

Corrupted Infrastructures of Meaning: Post-truth Identities Online

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Summary

This article outlines a framework for analyzing post-truth identities. Our overarching argument is that post-truth identities emerge from a confluence of individual-level and contextual factors. Cognitive biases that shape how individuals encounter and process information have recently been granted freer rein as a result of changes in the technological basis of media systems in the advanced democracies. But in addition to these macro-structural changes, we suggest that attention should also focus on how post-truth identities come to be formed and maintained at the micro level, in everyday life. Drawing upon the social identity theory tradition in social psychology, we assume that identity is inextricably tied to group formation and the maintenance of group belonging. Post-truth identities rely upon corrupted, self-initiated infrastructures of meaning that are animated by emotional narratives and repositories of cherry-picked, misrepresented justifying ‘evidence.’ These infrastructures are, in part, enabled by the unique affordances of social media for decentralizing, but also algorithmically organizing, the production and circulation of socially consequential information. Identity affirmation is reinforced by the major online platforms’ commercially driven, personalized recommendation features, such as Google search’s autosuggest, YouTube’s autoplay, and Facebook’s news feed. The affordances these create contribute to shared experiences among believers but can also make it more likely that larger audiences are exposed to falsehoods as part of everyday searching, reading, viewing, and sharing. And yet, much of the infrastructure exists on the broader internet, away from social media platforms, in dedicated folksonomic settings such as forums, wikis, email lists, podcasts, and alternative news sites. These settings also provide ready-made materials that mainstream media organizations use in their reporting, which further contributes to the spread of false and distorted beliefs and the formation of identity among both existing supporters and new recruits. We illustrate these conceptual themes with three examples: ‘anti-vaxxers,’ ‘flat earthers,’ and ‘incels.’

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False and distorted beliefs are widespread in contemporary societies. In 2018, almost a third of the U.S. population did not believe in the safety of vaccines (Wellcome Trust 2018). In stark contrast with earlier predictions that social media would enhance rationality in the public sphere, a troubling array of communities based on what we term *post-truth identities* have now set sail online, unmoored by fact-based discourse. From ‘anti-vaxxers’ to #MGTOW (‘Men Going Their Own Way’) supporters, from ‘flat earthers’ to Obama ‘truthers,’ from 9/11, ‘#QAnon,’ and ‘#Pizzagate’ conspiracy theorists to proponents of scientifically-unproven ‘miracle cures’ for pandemics and terminal diseases—many such online communities have achieved remarkable levels of public prominence. In this chapter, we offer some explanations why.

Our overarching argument is that post-truth identities emerge from a confluence of individual-level and contextual factors. Cognitive biases that shape how individuals encounter and process information have recently been granted freer rein as a result of changes in the technological basis of media systems in the advanced democracies. Post-truth identities rely upon what we term *corrupted, self-initiated infrastructures of meaning* that are animated by emotional narratives and repositories of cherry-picked, misrepresented justifying ‘evidence.’ These infrastructures are, in part, enabled by the unique affordances of social media for decentralizing, but also algorithmically organizing, the production and circulation of socially consequential information. And yet much of the infrastructural scaffolding exists on the broader internet, away from social media platforms, in dedicated folksonomic settings. These infrastructures of meaning also provide ready-made materials that mainstream media organizations can use in their reporting, which further contributes to the spread of false and distorted beliefs and the formation of identity among both existing supporters and new recruits.

We adapt the term infrastructure of meaning from its fleeting appearance in Weinberger’s optimistic web 2.0 prophecy *Everything is Miscellaneous* (2007, 171–172). This is how he described it:

‘For the first time, we have an infrastructure that allows us to hop over and around established categorizations with ease. We can make connections and relationships at a pace never before imagined. We are doing so together. We are doing so in public... Each connection tells us something about the connected things, about the person who made the connection, about the culture in which a person could make such a connection, about the sorts of people who find that connection worth noticing. This is

how meaning grows... This infrastructure of meaning is always present and available, so that we can contextualize the information we find and the ideas we encounter.’

