2017)).

A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals (Stanley 2015: 53)

Demagoguery – that is undermining propaganda that is aimed at democratic values – is particularly pernicious. Demagoguery signals a commitment to democratic values – making it appear like a legitimate contribution to democratic discourse – whilst at the same time working to undermine those very values. For example, climate change scepticism will often signal its commitment to legitimate intellectual values of scepticism, open discussion, and objectivity, whilst functioning to undermine reasonable public deliberation (Stanley 2015: 60). In contrast to the explicit signally of democratic values, the underlying anti-democratic mechanisms may be complex and difficult to identify.

3.1. 'Fake News' is Propaganda

'Fake news' has a variety of propagandistic uses. Concerns over 'fake news' have been used by governments in Kenya, Malaysia, Tanzania, the Philippines, Uganda and Russia to motivate censorship laws criminalising spreading false information online (Coady MS).[27] Many of these laws include references to 'fake news' (which naturally goes undefined) in the text of the laws. Claims of 'fake news' have also been used by oppressive regimes to undermine stories that run contrary to government interests. The government and military in Myanmar have used the term to undermine reports of the genocide of Rohingya people, Bashar al-Assad has used the term to dispute Amnesty International reports of deaths in military prison, and Chinese state media have used it to contest allegations of human rights abuses.[28] If we wanted to look for terms with similar political functions, we could do worse than the German words *lügenpresse* (lying press) and *journaille* (journalism-scum), which have a history of use as attack words (notably by the National Socialist party, and more recently by the *Alternative für Deutscheland* party, and by alt-right figures).[29]

Consider the following tweet from @realDonaldTrump:

The Fake News Media has been so unfair, and vicious, to my wife and our great First Lady, Melania. During her recovery from surgery they reported everything from near death, to facelift, to left the W.H. (and me) for N.Y. or Virginia, to abuse. All Fake, she is doing really well! (@realDonaldTrump June 6th 2018)

Like the syntax, fully unpacking this propaganda is a complex task that requires insider knowledge. However, even staying at the surface level, I think it should be clear that this tweet serves several manipulative purposes:

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[27] (Reporters without Borders, 2017, Head 2018, Olewe 2018)
[28] (Beech 2017, Isikioff 2017, Shepherd 2017)
[29] (The Economist 2016)
In general, I think we should be very careful about making parallels with 1930s Germany, but in this case the analogy seems justified.

- To slur mainstream media reports about Melania Trump's health, tarring both the stories and the institutions with the allegation of fakery;
- To forcefully press Trump's own interpretation of the situation;
- To elicit various emotional responses from its audience, including fear of being duped by mainstream media institutions,[30] and disdain for those 'unfair, and vicious' institutions;
- To engage in *epistemic policing*, directing its audience to not believe anything published by mainstream news outlets (see Stanley 2015: 143-6);
- To raise sceptical doubts about the veracity of mainstream media sources (Faulkner 2018), aiming to manipulate public trust;
- To cue up an ideology that claims that all mainstream media outlets are engaged in systematic manipulation of public opinion, are spreading left-wing propaganda, and are suffering from bias and groupthink.[31]

This tweet relies on the powerful evaluative and expressive content of 'fake news', and its function as a slur term to cue up an ideology of media manipulation. The lack of a stable descriptive content is important here: it enables demagogues to target the term at whoever they want, without the threat of being criticised on factual grounds. Saying 'that's *not* fake news' is a pretty ineffective response to this tweet. The person making the allegation can easily switch to a meaning of 'fake news' that makes their allegation correct.

In this case, 'fake news' functions as a classic example of *undermining propaganda* (Stanley 2018: 85). It functions to appeal to classic enlightenment ideals— truth, a free marketplace of ideas, and objective journalism —whilst at the same time working to undermine those very ideals, both by weakening public trust in (reasonably)trustworthy news institutions,[32] and by making it difficult to have a reasonable debate about whether news claims are true. This is part of a wider trend on the right whereby (typically misplaced) claims to rationality and critical thinking are used by right-wing figures to spread anti-democratic ideology.[33]

The problem is not just demagogues that intentionally manipulate public trust: the ideology of media manipulation can be cued up by seemingly innocuous speech. This raises the concern that establishment or left-wing sources who use the 'fake news' will also cue up ideology. It is not too hard to see centrist and left-wing concerns about Russian troll farms, echo chambers, and gullible members of the public as the beginnings of a narrative of media

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[30] I don't think this term has a stable referent, but it is difficult to report the content of this ideology without it.

