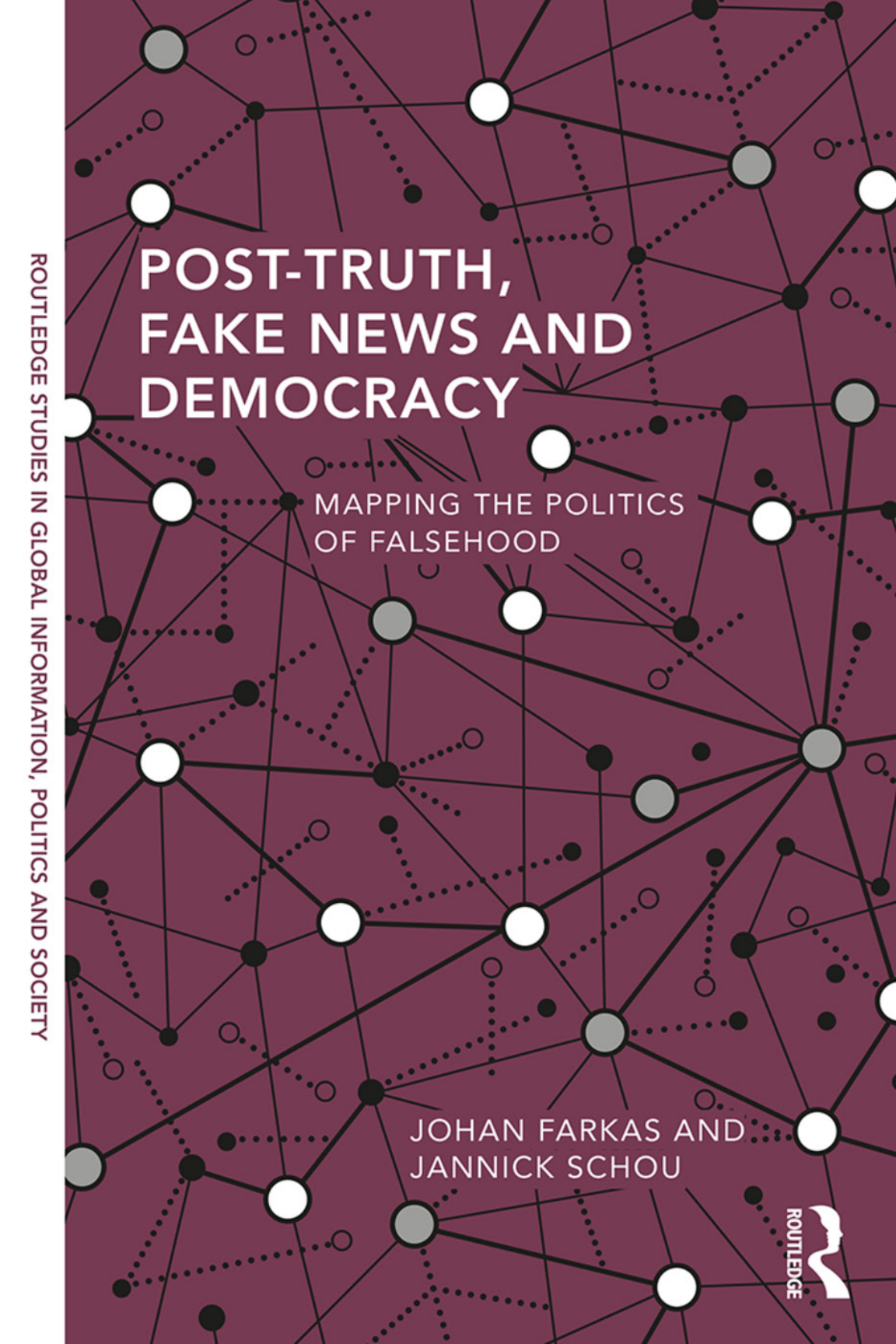
ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN GLOBAL INFORMATION, POLITICS AND SOCIETY
POST-TRUTH, FAKE NEWS AND DEMOCRACY
MAPPING THE POLITICS OF FALSEHOOD
JOHAN FARKAS AND JANNICK SCHOU
ROUTLEDGE

"Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy provides a highly original analysis of how discourses of truth have emerged in the 'fake news' era. It shows how (re)equating democratic governance with only reason, rationality and truth undermines the voice of the people and excludes those most disaffected with politics. Anyone interested in contemporary debates on power and democracy will be both challenged and captivated by this book." —*Ariadne Vromen, Professor of Political Sociology, Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.*