In this chapter, we jettison Weinberger’s optimism and instead turn the concept of an infrastructure of meaning to critical use for making sense of post-truth identities. As we show, the ability to ‘hop over’ ‘established categorizations’ (in Weinberger’s terminology) also enables the production of distorted systems of internally coherent classifications that are designed to enhance ingroup coherence and systematically mislead. The culture and sense of belonging that derives from public connection can also enable signalling, legitimizing, and giving license to false and distorted beliefs. Unaccountable modes of algorithmic prioritization in search and social media platforms often bring such beliefs to audiences far beyond the core adherents. ‘Always present’ contextualization also enables online post-truth communities to selectively attend to information that promotes falsehoods and bigotry, while marginalizing contradictory evidence.

Post-truth identities have developed in a long-term context of declining trust in established media and political institutions and growing cynicism toward authority and expertise among significant segments of the public. There has also been a generational shift in the transnational modes of connectivity available to those who hold conspiracy mentalities and extreme ideologies of hatred and who wish to build networks with like-minded others across the globe.

But in addition to these macro-structural changes, we suggest that attention ought to focus on how post-truth identities come to be formed and maintained at the micro level, in everyday life. Here, drawing upon the social identity theory tradition in social psychology, we assume that identity is inextricably bound up with group formation and group belonging (e.g. Tajfel 1982). All kinds of conspiracy theories are active at any given time—consider, for example, the false belief, widespread in the UK, that the Coronavirus epidemic of 2020 was caused by the installation of 5G radio masts by Chinese telecom companies. But the fact of a conspiracy theory’s existence does not automatically lead to the formation of post-truth identities. Instead, post-truth *identities* are distinguished by their remarkable and disturbing resilience over time, which makes them particularly important objects of study. Online, such groups build shared identities through the selective production of knowledge, norms, and values. In this context, we define knowledge as a process involving the justification of beliefs. The process of identity building depends heavily upon self initiated, online infrastructures of meaning, not least because such groups only fleetingly see themselves

represented in mainstream media coverage. Identity-affirming knowledge, norms, and values are continuously and publicly constructed by those who congregate in post-truth communities in mainstream online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. Identity affirmation may, in turn, be reinforced by the major online platforms' commercially driven, personalized recommendation affordances, such as Google search's autosuggest, YouTube's autoplay, and Facebook's news feed. Such affordances contribute to shared experiences among believers, but can also make it more likely that larger audiences will be exposed to falsehoods as part of everyday searching, reading, viewing, and sharing. At the same time, it ought to be recognized that much post-truth discursive identity work happens in online spaces *away* from social media platforms—in forums, wikis, email lists, podcasts, and alternative news sites. And finally, this identity work is itself also boosted from time to time by celebrity endorsements and news coverage by professional media organizations. We illustrate these themes with three examples: 'anti-vaxxers,' 'flat earthers,' and 'incels.'

The Roots of Post-truth Identities: Emotionality, Cognitive Biases, and Changing Media Systems

Lying and deception are as old as human communication, but post-truth involves something more than these (D'Ancona 2017; Kalpokas 2019). McIntyre (2018), for example, defines post-truth as 'not the abandonment of facts, but a corruption of the process by which facts are credibly gathered and reliably used to shape... beliefs about reality.' Similarly, Kalpokas' account (2019, 5) suggests that post-truth implies a general erosion of the boundaries between truth and falsity: a 'condition of detachment of truth-claims from verifiable facts and the primacy of criteria other than verifiability.' Fears about propaganda and misinformation have often hinged on whether people will be directly deceived by falsehoods, but the lesson of the past is that people are just as likely to become uncertain about what to trust and believe (Chadwick 2019). This was an important strand of dissident critiques of the neo-Stalinist states in Eastern Europe. It has its origins in revisionist accounts of propaganda that focus, not on mass deception, but on how a spiral of distrust grows in conditions of chaos and indeterminacy. Post-truth identities are best situated in this overarching context.

Emotionality

In Kalpokas' account (2019, 5), chief among the 'criteria other than verifiability' for truth claims is 'affective investment' in emotional narratives: ways of understanding that people

value, not because they offer ‘better’ understanding of the world, but rather because they have utility for maintaining a sense of personal well-being and for influencing the attitudes and behaviour of others. Such narratives are also important for forming and maintaining a stable sense of self and collective identity.