[31] For the acceptable content of this ideology, see the PragerU primer *What is Fake News?* (Klavan 2017).

[32] I don't want to suggest that establishment media has impeccable epistemic credentials, just that they are closer to the ideals than alternative news sites.

[33] A nice example of this phenomenon is Stefan Molyneux's *The Art of the Argument: Western Civilisation's Last Stand,* which is presented as a logic textbook, but functions to shore up patriarchal white nationalist ideology (Douglas 2017), and displays errors about basic logical concepts (Chartier 2017),

manipulation that parallels the right-wing ideology of media bias. The fact that establishment sources are attracted to this terminology is unsurprising: undermining propaganda is *designed* to be associated establishment values, meaning that they are honeypots for defenders of democratic values

One might think that the establishment version of the 'fake news' story is a *good* ideology, because it is based in claims that are largely true, and is motivated by the admirable aim of ensuring that the public has true beliefs. I worry that it too is bad ideology. Just as the right-wing ideology includes false claims about the extent of mainstream media bias (note: extent, not existence), the establishment ideology is prone to hyperbole concerning the influence of echo chambers and false articles on public opinion.[34] Operating with the dichotomy between real and fake sources also encourages an overly simplistic picture of the epistemic vices and virtues of news sources. Rather than seeing some sources as real and others as fake, we need to cultivate critical dispositions of trust regarding news stories, and be open to systematic failures in establishment news sources. Even well-intentioned sources get things wrong.

Furthermore, both the authoritarian and establishment 'fake news' ideologies undermine open public discussion. It is a familiar liberal idea that people have a right to believe what they want to, which generates a correlate duty for individuals and states not to interfere with others' beliefs. Vocabulary that is used for epistemic policing is a pretty clear example of interfering with others' beliefs by manipulating their emotions and dispositions to trust. Applying 'fake news' to a story is not like giving reasons why it is poorly supported, or like advising someone not to believe that source. It is more like issuing a command to disbelieve that story. We should be concerned that the epistemic policing function of 'fake news' will bleed into journalism and academic work. What starts as media literacy training can easily turn into policing the media institutions that the public trust, and issuing directives about which sources to believe.[35] Even if establishment figures avoid using 'fake news' to directly police sources, we should worry about uses of 'fake news' to motivate policies that interfere with in the flow of information (for example via legislation). If you use weaponised terms, you run the risk of hurting people.

3.3. Post-Truth

Having raised some worries about 'fake news', let's turn to 'post-truth'. I will argue that what 'fake news' is to the right-wing demagogue, 'post-truth' is to the centrist dad.[36]

The crisis of democracy literature is in the grip of what we might call a *return to norms narrative* (Purdy 2018). The popular literature on 'post-truth' is the epistemic side of the

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[34] (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018)

[35] It is not difficult to see resources like the Media Bias Chart as a kind of epistemic policing.

[36] 'Centrist dad' refers to middle-aged men who are putatively left-wing, but have failed to come to terms with political changes, leading to resistance to radical ideas. I intend the term in both pejorative and descriptive senses.

crisis of democracy literature, and is firmly in the grip of this narrative. The return to norms narrative in the epistemic case goes something like this:

- *The Crisis:* something is wrong with the epistemic life of western democracies. The prevalence of lies, bullshit and falsehood is indicative of an intellectual rot.
- *The Roots of the Crisis:* the roots of the rot are relatively recent, going back to the 2016 election (D'Ancona 2017: 7), the politics of the 2000s (see the examples in Davies 2017: C1), the decline of traditional print media (Ball 2017: C4), (McIntyre 2018: C4), the rise of social media (D'Ancona 2017: 46-50), (Ball 2017: C7), (McIntyre 2018: C5), and/or a rise in conspiratorial thinking (D'Ancona 2017: C3), (McIntyre 2018: C2).
- *The Nature of the Crisis:* the connective tissue between these different manifestations of the supposed crisis are failures to live up to the intellectual norms and ideals that characterise democratic society.
- *The Solution:* to deal with the crisis we need to return to the intellectual norms that characterised the pre-crisis era.