"Drawing on groundbreaking empirical and theoretical work, Farkas and Schou demonstrate the double threat to democracy posed by post-truth propaganda and its obverse: an authoritarian backlash to the politics of Truth with a capital T. *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy* provides an invaluable conceptual roadmap for navigating the political perils of the contemporary media landscape with an unwavering commitment to democratic politics. The authors provide more than compelling arguments and timely analysis they offer a powerful and carefully constructed resource for hope." —*Mark Andrejevic, Professor at the School of Media, Film, and Journalism, Monash University.*

"The book I have been waiting for – a critical interrogation of post-truth and fake news discourses embedded in their political and historical context that puts democratic renewal centre stage. Farkas and Schou skilfully draw upon political philosophy to argue that it is democracy rather than truth claims that should take priority if we really want deeper, better and more inclusive democratic institutions and societies. As they put it, 'we don't need more truth but more politics.' This book is not only conceptually compelling but also politically important. It helped me understand not only what is going on but also

what to do about it. A book for our times. Read it." —*Natalie Fenton, Professor of Media and Communications, Co-Director Centre for the Study of Global Media and Democracy, Goldsmiths, University of London.*

"This is a book that needed to be written. Through an impressive empirical mapping and discourse theoretical analysis of recent post-truth and fake news discourses, the authors identify, and problematize, how democracy in these discourses is articulated as a technocratic order based on 'the rule by truth.' In the process, and with the help of historical contextualization, Farkas and Schou expose the reactionary anti-democratic imaginary within the discourses, and consequently open space to once more envision democracy in terms of 'the rule by the people.' This incredibly insightful and important book is a must read for all students, scholars, and proponents of democracy." —*Lincoln Dahlberg, Researcher in Media Politics and Digital Democracy.*

"Few deny the emergence and importance of post-truth politics, fake news, and the changing impact of the public and social media on democratic politics, though it is difficult to find compelling diagnoses and alternatives. In *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy*, Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou provide a compelling diagnosis of the contemporary discourses on 'post-truth' through an in-depth analysis of news articles, commentaries, academic publications, policy briefs and political speeches. Carefully linking empirical research and critical political philosophy, the book successfully challenges those who call simply for greater truth and rationality by outlining a deeper conception of democracy, and its attendant institutions and practices. This is an important and path-breaking contribution that responds to a pressing issue in contemporary society and politics." —*Professor David Howarth, Director of the Centre for Ideology and Discourse Analysis, University of Essex, UK.*

POST-TRUTH, FAKE NEWS AND DEMOCRACY

Western societies are under siege, as fake news, post-truth and alternative facts are undermining the very core of democracy. This dystopian narrative is currently circulated by intellectuals, journalists and policy makers worldwide. In this book, Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou deliver a comprehensive study of post-truth discourses. They critically map the normative ideas contained in these and present a forceful call for deepening democracy.

The dominant narrative of our time is that democracy is in a state of emergency caused by social media, changes to journalism and misinformed masses. This crisis needs to be resolved by reinstating truth at the heart of democracy, even if this means curtailing civic participation and popular sovereignty. Engaging with critical political philosophy, Farkas and Schou argue that these solutions neglect the fact that democracy has never been about truth alone: it is equally about the voice of the democratic people.

Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy delivers a sobering diagnosis of our times. It maps contemporary discourses on truth and democracy, foregrounds their normative foundations and connects these to historical changes within liberal democracies. The book will be of interest to students and scholars studying the current state and future of democracy, as well as to a politically informed readership.

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POST-TRUTH, FAKE NEWS AND DEMOCRACY

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Johan Farkas and
Jannick Schou

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Dedicated to our families.
In memory of Bigita Faber

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book deals with contemporary discourses in and around questions of truth, democracy and politics. It charts the formation of a new political battlefield revolving around ideas such as fake news, alternative facts and post-truth, providing a staunch critique of the limitations of these still-developing ideas. With this book, we argue that not only have contemporary concerns around democracy and truth been severely limited in their understanding of what democracy is, they have also taken for granted that democratic practices are almost solely about truth, rationality and consensus. This need not be the case. Indeed, it *should* not be the case. And so, with this book, we want to suggest that our current democratic moment should not lend itself to claiming more *true* politics but rather more *democratic* politics.