The centrality of emotions, particularly fear and anxiety, to people’s processing of information is a central theme in accounts of post-truth (Laybats and Tredinnick 2016). Social psychologists have long shown that affect is important in decision making (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo & Kassam 2015), but the literature on post-truth has stressed emotionality’s heightened significance when individuals attempt to find order and coherence among a messy, complex, and overwhelming abundance of information and opinion (Metzger & Flanagin 2013). In a hypercompetitive media system, emotionally engaging media content is an important generator of individual attention, perhaps even more so than when broadcast media were the dominant means of communication (Papacharissi 2014).

Cognitive Biases

Since the mid-twentieth century, strands of social science research, particularly in disciplines such as psychology, economics, management, communication, and political science have challenged rationality-based accounts of human attitudes and behaviour. Studies of cognitive biases beginning in the 1950s drew attention to the prevalence of irrationality in decision making and their findings have had a significant impact on recent debates about post-truth (e.g. Asch 1955; Lerner, Li, Valdesolo & Kassam 2015; Metzger & Flanagin 2013; Tversky & Kahneman 1974; Wason 1960). Understanding of the consistent susceptibility of individuals to false information has improved significantly since the turn of this century even if much (though not all) of the research has applied concepts that pre-date recent concerns.

Behavioural research has shown that people fall into predictable traps when making judgements (e.g. Asch 1955; Tversky & Kahneman 1974; Wason 1960). Two concepts with particular relevance are motivated reasoning and confirmation bias. Motivated reasoning is a state of being in which our decision-making and truth assessments are swayed by what we want to believe, even if what we want to believe is not in accordance with observable facts (Kunda 1990). Individuals strive to maintain a positive self-image and will often make irrational choices to reduce the conflict they experience when faced with information that contradicts this self-image (e.g. Elliot & Devine 1994; Festinger 1957). Confirmation bias (Nickerson 1998; Wason 1960) is a cognitive process through which people enact motivated reasoning and prioritize information that conforms with decisions they have already made,

especially when such decisions have been guided by strongly held beliefs. People are often skilled in developing rationalizations that support their prior beliefs (Lodge and Taber 2013).

Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias have featured in much of the research on misperceptions. Some research has extended this approach to encompass ideological beliefs and group belonging. For example, Kahan (2012, 1) points to another type of motivated reasoning—identity-protective cognition—wherein individuals tend to process information in ways that help them develop beliefs that ‘signify their loyalty to important affinity groups.’ In a ‘self-defence’ strategy designed to maintain the status, social support, and sense of belonging that derives from group affinity, people tend to resist information that contradicts the dominant beliefs of the group whose membership they particularly value.

This resonates with another relevant cognitive bias from the early days of social psychology—social conformity. First demonstrated in laboratory experiments by Asch in the 1950s (e.g. Asch 1955) and replicated in several studies since then, people’s bias toward social conformity means that they are more likely to adopt false beliefs if they observe belief in falsehoods among individuals who surround them. The effect is particularly strong when there appears to be a visible consensus among numerous others. Beliefs are profoundly relational. Many do not derive from direct observation but from our perception that others in our social networks exhibit them. We might also perceive that there is some degree of consensus among other believers, and, if we lack information that will counter that consensus, this gives information particular force based on what Kuran and Sunstein (1999) have termed ‘availability cascades.’ An availability cascade occurs when people who have poor or incomplete information take shortcuts by simply basing their beliefs on the beliefs of others. The result is that people join an emerging consensus because it is easier to do and more likely to help them to fit in and advance their social status in that particular context.

Of course, most post-truth identities do not find genuinely mass support, so it is important to consider how individual dispositions can shape susceptibility to false beliefs. Media and social psychologists are starting to learn more about these dispositions. For example, ‘conspiracy mentality’ is linked to devout religious beliefs, low levels of science literacy, feelings of disempowerment, and cynicism toward experts and public institutions (Landrum et al 2019; Landrum & Olshansky 2019).