Here is a particularly revealing passage from D'Ancona (see also Davies 2017: C8):

Our own Post-Truth era is a taste of what happens when a society relaxes its defence of the values that underpin its cohesion, order, and progress: the values of veracity, honesty and accountability. These values are not self-preserving. Their maintenance is the product of human decision, agency and collaboration (D'Ancona 2017: 112)

This narrative shows up in proposed solutions to the epistemic crisis. We see a surprisingly limited menu of options:

- More critical thinking on the part of citizens (D'Ancona 2017: 113-6, 124-9, Davies 2017: C7, Ball 2017: C13, McIntyre 2018: C7);
- For individuals to live up to the intellectual values of democracy (Davies 2017: C8);
- Tech-based solutions that aim to put more true information in front of citizens (D'Ancona 2017: 116-24, Ball 2017: C13);
- The need for more fact-checking (Ball 2017: C12);
- The need to renew our trust in traditional news institutions (McIntyre 2018: C4), and for journalists to live up the values of those institutions (Davies 2017: 192-4, Ball 2017: C13);
- The need for scientifically credible and charismatic leaders who can articulate the vision of a well-functioning democracy (D'Ancona 2017: 129-36, 139-49, Davies 2017: 255-72, Ball 2017: C13).[37]

These solutions have a (small-c) conservative bent. There is a focus on individual

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[37] D'Ancona gives Winston Churchill as an example. One might think this choice of political figure is indicative of a wider project of rehabilitating problematic values via supposed threats to democracy.

responsibility, education, and the defence of established institutions (such as long-running broadsheet newspapers, public-service broadcasters, and academia). The norms and values which are invoked also have a conservative bent: we see a repeated stress on the enlightenment values of truth, reasonableness, and critical thinking. We do not see radical proposals such as instituting public ownership of social media sites, limiting the power of digital capitalism, breaking up digital monopolies, or enabling marginalised groups to take control of their representation in online spaces (Noble 2018). There is no focus on the value of intellectual heterogeneity, or of the importance of giving space to marginalised voices.

The connection between 'post-truth' and the return to norms narrative is indicative of a propagandistic usage of 'post-truth'. I don't know what the intentions of these authors are, but I think that it is plausible that they see themselves part of a defence of established institutions against a rising tide of populism, that aims to wind back the clock to before the supposed crisis. The effect of these contributions is to establish a reactionary ideology that aims to defend established institutions and practices, irrespective of the problems with those practices and institutions. I don't think that these authors are necessarily self-deceiving: they might think that the return to norms narrative is *good* ideology.

The return to norms narrative is problematic both on factual and political grounds.

The return to norms narrative leads us to a kind of exceptionalism about the present,[38] encouraging us to think that the contemporary epistemic problems are unlike any that have ever been faced by democratic societies. Even a cursory look at history should correct this idea: politicians have always lied, newspapers have always been incentivised to publish what will make the most money, and human beings have many irrational false beliefs. Oppressed groups have consistently been excluded from public discourse, and have been subject to large-scale lies and propaganda. There was never a golden age: the epistemic norms of democracy have never been realised in practice. Seeing the problems faced by contemporary democracies as new misconstrues both their source — why think that the 2016 US presidential election caused a change in epistemic culture, rather than being indicative of wider undercurrents of epistemic dysfunction? — and robs us of the ability to use the historical record to understand our current predicament. I would suggest that historically speaking, the most salient feature of contemporary epistemic problems is their target. The only novelty is that it is white middle class liberals rather than members of oppressed groups who are struggling to get purchase in public discourse (Mejia et al. 2018).

The return to norms narrative also massively misconstrues the option space of possible ways to improve democracy. I don't think that any of the options above should be ruled out of consideration: improving intellectual culture is a difficult task, and we need all the ideas we can get. What is problematic is only taking options that return us to the status quo seriously, and ignoring radical alternatives. Herein lies the problem with centrist dads: they are well-motivated and intellectually serious, but their intellectual bent always leans toward

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[38] Thanks to Koshka Duff for this phrase.

conservative proposals, and they need to be counterbalanced by radicals who open up the full space of options.