In writing this book, we have often felt like we have been chasing a constantly moving target. Both public debates and political interventions move fast – often in unexpected directions. This also means that we have continuously had to amend our arguments to keep up to date with the newest developments. For some, the Sisyphean task of following the shifting boundaries of a continuously moving field might seem like an argument against writing this book. Should we not have waited, it might be asked, until things were more settled? On the contrary: Our point in writing this book is precisely that things are not yet settled and that there is still room for thinking, acting and doing otherwise. The book attempts to do so, often in an explicitly polemical tone, by intervening in contemporary academic and political dialogues. There is a pressing need for critical scholars to engage with our democratic moment. They must do so in an effort to demand deeper, better and more inclusive democratic institutions and societies. While parts of this book may thus be rendered obsolete in due time, we nonetheless believe that its basic message will continue to resonate for the foreseeable future. Democracy always needs our care, concern and attention.

Many of the ideas presented in this book date back to conversations started in 2015. Back then, we had become increasingly interested in understanding how new forms of deception and disguised propaganda work on digital platforms. In particular, we had looked into how fake accounts on Facebook were being deployed to tactically discredit and antagonize ethno-cultural minorities. At the end of 2016, things seemed to suddenly change, as fake news became a ubiquitous term in the public imagination. Yet, somewhat contrary to our previous work, what caught our attention was not how such news actually operated, but the kind of performative impact the concept of fake news seemed to have. Indeed, it seemed to us that fake news, alternative facts, post-truth and similar ideas were being used as new political weapons in a struggle over the very future of democracy. This book is our attempt to understand this field of struggle. Only by knowing the stakes of these conflicts might it become possible to imagine other futures and alternatives for democratic practices.

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Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou
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INTRODUCTION

The Spirit of Democracy

On 25 April 2018, French president Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech to the joint houses of the US Congress. The speech was widely discussed in both American and European media and was noteworthy on several accounts. One of the ways in which Macron's speech captured the political zeitgeist was in its quite direct confrontation with the issues of fake news, post-truth and misinformation. "To protect our democracies," Macron (2018) argued in his speech,

> We have to fight against the ever-growing virus of fake news, which exposes our people to irrational fear and imaginary risk . . . . Without reason, without truth, there is no real democracy because democracy is about true choices and rational decisions. The corruption of information is an attempt to corrode the very spirit of our democracies.

In this statement, Macron captured what has become some of the most pervasive arguments leveled across advanced democratic states by journalists, policy makers and academics alike: namely that democracies worldwide are facing a deep-seated crisis, as fake news, alternative facts and misinformation have come to dominate public spheres. This narrative has not only become prevalent in Europe – where the EU has set up a new specialized unit, *East Stratcom*, to counter the threat of "cyber-attacks" and "fake news" (Rankin, 2017) – but has also started to develop in other parts of the world: from India, where political leader, Subramanian Swamy, have described fake news as a "cancer" in need of "surgery" (Press Trust of India, 2018) and Malaysia, where controversial laws made "fake news" punishable with up to six years in prison (Ngui, 2018)

to Kenya where legislation was implemented to stop "people who create fake news" and ensure that social media is only "used very responsibly" (Gathright, 2018). Indeed, it seems that fake news and post-truth have become ubiquitous concepts in contemporary discourses about the current state and future of democracy itself.

Fake news came to prominence following the tumultuous election of Donald Trump as 45th president of the United States in 2016. Trump famously started a rhetorical war on established media outlets by labeling them as fake news media (Farkas & Schou, 2018). However flashy and prominent in the public discourse, Trump's outbursts only constitute the tip of the political iceberg. It is only a small fraction of a much more widespread set of discourses about misinformation and the decline of trust in previously dependable sources. According to these increasingly dominant narratives, scientific evidence is no longer trusted, with climate change being consistently labeled a hoax; medical evidence is sidestepped, as patients search for their own truth online; and "proper" journalism is under attack from fake news farms, troll factories and social bots. These discourses argue that the rise of digital and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, has allowed for a seemingly endless flood of misinformation and deception to appear. The traditional gatekeepers of truth, such as editors, journalists and public intellectuals, have lost their monopoly on public issues, and in this process, so-called malicious actors and misinformed citizens have started to spread their own lies, deception, hate, propaganda and fake information on a previously unseen scale. According to a number of prominent public voices (including President Macron), all of these phenomena (and many more) are indicative of a new political age or paradigm: we are facing a post-truth society or a post-factual era in which Truth and Reason have been superseded by alternative facts and individual gut feelings. An epochal rupture in the very fabric of democracy is said to be taking place. The foundations of our political system is cracking up. Democracy is doomed, these voices tell us, unless these destructive trajectories are interrupted and changed for the better.

