9 Outrage marketing and deceptive campaigning

Populist and epistocratic pathologies of an anti-political era

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Introduction

In their condense and thorough study 'Penal populism and epistemic crime control,' Ian Loader and Richard Sparks examine populism and technocratic management as political ideologies which compete over crime control policies. Both worldviews, although diametrically opposed, claim to know how to build a 'better politics of crime' (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 99).

Penal populism is an ideology railing against a hitherto dominant group of Platonian guards (Loader, 2006), the professional elites who were implementing policies in the criminal justice system. Today, populists reject a crime control system that fails to sentence offenders to long prison terms.

> Populism seeks to counter-pose the 'cool,' sanitized discourse of 'the system' with one that recognizes crime control as an expressive practice – a field where outbursts of anger, resentment, blame, censure, demonization and the like are not merely to be expected, but to be treated as legitimate.
>
> (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 103)

Loader and Sparks assume that populism tends to close down spaces of political deliberation. It replaces the always revisable construction of diverse opinions with the effort to 'concentrate power in the name of the "unified" masses' (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 105).

On the other hand, technocratic worldviews claim to be devoid of ideology, making use of epistemic control methods and valuing free and objective criteria for making decisions. These worldviews maintain that public policy outcomes will be improved under management systems in which experts take objective decisions in place of misinformed politicians. The authors distinguish three variants of epistemic crime control (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 106). The first is focused on the improvement of social information about crime and justice, trying to educate a poorly informed citizenry. A second variant aims to strengthen insulated institutions of policy formation (like sentencing commissions, parole boards, and inspection bodies), thus restraining the 'politics of passion' that imbues sensitive

issues like crime. A third type wants to ground policy and practice in 'evidence based' and 'what works' methods.

Loader and Sparks point out that these three variants are vulnerable to the criticism that they are monological and top down. Paradoxically, technocrats – preferably termed *epistocrats*, the antipodes of 'the common people' – privilege competence over consent as the arbiter of crime policy, thereby locating the criteria for making 'good' decisions outside the democratic process of reaching those decisions and raising barriers for entry to political discussion. The authors argue that these epistemic approaches seem to rest on a 'scholastic fallacy' that public sensibilities can be altered by exposure to evidence and 'facts-of-the-matter' (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 107). They respond to the 'dangers' of populism 'by reasserting the very practices of elite governance that fuel populist resentment in the first place' (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 111). In this way, epistemic ambitions of prediction and control 'appear to reproduce in reverse populism's depiction of political life as a struggle between elites and masses' (idem), between rational truth versus emotionalized opinion. In this respect, Loader and Sparks quote political theorist Nadia Urbaniti. She warns that once episteme enters the domain of politics, 'the possibility that political equality gets questioned is in the air because the criterion of competence is intrinsically inegalitarian' (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 111).

Loader and Sparks show convincingly that penal populism and epistemic crime control are ideological opposites. However, they equally emphasize that both have some unexpected affinities. On the one hand, the gap between populists and epistocrats seems unbridgeable. But on the other hand, both seem to close down the 'open space' of political deliberation (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 112). In a curious way, both mirror each other and believe that that there is no real room for debate, pluralist voices, and disagreement.

> Populism and epistocracy press claims that recycle and reinforce the idea that democratic politics is unable to respond effectively to public anxieties about crime, security and related problems, or find a way towards effective and legitimate solutions. They become unlikely partners in questioning the claims and doubting the promise of democratic politics.
>
> (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 112)

Loader and Sparks conclude that populism and epistocracy are 'connected pathologies of our contemporary anti-political malaise' (Loader & Sparks, 2017: 99): both impair the ideal and practice of democratic politics by disregarding the normative force of democratic procedures which are necessary to obtain legitimate forms of crime control.

The criticisms of epistemic and populist approaches worded by Loader and Sparks are in some respects remarkably congruent with Hannah Arendt's theories on truth and lying in politics. She has elaborated a political philosophy which is radically critical to populism – in her terms, 'mass politics' – as well as technocracy. Both tend to use measures that force and coerce, and undermine the promise

of politics: the peaceful coexistence of different people and their willingness to understand others' opinions during discussion. Arendt emphasizes that political action is primarily focused on imagination and its fabrications, producing various kinds of erroneous, distorting, and misleading information. She points out that deceptive speech is an inherent feature of mass communication, ranging from demagoguery and adversarial politics to PR, advertising, and promotional strategies.