A further key point here is that if the cognitive biases and mentalities that lead people to adopt false beliefs were observed by social psychologists before the recent debate about post-truth, what is special about the recent period? We now discuss how systemic change in the media environment over the last decade has contributed to a context in which these basic

human frailties have become increasingly consequential for public communication.

Changing Media Systems

Research in this field is in its infancy, but there are aspects of mass social media use that have enabled the cognitive biases and mentalities we have outlined to become more readily activated, distributed, and, above all, visible.

This first point we want to make here is well-known to researchers of online communication, even if there have often been disagreements about the overall implications. It is that many of the constraints that typically shape face-to-face communication apply only weakly in online settings. In social media interactions, anonymity or pseudonymity are widespread, or people use their real names but have weak or no social ties with many of those with whom they discuss issues. As a result, when interacting on social media, people are generally more likely to question authority and worry less about having to face reprisals for their behaviour (Suler 2004). The fact that many social media users feel less bounded by authority structures does not inevitably lead to problematic outcomes. Social media environments have encouraged the expression of legitimate but underrepresented views and the airing of grievances that have not been addressed by professional media. However, social media also afford a communication environment in which it is easier to circulate ideas and signal behavioural norms that may, depending on the specific context, undermine tolerance, social trust, and fact-based discourse.

Second, research in communication on selective exposure has shown that many individuals tend to seek out and disproportionately focus on media information congruent with their motivated reasoning (Sears & Freedman 1967). Social media have created historically unprecedented opportunities to encounter and share the beliefs of others. They have also made it relatively simple to create online communities in which emotionally charged narratives can work to sustain social solidarity and group belonging in the absence of direct, embodied relationships (Chadwick 2019; Papacharissi 2014). Online, identity based on affective ties seems to be curiously difficult to dislodge. There are plenty of opportunities to have our views reinforced by like-minded others, there are readily available, designed-in signals of other people's views, such as likes, upvotes, and shares, and there is much less friction involved in seeking out and connecting with others who hold beliefs that are usually marginalised from mainstream news and other traditionally authoritative sources of information.

The mass diffusion of social media is reshaping the broader epistemic landscape of

societies. ‘Counter-epistemic communities’ (Waisbord 2018) may vary in scale, from the large numbers who reject global warming to the smaller numbers who promote extreme misogyny, but the key point is that, for their adherents, these beliefs are not marginal at all, but play a significant role in generating the affective ties that are essential precursors to identity formation and political agency. When combined with the algorithmic organization of information, which can enhance a sense of commonality and thrust seemingly marginal ideas to the centre of the average user experience on platforms such as YouTube, such communities can, under certain conditions, play a more prominent role in the marketplace of ideas than would have been the case during the era of broadcast and print media.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the ideas on which these post-truth identities rest often attract coverage by professional news organizations. User generated forums and wikis function as strategically-created semantic reservoirs whose meanings, however extreme and bizarre, can flow into mainstream news discourse, not least because professional journalists are now so dependent on online sources. This grants such ideas the imprimatur of elite media coverage and larger audiences. For example, there has been a relative absence of restraint by professional journalists when reporting the attention-grabbing actions of the so-called ‘incels.’ Some professional journalists have remediated and amplified incel beliefs, using time-worn sensationalist framings, particularly when narrating the background stories behind terrorist events. The same applies to anti-vaxxer ideas. Among editors and news audiences there is an enduring enthusiasm for emotional resonance. But this has been granted freer rein now that personal choice has become so important in the consumption of information. Social media platforms’ ‘feeds’ are the central organising experience of most people’s online activity and can play a role in identity formation by heightening hostility toward political enemies (Settle 2018). The dominant business model of platform companies has been based on selling individuals’ attention to advertisers. To this end, companies have designed user experiences sufficiently attractive to keep people interacting and sharing information. In practice, this has meant that users’ feeds often (though not always) tend to reinforce what network scientists call homophily: humans’ long-observed bias toward forming bonds with those who are similar to themselves. Those who share information to increase their sense of group belonging are less likely to see the media environment as an opportunity to learn from others. They are more likely to use their online communication to advance their own group’s identity and are less likely to be interested in engaging with those they consider to be threats to that identity.