This book seeks to investigate and critically examine these contemporary narratives and discourses currently circulating at rapid speed in advanced liberal democracies. It does so by systematically detailing the emergence of what we term *post-truth worlds*. We use this concept to capture what is, in many ways, a still developing and expanding field of political struggle and contestation. This field is dedicated to explaining *how, why* and *in what ways* democratic practices are currently being put under dire pressure. Post-truth worlds can be seen as discursive formations or political imaginaries produced, disseminated and adopted throughout the Western world. With this book, we want to move into these worlds. We want to explore their internal discursive logics – the ideas they contain and the implicit normative premises that structure them. Why is it, we ask, that contemporary democratic states and societies are currently said

to be facing an immense political crisis? How has the seemingly unstoppable barrage of fake news and alternative facts, flooding the gates of democracy and inaugurating an era of post-truth politics, been conceptualized, thought out and linked to wider political issues? What are the dominant normative ideas that continue to inform our current ways of thinking and acting upon questions of truth, democracy and politics?

These are the core questions investigated in this book. To answer these, the book uses a substantial amount of space to present an empirical mapping of the current terrain of political struggle over the stakes and ideas in contemporary post-truth worlds. Indeed, a large portion of this work is taken up by a relatively detailed discourse analysis of the kinds of claims made as to how democracy, truth and politics influence each other. In wanting to interrogate this still developing and continuously morphing *politics of falsehood* (Farkas & Schou, 2018), we are not interested in evaluating or assessing whether and to what extent current debates around truth, deception and democracy are accurate or not. We do not aim to say whether democracies really are facing a deep-seated "crisis of facts" (Davies, 2016). Instead, we want to take contemporary concerns seriously by understanding these as performative interventions seeking to give meaning to and influence our democratic moment in very particular ways. Whether they accurately represent the world or not is, for us, less important than the specific set of ideas they serve to produce and bring into existence. At its core, this book can thus be seen as a study in political conceptual history, albeit with a contemporary twist.

In proposing this shift in analytical focus – from looking at the conditions of truth to the discourses on truth – this book differentiates itself quite substantially from existing accounts of post-truth politics and similar concepts. Currently, there seems to be no shortage of commentators and intellectuals decrying the onslaught of fake news and post-truth. A veritable "industry of democratic defense" (Müller, 2018) seems to have sprung up, as commentators seek to combat the proclaimed post-truth crisis. A simple search on Amazon reveals an avalanche of newly published books with catchy titles. *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* (Ball, 2017), *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It* (Davis, 2017), *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (d'Ancona, 2017) and *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (Kakutani, 2018) are only a few examples of this expanding market. Similarly, large media outlets across Europe and the United States also disparage the new age of disinformation by publishing a wealth of articles, op-eds and comments dedicated precisely to the decline of democracy and truth. In the academic landscape, too, there is a growing movement dedicated to intervening in contemporary questions in and around fake news and post-truth. Notable contributions include titles such as *Post-Truth* (McIntyre, 2018), *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (Fuller, 2018), *Everything is Permitted, Restrictions Still Apply: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Social Dislocation, Narcissism, and Post Truth* (Thurston, 2018) and *Fake News:*

Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism (McNair, 2018). As already hinted at, our aim with this book is to do something different than what is attempted in these existing interventions. We want to understand the new political discourses and grammar that are currently being constituted in and around questions of post-truth, fake news and alternative facts. Rather than saying what is true and what is fake, we want to turn this issue into an empirical set of questions. In this sense, we hope to take stock of the current debate surrounding these issues and unpack contemporary anxieties, visions and ideals about democracy and politics. In doing so, we might not only be able to understand our existing situation better, but we can also begin to carve out other ways of acting, intervening and thinking about truth and democracy going forward.

Democracy in Decline? Main Arguments

This book is an attempt to open up and enter post-truth worlds by exploring contemporary discussions on truth, democracy and falsehood, diving into their political logics and implicit normative ideas. We hope to think with and beyond these existing worlds. Based on systematic empirical mappings of the state of debate, we hope to produce new political openings, allowing us to envision other ways of discussing and imagining the state of democracy. In this sense, the book has both empirical and critical ambitions. It seeks to fuse detailed empirical studies with political philosophical discussions on democracy, politics and capitalism.

The critical ambition is in large part formed through an engagement with the existing state of affairs. An engagement that is both historical and political. Our aim is not to "debunk" or "expose" existing discourses as ideological veils or smokescreens, but, more modestly, to suggest that their rendering of the world is not complete. They have severe blind spots and lack crucial connections to wider historical developments that have been taking place since the middle of the last century. Not only does the notion of the post-truth era come with an implicit nostalgia for a "truth era" of democracy that never existed – thus erasing long historical struggles of disenfranchised groups, such as women and racial minorities, to be acknowledged as part of the democratic populace – but the idea of a post-truth era also fails to acknowledge that democracy, as a political system, has never only been about truth in the first place. In doing so, it neglects that contemporary democracies were by no means in a stable condition before the villains of post-truth suddenly knocked them off their course.