Arendt points out that politics – also democratic politics – has always been a domain where deception and lies are flourishing, an interpretation which runs against modern liberal intuitions that democratic societies are free from the perils of propaganda and disinformation. She would have been astonished by current impressions that we are witnessing a breakdown of confidence in truth telling, as the labels 'post-truth' and 'fake news' indicate. These terms assume that democratic societies once enjoyed an 'era of truth' (Corner, 2017). In fact, fake news and its deployment as part of political strategy are nothing new to Western types of public communication.

In this chapter, I will present some aspects of Arendt's philosophy to clarify Loader and Sparks' 'contemporary anti-political malaise' and possible way-outs. I will lift the 'connected pathologies' of populism and epistemic control to the level of 'dysfunctional communication,' the ways in which audiences are deceived and misinformed. My claim is that these pathologies reside in the greatly increased size of tabloidized media sectors as well as promotional industries. On the one hand, these media sectors, including digital media, concentrate on the production of scandal hunting, naming and shaming, and sensationalist news. On the other hand, epistemic policy programmes have increasingly become part of governmental and corporate campaigns and promotional activities. In other words, I will take up the thread of Loader and Sparks' analysis but will zoom in on two different types of 'dysfunctional communication,' namely tabloid populism and public relations (PR) campaigns. Both types have crusading and propagandistic elements, and for that reason they seem to be inherently anti-political and fundamentally at odds with democratic deliberation, exchanging and challenging each other's arguments. In this way, I will put Loaders and Sparks' analysis in a broader sociological frame of mediatization, focusing on dis- and misinforming types of mass communication, as well as the underlying business models.

In the last section, I will point out that these mediatized systems form severe obstacles to open-minded public deliberation, and that – contrary to Loader and Sparks' criticisms of insulation efforts – deliberative spaces in social life worlds should be protected from promotional and agitational campaigning, and from a mediatized 'economy of emotion' in particular. However, this undertaking does not implicate that 'compelling truths' should determine the proper mode of public discourse. In this respect, I endorse Arendt's view that scientific methods are not the sole claimants to and arbiters of truth and knowledge. I will argue that 'publicly acceptable facts' and their recognition seem to be more important than experts' competences to ascertain factual truths.

Section 2 explores Hannah Arendt's philosophical insights, focusing on the relationship between truth and lies in politics, and the anti-politics of mass

mobilization. In section 3, the focus shifts to the advance of promotional 'make-believe' industries as well as populist outrage marketing, and various types of deception and misinformation which are characteristic of these industries. The last section discusses some problematical impacts of emotionalized media formats and the way they impair public deliberation, and draws attention to Arendt's vision on truth telling and opinion formation.

Hannah Arendt on lying in politics and the mobilization of the masses

Philosopher Hannah Arendt has examined the issue of truth and lying in politics in depth. In her extensive study of totalitarian regimes (published originally in 1951), she discussed political systems of 'organized lying' in which decision-making is focused on a permanent adjustment or displacement of reality. For example, organized lying can completely erase memories of a certain period or a certain group. Consider the removal of Trotsky from the history of socialism. In a totalitarian regime, people have lost contact with their fellow citizens as well as the reality around them. People may even ignore what their own experiences tell them and become emancipated from reality.

> The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (that is, the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (that is, the standards of thought) no longer exist.
>
> (Arendt, 1973: 474)

In modern democracies, contrary to liberal intuitions, lying is as well a natural part of politics. In her study 'Lying in Politics' – an analysis of the US Pentagon Papers, which dealt with the US role in the Indochina wars – Arendt refers to the rise of advisors, think tanks, and professional, academically educated 'problem-solvers.' These professional echelons show great self-confidence and are 'in love with "theory," the world of sheer mental effort' (Arendt, 1972: 10–11). US policymakers have immunized themselves against all kinds of facts about the interference in Vietnam and have entered a 'defactualized world' (Arendt, 1972: 36). Political leaders have come to believe so strongly in their own fabrications that they were no longer able to distinguish between fact and fiction. Arendt states that US presidents have become so reliant upon PR communicators and advisors that they are vulnerable to 'complete manipulation' (Arendt, 1972: 8). Professional, scientifically trained consultants and 'problem solvers' – later termed 'spin doctors' – dislike chance, bad luck, and contingency and want to sell their certainties to the public. In the context of the Vietnam war, these groups sought to erase all relevant inconvenient facts, and their assessments became entirely detached from reality. Arendt points out that public relations and advertising can be seen as other recent 'genres in the art of lying.' In these 'image-making' industries, an army of marketing experts is committed to 'the art of making people believe in

the imaginary.' Political slogans and stock phrases are being prepared for mass consumption, like any other commercial good (Arendt, 1972: 8).