To illustrate these conceptual points, we now turn to a discussion of three examples of

post-truth identities: anti-vaxxers, flat-earthers, and incels.

Anti-vaxxers

The global scientific and policy consensus that vaccines are safe and effective in preventing the spread of infectious diseases dates back to the nineteenth century. Yet minorities of publics—and sometimes substantial minorities—are sceptical about vaccines’ safety and refuse to have their children immunized. In some parts of Europe, such as Italy, vaccination rates have declined over the past two decades (Wilson 2019).

Anti-vaxx groups are highly visible online and were among the first post-truth communities to use the internet to disseminate information (Kata 2010; Wolfe, Sharp & Lipsky 2002b). Over the last decade, the groups have shifted their focus to social media and online forums. Facebook (Schmidt et al 2018; Smith & Graham 2019) and YouTube (Keelan et al 2007) have been particularly important for the anti-vaxxer infrastructure of meaning, though there is emerging evidence that private encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp have become more significant in the spread of such attitudes in recent years (Darrach 2020). Bradshaw and colleagues (2020) show that anti-vaccine groups operate in highly social groups with shared group norms. This is congruent with the by-now familiar argument that online identity construction is often influenced by the way in which one wants to be perceived by an imagined audience (Boyd & Marwick 2010).

Anti-vaxxer videos frequently appear in the top list of results on YouTube, even for searches using the neutral keyword ‘vaccines.’ This suggests the selective exposure that occurs when people purposively search for anti-vaccine material on YouTube is not the whole story: casual searchers are incidentally exposed to the material. More specific search queries, on the links between vaccines and autism, for example, or searches using ordinary language such as ‘should I vaccinate my child?’ return even greater quantities of anti-vaxxer material (Basch et al 2017; Venkatraman et al. 2015).

Common arguments found in anti-vaxxer groups are that vaccines harm immunity, spread the diseases they are meant to eradicate, and cause other conditions such as autism, sudden infant death syndrome, Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s (Kata 2010; Wolfe, Sharp & Lipsky 2002b). Emotionally-laden narratives are an important part of anti-vaxxer identity work. These often involve personal stories, particularly about children who have supposedly been harmed by vaccinations. Testimony by parents and images of children are common devices. Conspiracy theories often appear on anti-vaxx sites. The conflict is often framed as

an ‘us versus them’ battle of anti-vaxxers versus government, pharmaceutical companies, medical experts, and mainstream media. As with other conspiracy mentalities, criticism of vaccination *stands in* for meta-explanations of inequalities of power and influence across society (Van den Bulck & Hyzen 2020). Celebrity endorsements and sensationalist coverage have also been significant for bringing these ideas to wider audiences.²

A large-scale analysis of seven years of Facebook posts by 2.6 million users between 2010 and 2017 revealed that the pro-and anti-vaccine networks are polarized (Schmidt et al 2018). A majority of users on each side of the debate only consumes or produces information that reinforces their own attitudes. More active members of the anti-vaccination network tend to consume greater amounts of posts on the subject than those in the pro-vaccination network. There is little evidence of interaction among the two networks. The divide between them widened over the seven year period studied. These findings suggest that social conformity bias and availability cascades among participants in these networks can play a role in entrenching anti-vaccination attitudes (Kuran & Sunstein 1999). Anti-Vaxx groups also operate using dedicated sites and forums, which are interconnected via hyperlinks, again amplifying the effects of social conformity and availability cascades. Individuals often seek out these groups as a form of social support (Smith & Graham 2019) and this leads to emotional investment in group membership, which leads members to resist information that contradicts the group’s beliefs.