Formulated in a somewhat simplified way, this book will argue that current discourses about the fate of democracy have tended to presuppose a very particular understanding of what counts as true and false. In doing so, they have also tended to smuggle in an implicit, yet nonetheless incredibly pervasive, model of how proper democracies ought to function. They have claimed certain forms of power as being natural and supposedly inherent to democracy as a form

of governance and political ordering. We will argue that this current way of thinking about democracy – which has become almost completely hegemonic in contemporary political debates – is both politically charged and normatively risky. What it essentially does is equate the idea of democracy with the ideas of reason, rationality and truth in an *a priori* fashion. This link remains an unquestioned assumption of post-truth worlds. In this narrative, what is threatening democracies worldwide is falsehood – pure and simple. Re-establishing the former (i.e., democracy) means eliminating the latter (i.e., falsehoods). It was precisely this link that Macron emphasized in his speech to the US Congress. In appealing to the very "spirit of democracy," Macron condensed and spoke aloud what has otherwise remained a hidden political premise: that *without reason, without truth, there is no real democracy because democracy is about true choices and rational decisions*.

What are we to make of this formulation? It seems to set up a conceptual hierarchy, linking five key concepts together in a seemingly neat or even necessary chain: reason, truth, real, rational and democracy. What we take from this chain is the idea that democracy *is* truth, it *is* reason and it *is*, in a certain sense, the conditions of possibility for rationality itself. This type of argument is certainly not without precedent, either historically or in a contemporary light. Indeed, in what can best be described as a strange foretelling of the current state of democracy, the German philosopher and staunch defender of rationality, Jürgen Habermas, already argued in 2006 that "[a] 'post-truth democracy' . . . would no longer be a democracy" (Habermas, 2006, p. 18). Similarly, the history of democratic thought is littered with philosophers and political theorists linking democratic practices to truth telling, rationality, consensus and reason.

Yet, to claim that democracy is identical to truth – or at least the conditions of possibility for truth to exist – is also to take for granted the highly contested and complex history of democracy itself. It is to gloss over the fact that what democracy *is* has never been static or fixed, but continuously evolving and disputed. As is well known, the practice and idea of democracy constitutes what we might call an *essentially contested concept* whose contents and meaning has shifted greatly over time. Democracy has never just been one thing alone, instead remaining an object of political and social struggle. Even so, if one were to distill a common kernel from democracy, it is questionable whether this "spirit" should be linked to the terms invoked by Macron. Turning to the etymological roots of democracy reveals a different story, as David Held (2006, p. 1, original emphasis) so succinctly recounts:

> While the word 'democracy' came into English in the sixteenth century from the French *démocratie,* its origins are Greek. 'Democracy' is derived from *dēmokratía*, the root meanings of which are *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule). Democracy means a form of government in which, in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule.

Beyond this initial definition, the history of democracy as a concept and a form of governance is complex and multilayered. Over time, competing definitions and ideas about the ways in which democracy is best organized has continued to roam back and forth. Different styles and forms of democracy have emphasized distinct patterns of political participation, rights and obligations. Though varying in terms of its concrete implementation, most liberal democracies today are based on representative forms of democracy in which citizens get to vote for (different) political parties at periodic elections. This is a system of delegation in which citizens, through their vote, elect politicians to represent their interests. While this style of democracy is dominant in advanced capitalist countries, often based on minimal forms of direct engagement and everyday political influence, it is certainly not the only way of organizing a democratic system. Indeed, throughout history there have been (and continue to be) much more direct forms of democracy, emphasizing rule by the people as not just a periodic occurrence but integral to everyday political practice.

This tension between a system of delegation and political expertise, on the one hand, and popular sovereignty and the people, on the other hand, continues to form an important dynamic in most liberal democracies. In this context, the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2005) has argued that liberal democracies are *not* constituted as singular orders but are carriers of what she terms as *the democratic paradox*. For Mouffe, this democratic paradox resides precisely in the fact that contemporary democracies are the product of liberalism – with its emphasis on rights, individualism and law – and the democratic tradition, which has historically been linked to ideas about equality, participation and popular sovereignty. Liberal democracy has to balance these counteracting forces, she suggests, and its success is in many ways dependent on its ability to do so.