Arendt points out that lying has been endemic in politics since its beginning. 'Lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings' (Arendt, 1972: 10). This can be explained by its focus on future potentials. Advocates of political change rely on the imagination – and the inventions that come with it – and they tend to conceal or deny troubling matters of fact. Arendt emphasizes that imagination – the ability to conceive possibilities for change and thus for acting – is a fundamentally political feature and even the very capacity for politics. This relates to her viewpoint that human action always involves beginning something new and initiating change.

She argues that we cannot escape having to manage troublesome facts in everyday life, but in this process we are receptive to political stories suggesting how factual truths can be avoided or made less compelling.

> Lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with making a careful eye to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we are not prepared.
>
> (Arendt, 1972: 6–7)

Arendt points out that truth and politics are at odds with each other. On the other hand, lies have always been considered a necessary tool for the demagogue. There is an essential affinity between lying and acting in politics, transforming facts and anticipating the future. Politics is the domain of action and brings inventiveness and novelty to the world. Imagination, spin, and lying are thus intertwined.

In her essay 'Truth and Politics,' Arendt argues that factual truths run counter to opinions in their mode of asserting validity. Truth carries an element of coercion. Truth seeking does not take into account other people's opinions. 'The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of politics' (Arendt, 1977: 241). On the other hand, Arendt notes that there is a 'stubborn residue of truth' within the political realm itself. Factual truth is established by witnesses. Their experiences can get through to us and be remembered on the basis of their testimonies (Arendt, 1977: 238). These testimonies have a positive force and a resilient quality; stories of human support and goodwill cannot be silenced, even during war time. Without testimony of witnesses, the event or fact has no reality. In this way, incidents and problems can be discussed and addressed. However, the ground of reality is extremely fragile because witnesses are easily discredited.

For these reasons, Arendt regularly questions the truth claims of experts. Politics is the realm of diverse opinions, what the Greeks called *doxa*, a constant struggle of values and interests, not a greater and greater approximation to a single

truth (which is an act of possible domination and coercion) (see Birmingham, 2007). In political space, speech matters. The standpoints of all are open to inspection. When speaking, you have to take into account other people's perspectives and be prepared to recognize and understand them (Arendt, 1977: 241). Claiming that something is right or wrong presupposes the presence of others who agree or disagree (Hansen, 1993: 210).

Violence, on the other hand, brushes aside communication and makes recognition and understanding impossible. Arendt takes violence broadly, namely as breaking off communication. Propaganda and polemic deprive persons of the medium of shared communication, and therewith of human solidarity. The subjects remain silent and are not treated as originators of meaning, but simply as objects of directives. This manipulation is not concerned with the meaning of factual truth, but uses ideology and image-making to produce a new reality (Arendt, 1977: 252). Manipulation is a *poiesis*, a method of defactualization which refutes the distinction between fact and fantasy. Moreover, using fighting words in a defactualized world proves to be effective.

> Fighting words belong to the realm of violence, and violence, as distinguished from power, is mute; violence begins where speech ends. Words used for the purpose of fighting lose their quality of speech; they become clichés.
>
> (Arendt, 2005: 308)

Arendt suggests that clichés and stock phrases address the 'desire for the superlative,' even a 'madness for the superlative,' which fascinate the masses. Slogans and rhetorical phrases also promise an escape from chaotic reality and evoke a fictitious consistent, stable, and predictable world (Arendt, 1973: 352–353; Birmingham, 2007: 35).

Despite the importance of shared communication, Arendt is not pleading for consensus politics. She is attentive to any conformism, and she is not playing down conflict. Politics is a competitive space to disagree, in which one competes for recognition, precedence, and acclaim. It involves a passion for ideas and willingness to take risks. But she points out that competition should not be ruthless; it should not imply a willingness to triumph at all costs. In that sense, we need a spirit of fighting without hatred and fanatism, and 'without the spirit of revenge' (Arendt, 1972: 167; Birmingham, 2007).