Flat-earthers

Flat-earthers are a self-described ‘movement’ united around the false belief that Earth is not a sphere but a flat disc. They exemplify many of the characteristics of post-truth identities we have discussed above. Their official website, tfes.org, hosts a library of selected articles and writings on the topic, a discussion forum with almost six thousand members, and the ‘Flat Earth Wiki’—a user-generated database of terms and linked concepts that runs on the widely used MediaWiki platform (the same technology used to host Wikipedia). The Flat Earth wiki describes a flat-earther as ‘someone who believes in the Flat Earth theory’. This use of

² One good example of celebrity and news values converging is a June, 2019 article on *RollingStone.com*: A Guide to 17 Anti-Vaccination Celebrities <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/celebrities-anti-vaxxers-jessica-biel-847779/> (accessed March 9, 2020).

identity labelling is common in such online groups, as we will see again with incels later in the chapter.³

Much flat earth misinformation propagates on YouTube. Key to this is YouTube's autoplay personalised recommendation algorithm, which analyses past viewing and generates similar material in an ongoing stream of suggestions (Landrum, Olshansky & Richards 2019). Videos on flat earth topics run into the tens of thousands and have collectively amassed many millions of views, with 2016 to 2018 showing a spike in video uploads that prompted public criticism of YouTube, which then modified its algorithm to down-rank the material in search and autoplay (Paolillo 2018). Celebrity endorsements from musician Bobby Ray Simmons Jr. (aka B.o.B.) among others have played a role in increasing the visibility of flat-earth ideas, as has publicity in mainstream broadcast shows with large audiences, such as UK ITV's *This Morning*. For example, in February 2020, while we were conducting research for this chapter, a *This Morning* feature about flat earth ideas appeared on YouTube and received 1.5 million viewings in just three weeks.⁴

Flat-earth's infrastructure of meaning employs the familiar signals of authority, legitimacy, and interactivity that are the staples of the post-web 2.0 internet. The wiki outlines various of the movement's beliefs, such as the 'space travel conspiracy' it claims was faked by NASA 'to further America's militaristic dominance of space.' The materials employ pseudo-scientific language and jargon. However, flat earth discourse also relies on emotive narratives of conspiracy, corruption, and cover-up, which appeal to fear and anxiety (Parker & Racz 2019). These conspiracy theories offer simple narrative explanations that seemingly produce order out of a complex and chaotic world (Van den Bulck & Hyzen 2020). Field research at flat earth gatherings has shown that conspiracy mentality is widespread among the supporters (Landrum, Olshansky, & Richards 2019). Identity-protective cognition, in this case, appears to allow information congruent with the beliefs of the group to be prioritised over empirical evidence. Flat earth conspiracy theories often operate as ideological telescopes: belief in the conspiracy derives from the more totalizing ideological position it represents, such as mistrust of the establishment or elites, rather than the specifics of the theory itself (Van den Bulck and Hyzen 2020).

Incels

³ <https://theflatearthsociety.org/wiki/wiki-index.php?page=Flat-Earther&highlight=flat%20earther> (accessed April 29th, 2020).

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wClJlarfyhE> (accessed March 6, 2020).

Incels (‘involuntary celibates’) are an online subculture of heterosexual men who define themselves by their inability to obtain a sexual or romantic partner, due to what they claim is systematic social hostility by women toward men (Heritage & Koller 2019; Zimmerman Ryan & Duriesmith 2018). In the incel community, the term incel has always been a clear identity label, with members self-identifying as incels (Maxwell, Robinson, Williams & Keaton 2020). The main online incel forum restricts membership to incels, and those interested in their ideology, with strict criteria for who qualifies as an incel and much infighting over the identity boundaries (Jaki, De Smedt, Gwózdź, Panchal, Rossa & De Pauw 2019). Identity groups often denigrate out-groups with negative identity labels (Jaki, De Smedt, Gwózdź, Panchal, Rossa & De Pauw 2019). For example, in the incel community women are commonly referred to as ‘foids’ (a portmanteau of female humanoid).

The subculture revolves around a worldview known as the ‘Black Pill’, which sets out that physical attractiveness is the sole decisive factor in love or sex (Jaki et al 2019). Incels have gained notoriety for a particularly violent strain of misogynist ideology and have been linked to several terrorist attacks (The Guardian 2017; The New York Times 2018). The identity rests on an emotional narrative of ‘male victimhood’ (Blommaert 2018), male supremacy, heteronormativity, white supremacy, and a desire to aggressively re-establish what they present as traditional gender norms (Zimmerman, Ryan & Duriesmith 2018). Anger, sadness, and frustration are common themes on the incel forum, as are aggressively insulting sexual and physical descriptions (Jaki et al 2018). They combine conspiracy mentality with reductive and simplistic explanations of complex social phenomena.