We will return to these discussions on the political philosophy and history of democracy in the second part of the book. We will do so to give a critical response to contemporary ideas about a crisis of truth, offering a quite different portrayal of democracy than is currently given. Based on our empirical dissection of the current terrain of struggle, we want to argue that the proliferation of ideas about fake news and the ambushing of reason should not, at least not primarily, be understood as a "truth crisis." There *is* a series of deep-seated problems facing liberal democracies, but the rise of fake news and alternative facts is not the biggest of our problems. In fact, solving the post-truth crisis could very well *add* to our current predicament – at least in the way it is currently imagined. Why is that? Because, not unlike Macron, those proclaiming that a truth crisis is destroying liberal democracies all seem to view evidence, reason and hard facts as the *only* solution to contemporary democratic problems. To save democracy, these voices argue, we need to once again secure the solid ground of reason that has begun to shatter.

This is a dangerous path. A large part of this book is dedicated to showing why. As this book will try to demonstrate, this kind of *truth-based solutionism* is

no solution at all. It carries within it a dangerous seed that obscures what we perceive to be the core promise or even utopia of the democratic tradition: namely that popular sovereignty and rule by the people *is* possible. Post-truth worlds, meanwhile, all too often end up as attempts to undo the democratic paradox by throwing the democratic tradition to the wayside. Democracy, we want to argue in this book – particularly following radical democratic and pluralist political thinkers like Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière – is not just about facts, reason and evidence. It never has been. Democracy and politics are instead about the interlocking exchanges between the individual and the people, as well as the competing political ideas about how society ought to be structured that emerge from this interplay. We cannot deduce how we want to live together. There is no single formula for the composition of the political community. What remains proper to a well-functioning democracy is not so much its ability to navigate based on reason and truth, but its ability to include and give voice to different political projects and groups. Democracy is about different visions for how society should be organized. It is about affect, emotions and feelings. As Mouffe (2005) argues, "[a] well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions." Indeed, for Mouffe (2005, p. 104),

> the ideal of a pluralist democracy cannot be to reach a rational consensus in the public sphere. Such a consensus cannot exist. We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion. The ideas that power could be dissolved through a rational debate and that legitimacy could be based on pure rationality are illusions which can endanger democratic institutions.

As we will demonstrate in this book, it is precisely these elements that continue to be denied within current solutions to the alleged post-truth crisis. To make matters worse, these solutions often add insult to injury by combating the very thing they are trying to save: to cure democracy, anti-democratic or even authoritarian measures are prescribed. Responding to this development, we believe that what we need now, perhaps more than ever, is not necessarily more truth. We need spaces for the enactment of politics proper.

This book should be seen as a staunch defense of democracy, *not* as the sole rule of reason, but as the rule of the people. Saving democracy is, we will argue, not about arming against fake news and disinformation – at least not primarily. It is instead, and perhaps more importantly, about creating genuine spaces for politics: that is, spaces for contestation, for political difference and for pluralism. Doing so implies imagining other futures than those currently promoted under the banner of truth and rationality. It requires the construction of a new Left politics that can adequately address key societal issues and concerns.

In short form, these are the arguments set up in this work. We will show how a certain imaginary has gripped the Western world and why its implicit ideas about the nature of democracy are problematic. We will furthermore suggest that other paths are possible, even necessary, if we want to reclaim the democratic tradition. While we are currently trapped within the confines of certain post-truth worlds, there is nothing to suggest that our history is programmed in advance. There is always room for resistance – for thinking and doing otherwise. This book hopes to contribute to this endeavor.

Approach and Clarifications

Before embarking on our investigation into and out of contemporary post-truth worlds, we want to make our approach to this matter as clear as possible by tackling certain questions in advance. We do not seek to dispute or deny the threats posed by misinformation and disguised propaganda in digital media. We do not claim that the barrage of bots, fake information and disguised propaganda online do not pose serious problems for democracy. They do. We have conducted quite extensive research on these topics ourselves, studying the intricacies of political deception and conflict in digital media for a number of years. This includes research on fake Muslim propaganda in Scandinavia (Farkas, Schou, & Neumayer, 2018a, 2018b) and the struggle against these (Farkas & Neumayer, 2017; Farkas & Schou, 2017), the use of disguised Facebook pages by political groups (Schou & Farkas, 2016), Russian interference through Twitter in the 2016 US elections (Farkas & Bastos, 2018) and how twentieth-century propaganda theory can be used to understand such disguised propaganda online (Farkas, 2019; Farkas & Neumayer, 2018). This work has sought to contribute to understanding how contemporary media ecologies foster both new means of deception and the struggle against these.