Arendt sharply criticizes mass society in which people identify themselves primarily with a mob or a movement, often held together by tribal kinship, not by the political body (the nation-state) (Canovan, 1974: 33). She turns against linguistic manipulations that aim to appeal to the underlying tribal feelings of the masses. However, after World War II, campaign politics and the mobilization of the masses changed in nature. The entertainment industry is totally focused on the 'excitability' of the consumptive masses, accompanied by an *Ausverkauf der Werte* (Arendt, 1977: 204). Those who are engaged in the 'business of deception' do not belong to the restricted circle of statesmen and diplomats, but are part of image-making industries. Thus, political lies are part of a broader sense

of imaginative deception. 'Every known and established fact can be denied or neglected if it is likely to hurt the image' (Arendt, 1977: 252).

Arendt's analysis has lost none of its urgency for today's political world; manipulation and image-making bring forward forms of defactualized communication. Many populist tribunes enter the debate as a fighting machine, without openness of spirit. When political language is pulled within the domain of *poiesis*, factual truths may lose their meaning, e.g., the possibility of paying attention to and interpreting political problems. Image-making has become the hallmark of a booming entertainment industry, in which the marketeers of mass emotion promote their imaginaries.

Two major branches of dysfunctional mass communication

In this section, I will discuss various recent developments regarding deceptive and misinformed public communication, and its propagandic elements. I will also discuss some definition issues concerning the terms *propaganda*, *fake news*, *deception*, and *misinformation*. Successively, I will address promotional cultures, and outrage instilling news deliveries which are characteristic of tabloid populism. I give some clues about how both developments may contribute to what Loader and Sparks have dubbed an antipolitical malaise.

Before proceeding, let me first explain the terms *deceptive campaigning* and *tabloid populism*. Deceptive campaigning can be placed in the context of influencing public perceptions and expectations in order to manage the reputation of an organization or company. Governmental and corporate PR agencies and their 'spin doctors' may exploit various forms of informational control, for example, presenting distorted information from a 'credible' source, or spreading disinformation about a whistle-blower. They tend to use subtle methods, which involve withholding information, distortion, and misdirection (Bakir et al., 2018; Miller & Robinson, 2019; Samoilenko, 2017). For example, PR agencies often resort to greenwashing: presenting an environmentally responsible public image of a corporation. It is known that Volkswagen, prior to Diesel-gate, had rolled out its 'Think Blue' campaign, which propagated eco-friendly mobility. Employing attention deflection tactics, Volkswagen attempted to position itself as one of the world's 'greenest' car manufacturers (Aurand et al., 2018).

With regard to tabloid populism, it is important to note that the influential tabloids – the Mail-Sun-Express triad – frequently produce propaganda based on spurious information and anti-immigration sentiment. The Brexit campaign illustrated that English politics are at the mercy of the major media oligarchs. In fact, the Murdoch dynasty functions as a political shadow empire, and no one within the political class in England can ignore its agenda (Beckett, 2016; Dean, 2013; McKnight, 2013). Against this background, some scholars have referred to tabloid populism as a

> specific ideological worldview, as well as a discursive practice and communicative genre, which is distinct from the quality press and which has been conspicuously complicit in the diffusion of populist discourses.
> (Zappettini, 2018: 5; see also Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019)

Other researchers assume that tabloids, like populist politicians, assert a rapport with the people, an ability to think and speak of them and for them (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Understood this way, tabloids not only diffuse populist messages among audiences, but also function as ideological nurturers of populist worldviews. They prioritize stories that may generate consternation and anger, which can be picked up by populist parties and their protagonists. Thus, rather than viewing populism as a label affixed to politicians and political parties, I will consider populism as a specific style of public communication that appeals to or speaks for 'the people,' incriminating and discrediting the elites (political insiders, the criminal justice establishment, etc.) and generally offering simple solutions to complex problems.

Epistocratic information control: Promotional campaigns

Propaganda and promotional strategies

The term *propaganda* carries a strong negative meaning and is considered to mean manipulative and coercive communication. Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell (2014: 4) in their seminal work on propaganda define the term as 'the deliberative attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve response that furthers the desired intent of the propaganda.'