The fact that 'post-truth' cues up the return to norms narrative means that we should avoid this terminology. This raises the question of what we should put in its place. We need both general terms for the epistemic problems with democracy (something like 'epistemic dysfunction'), and specific terms for different kinds of problems. I suggest that our first port of call ought to be work by critical race theorists, feminists, and post-colonial theorists. These theorists have been thinking about the epistemic problems with democracy for decades. For example, we might frame problems about news provision as issues of active ignorance (Mills 2007), (Frost-Arnold MS), think about misplaced trust in political figures in terms of systems of misogyny (Manne 2017: C8) and identity-inflected credibility judgements (Fricker 2007), (Dotson 2011), and take seriously work by Gramsci and Du Bois to help us understand how language can function as a mechanism of mass control (Stanley 2015), (Swanson MS). Turning to these theorists gives us some of the tools we need to start taking seriously the effects of power on epistemic culture, a topic which is notably absent from the return to norms narrative (Mejia et al. 2018: 114). Taking seriously gender, race, and class will also give us the tools for thinking about the way that these ideologies contribute to online manipulation (Daniels 2009), (Marwick and Lewis 2017), (Noble 2018). Rather than tarring radical politically-engaged academic work with the slur term 'post-modernist', we should be using the terminology and intellectual tools that we find in this literature to help diagnose of the epistemic problems of contemporary democracy.

Independently of whether 'fake news' and 'post-truth' mean anything, we should not use these terms. Doing so legitimates propaganda – of both demagogic and reactionary varieties –, introduces bad ideologies into the background of our conversions, and makes it difficult to tell apart propaganda from attempts at rational discussion. When certain words become weaponised as tools for cuing up ideology, we should simply drop those words.[39]

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to sound an alarm bell about the use of the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. I have canvassed three forest-manager style considerations that support consigning both 'fake news' and 'post-truth' to Hume's bonfire of sophistry and illusion. I have argued that these terms have three problems: they are linguistically defective, they are unnecessary, and they are politically problematic. Different considerations will speak to different theorists. Linguistic defects will be troubling for theorists that use 'fake news' and 'post-truth' uncritically as if they were established terms of natural language, and who think that most natural language terms have determinate contents. The superfluity of the terms will be troubling for theorists who are trying to reclaim these terms, or who try to avoid confusion

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[39] This idea is a theme in (Lakoff 2014). See (Lakoff and Duran 2018)

by stipulating their meaning. The political problems with this terminology ought to be persuasive for anyone who is worried about the effects of undermining propaganda on democratic discourse. I don't think that abandonment is a very novel or creative position: the natural reaction to a poorly defined buzzword is to refuse to use it.

If we take these considerations seriously, we should stop doing several things. Academics should stop framing their papers in terms of a 'post-truth' narrative, because doing so cues up a body of reactionary ideology. Philosophers should eschew attempts at conceptual analysis of 'fake news' or analysis of epistemic problems that are couched in this terminology. Academics who research social media networks should avoid using 'fake news' as a tool to pick out kinds of problematic content. Activists who use 'fake news' as a tool to criticise news bias and the problems with digital capitalism need to find new words that don't undermine their own aims. All of these projects can be recast in different terminology: the point of this paper is not to advise against researching or contesting epistemic dysfunctions in the news or social media. We should all keep working on the epistemic problems of democracy, we just need better words for doing so.[40]

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[40] Thanks to Peter Allen, Zara Bain, Sebastian Becker, Thomas Brouwer, David Coady, Jennifer Corns, Koshka Duff, Lunette Elle Warren, Adam Ferner, Noah, Friedman-Binglin, Karen Frost-Arnold, Axel Gelfert, Michael Lynch, Matthew McKeever, Claire Moriarty, Jakob Ohlhorst, Richard Pettigrew, Mark Pinder, Kim Pedersen, Orestis Palermos, Lauren Spencer, and Alessandra Tanesini.

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