In conducting this research, we have become increasingly concerned about the kinds of conversations we – as academics, citizens and participants in the public sphere – are currently having. Or *not* having. A conversation that is currently missing forms the core of this book: that is, the fate of democracy as *dēmokratía,* rule by the people, rather than rule by the truth.

In this context, we might as well make clear from the beginning that we have both been formed by a quite particular way of thinking about democracy. This has in large part been fueled by participatory, pluralistic and open ideas about what democracy is and should be, about who should be allowed to speak and be heard (Schou, 2017; Schou & Farkas, 2016). Being faced with ongoing discussions on how to handle and reconstruct liberal democracies, it seems to us that such democratic ideas have been thrown in the bin. Yet, moving seamlessly from the proposition that we should combat false information and deliberate deception to wanting to reinstate the privilege of truth is a complete non sequitur to us: the two are not mutually exclusive. It *is* possible to both be worried

about the new capabilities of digital technologies *and* wish for more participatory and inclusionary forms of democracy. In fact, as shall be argued here, this pairing might be the only way forward if democracy is to survive.

As captured by the title of this book, most of its chapters are taken up by in-depth discussions and analyses of current discourses perpetuated at rapid speed across social media, news headlines, scholarly articles, policy briefs and presidential speeches. Indeed, much of this book presents close textual analysis, grappling with the particular ways in which language is mobilized to express and articulate certain visions about the conditions and faith of democracy. To claim that such an investigation only sheds light on language and discourses would, however, be to artificially limit the scope and breadth of the arguments developed here. While our analysis focuses on the deployment of language and construction of texts, these should not be seen as freely floating entities that can simply be divorced from material circumstances, contexts and practices (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Language not only reflects our way of understanding and acting in the world, it is also recursively involved in bringing those very worlds into existence. To deconstruct the mounting political grammar currently promoted about the post-truth era, particularly in the so-called Western world, is also to lay bare the hegemonic cognitive schemes and institutional structures that guide contemporary political actions, policy measurements and interventions. Engaging with these is furthermore a means of taking part in the hegemonic struggles over the very meaning and modalities of the world itself. As a consequence, this book does not claim any neutral high ground or universal position of reason. This does not mean that the book resides in the often-caricatured realm of *postmodernism*, a strange portrayal of a position in which truth and reason are said to be cast aside as completely relative, arbitrary and groundless. We instead take the challenge inaugurated by post-structuralist writers seriously, not least the work of Laclau (1990, 2005), by occupying a middle ground best captured by the term *post-foundationalist* (Marchart, 2007). Inspired particularly by the writings of Laclau, but also Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Derrida and Oliver Marchart, this is a position that at one and the same time denies the possibility of any stable and unshakeable ground underlying social reality *and* affirms the possibility of multiple grounds that seek to install a precarious and temporary foundation. Phrased somewhat differently, such a position takes issue with the idea of any transcendental universal Truth (capital T) that cuts across and goes beyond geographies, epochs, subjectivities, species and (perhaps even) planets. Instead, it argues that there have historically been *different truths* (small t) that have been the product of social and political struggles. These competing truths are not mere smokescreens or ideological veils, but situated world-making efforts around which particular forms of life have grown. We are never operating without ground, yet no ground is ever eternal and firm. In the political realm, there can be no absolute or universal site of political legitimacy. All politics is about competing (antagonistic) ways

of understanding and giving meaning to the world. The very object of politics remains the mobilization and hegemonization of the field of social meaning. These political philosophical coordinates will be developed further throughout this book, particularly in the following chapter. For now, we simply use them to say that just as the world of politics is not a world of the universal neither is that of research and academic knowledge. We are also situated within certain conceptions and apprehensions of what the world is and could be. Indeed, as our analysis showcases, far from just describing an already assembled world, researchers play an important role in making things such as post-truth and fake news come into being at all. They take part in performing, producing and constructing the very meaning of these ideas. This should, however, not make us give up in advance or forfeit any kind of normative commitment. Instead, as David Howarth has so succinctly insisted, it should prompt us to engage in political struggles alongside other political actors. As Howarth (2000, p. 123) states by reference to the work of Laclau and Mouffe:

> Critical discussion of Laclau and Mouffe's project for radical democracy have centred on their supposed relativism. If there are no ultimate grounds for defending and justifying any set of values and beliefs, how can they expect to argue for radical democracy? This sort of 'enlightenment blackmail', as Foucault (1984, p. 43) puts it, implies that unless one has or invokes absolute foundations to defend a political project, then one has no ground whatsoever. However, just as most competitors in a game cannot predetermine its outcome yet are still willing to play, so Laclau and Mouffe can argue their case for radical democracy without assuming it to 'trump' any opposition proposal. In other words, it is the actual proposals they (and others) put forward which must be evaluated and not the conditions of possibility for making any judgment at all.