Incels’ distorted infrastructure of meaning operates in ways similar to those of the anti-vaxxers and flat-earthers. Having been banned from the online platform Reddit, they created their own site, incel.co, which hosts an active discussion forum, a FAQ and information page, and ‘Inside incel,’ an elaborate wiki of specialised insider terminology. This user-generated material contains invented narratives, neologisms, and self-referential cultural memes as well as a curated list of academic and pop culture articles that purportedly provide evidence for the ideology of the group, organized under the heading ‘Scientific Blackpill.’ This list features articles on gendered racial bias in dating, the importance of attractiveness in predicting positive dating outcomes, and studies supposedly showing that heterosexual women are more romantically interested in men with traditionally ‘masculine’ physical features. These studies are embedded in a narrative that men are unable to form romantic relationships due to the actions of women. Other articles listed include those

purportedly showing that women initiate divorce more often than men, that women exhibit sexual fantasies about non-consensual sex, and that women are more likely to use the dating app Tinder for casual sex (the last being included on a list of articles under the heading of ‘sluts’), all of which are used to legitimize aggressive misogyny.

The use of curated lists of academics articles, pseudo-science, and highly selective findings from news reports and academic research is a common thread running through post-truth infrastructures of meaning. In the incel wiki, articles are decontextualized and re-embedded in misogynist narratives. We found that many of the articles listed were actually inconsistent with incel ideology or were stripped of their theoretical underpinnings and their authors’ own conclusions. Incels selectively attend to information that upholds misogyny, while ignoring alternative information and interpretations. Neologisms and specific in-group language functions to police a boundary between incels and those outside the group (Blommaert 2018) but also creates a ready-made system of ideas important for legitimizing and maintaining the group’s identity, attracting new recruits, and representing their cause to journalists (The Guardian 2017; The New York Times 2018).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sketched out a framework for understanding post-truth identities. We have argued that such identities rest on a confluence of cognitive biases, conspiracy mentalities, and systemic changes in media systems over the past decade that have generated new affordances for the production, circulation, and discovery of false and highly distorted beliefs. Post-truth identities rest upon corrupted, self-initiated infrastructures of meaning that play a role in generating distorted knowledge, norms, and values, where knowledge refers to a process involving the justification of belief. Post-truth identities also rest upon affective solidarity among their participants while they also provide ready-made systems of ideas for new recruits and, on occasion, journalists in media organizations who report on these developments. The algorithmic organization of material on social media platforms plays a role, both in reinforcing group identity and in bringing these ideas to wider audiences. We conclude with some broader reflections.

Some of the writing on post-truth has presented a false dichotomy between, on the one hand, the supposedly always-reliable and responsible traditional media organizations of the past, who are often portrayed as enlightened, truth-seeking editorial gatekeepers and, on the other hand, online spaces populated by partisans, trolls, and the ignorant who supposedly

pollute the public sphere with falsehoods and conspiracy theories. The reality is much more complex. The broadcast and print dominated media systems of the twentieth century displayed many biases and distortions caused by the demands of commercial competition and advertisers. At the same time, these factors remain important today: mainstream media organizations can, and do, present the ideas of post-truth communities to broader audiences.

The decentralization of public communication over the last decade has had many positive effects, including the diversification of voices in the public sphere and increased access to scientific information among mass publics. That being said, the proliferation of digital and social media has also provided many new opportunities for the distribution and consumption of mis- and disinformation. While cognitive biases, conspiracy mentalities, and the long-term decline of trust in institutions are important roots of post-truth identities, digital and social media have played a role in enabling the construction and visibility of these identities and have made it easier for their adherents to connect with each other and sustain their knowledge, norms, and values. Research in this field is now gathering momentum. Future research might pay attention to how the convergence of cognitive biases and affordances we outline here contributes to the spread of falsehoods and misrepresentations. Understanding how post-truth identities are formed and maintained will better equip societies to combat the spread of false and highly distorted beliefs.

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