It is precisely from this sort of position – both critical of the normative *and* deeply normative – that we want to think through current ideas of post-truth and fake news. We want to do so to argue for different ways forward than those that are currently precluded and obscured by dominant political discourses. Doing so is rooted in the firm belief that what is currently at stake is not just a battle over what is true and what is fake. This is an entirely one-sided framing of the problem, and it is precisely this framing that is all too often set by news headlines, public intellectuals and politicians alike. In our view, reducing the current political moment to a crisis of truthfulness is in itself a deeply political act serving to obscure a whole set of important democratic issues that *could* be discussed – that *need to be* discussed. This includes questions about how democracies ought to function, what kind of society we want to live in, who holds power over what resources, what kinds of bodies are allowed to speak and who

are recognized as equals and treated as lives worthy of living. If we can forge even a few intellectual weapons for engaging with these questions during the course of this book, our efforts have not been in vain.

Outline of Book

The book is organized in two core parts. Following this introduction, the second chapter outlines the methodological and theoretical tools we employ to navigate and move within post-truth worlds. It presents the underlying approach operationalized in this book and dives deeper into how we have gone about mapping the current terrain of political struggle. The goal is to lay out the theoretical, methodological and ontological backpack we carry with us into the post-truth wilderness. For some, this chapter might seem a bit long or overly arduous at times, and while the reflections presented in this chapter are important to understanding our approach, we have tried our best to make sure that the rest of the books is understandable even without this theoretical chapter.

The second chapter leads directly to Part I of the book, called *Into post-truth worlds*. In this first part, divided into three chapters, we systematically unpack the ideas, solutions and problematizations currently conjured up by public voices in the Western world. We look at the interventions and anxieties linking democracy to questions of post-truth, fake news and alternative facts, and examine the implicit normative ideas about democracy contained in these. In this sense, Part I contains the main empirical portion of this book. It presents a fairly detailed exploration of the political terrain that is still developing around the state of democracy, truth and politics.

Part II, called *Out of post-truth worlds,* takes up the mantle from the first part, but shifts gears slightly. Instead of attending to the political worlds currently being constructed, it seeks to view their premises through the lens of critical and pluralist political philosophy. In doing so, we want to argue that, rather than deepening democratic practices, contemporary post-truth worlds have relied on ideas closely connected to post-political and post-democratic trajectories. Arguing that democracy is more or less solely about truth, consensus and rationality, these worlds have served to undermine the voice of the people and popular sovereignty. This is problematic not only because it denies the constitutive role of the people, but also insofar as it can serve to create a self-propelling feedback loop. As a counter-proposal to this model, we suggest that ideas offered by radical political philosophers, concerned with deepening democratic institutions and reclaiming these from the grips of the capitalist market, can serve as powerful alternatives. The book ends by arguing that we are currently situated in a democratic moment, what Gramsci (1992) called *the interregnum*. This is a time in which the old system seems to be failing but no firm model has been devised for the future. We close the book by arguing that such a moment provides an opening for once again contesting the hegemony

of capitalism, while working towards more inclusive, democratically open and just societies. At the very least, this might be the kind of utopia we need to invoke to once again start believing in a better and more democratic future.

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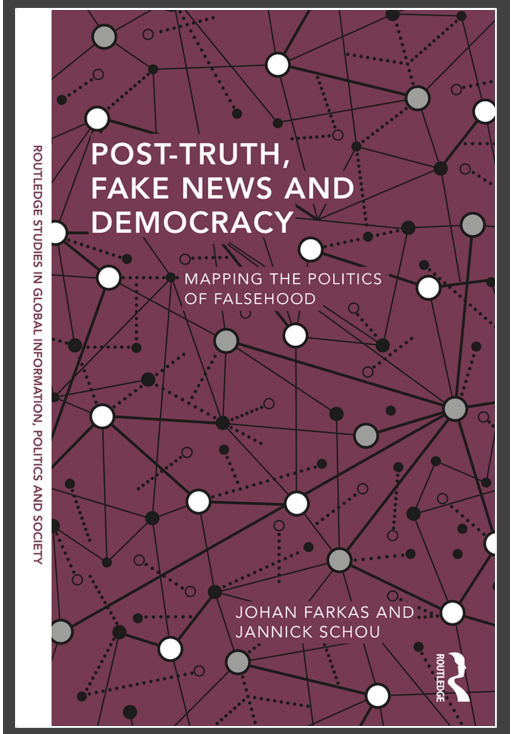

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