Today, a lot of state communication concerning foreign affairs and human intervention could be regarded as propagandistic in orientation, ranging from security reports to free trade strategies. Representing warfare strategies as peaceful interventions, as was the case with the catastrophic US attacks in Vietnam (Arendt, 1972) and the Iraq invasion by a US-led coalition, count as plain forms of propaganda.

Propaganda is often contrasted with a 'free and open exchange of ideas.' Since Nazi and communist regimes used the term *propaganda*, it became associated with repressive states and enemies, such as Al Qaeda, and it functions more or less as a taboo. It is still widely believed that propaganda and manipulation belong to non-democratic states. It is also believed that democratic societies – champions of open discussion and consensual communication – rarely engage in deceptive, incentivizing, or coercive communication. Moreover, political campaigning and spin are thought to be largely unproblematic for democracy (Bakir et al., 2019: 316). It would even be unacceptable to classify promotional campaigns as propaganda. As a result, manipulative and deceptive practices such as secrecy, misdirection, and silence adopted by state bureaucracies and big corporations have so far received little attention. For example, the tobacco industry has been persistently manipulative regarding smoking risks, whereas Big Oil has deliberately obfuscated climate change understanding. Even in the military sphere – infamous for its deceptive communication – the ideal of free and veritable speech is maintained and often taken for granted. NATO's narratives aimed at maintaining support for intervening in Afghanistan are assumed to be non-manipulative. The same goes for the tendency to highlight NATO successes and to downplay its

failures, thereby deceiving citizens about military achievements (see also Arendt, 1972). In a patriotic democratic climate, pride about open and truthful virtues goes hand in hand with the belief that national celebrations and patriotic campaigns are developed with the best intentions. In reality, these celebrations are replete with distorted, emotive, and mythical ideas (Bakir et al., 2019).

For all these reasons, Vian Bakir and colleagues (2019; see also Miller & Robinson, 2019) emphasize that propaganda is a blind spot within liberal democracies, rarely recognized and researched. Proclaiming that free societies have huge political and economic branches which are occupied with manipulation and propaganda touches a raw nerve. The authors point out that the propaganda taboo has diverted critical studies and scholarship away from PR, spin, campaigning, and other forms of persuasion which contain manipulative elements. Ideological bias, whereby predominantly liberal reporters, politicians, and scholars do not perceive that their cherished 'free market of ideas' might be seriously compromised by deception and lies, seems to play a large role in neglecting deceptive and manipulative forms of communication (Bakir et al., 2019: 970). An entire euphemism industry has developed to deflect attention away from economic and political realities, ranging from spin doctoring to perception management at the military level, thereby denying that these products have anything to do with propaganda.

In this context, David Miller and Piers Robinson (2019: 975) are referring to an intellectual tunnel vision: propaganda belongs to non-democratic societies; foreign policies and NATO interventions contribute to improve human rights. In reality, deceptive and propagandistic communication – by communication departments, intelligence agency networks, think tanks, academia, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – occurs on an extensive scale and is a key strategy through which political power is exercised in democracies (Miller & Robinson, 2019: 980). However, it should be noted that these institutions do hardly fabricate bare-faced lies, but are rather involved in widespread activities as distortion, omission, and misdirection (Miller & Robinson, 2019: 977). Spin doctors are aware that lies may damage credibility: 'deceiving without lying facilitates avoiding accountability should deception be discovered' (Bakir et al., 2019: 323).

However, John Corner opposes the idea that corporate and public-sector promotional strategies are propagandistic as such. This would imply that the idea of propaganda covers virtually all of the many forms of PR and promotional discourse, while only lying 'has enough discriminating potential to allow the category of propaganda' (Corner, 2007: 675). Thus, the deliberate fabrication and dissemination of false information functions as a core factor of the category propaganda, supported by other components such as strategic selectivity. Consequently, Corner continues, propaganda cannot be described as demagoguery, nor as a Manichean rhetoric, conjuring up horrible enemies and the celebration of uncompromising heroes and patriots (see O'Shaughnessy, 2010). Nor is it correct to see propaganda as promoting irrational behaviour by appealing to the pre-rational in man (see Ellul, 1973). Corner emphasizes that the term *propaganda* is too crude and by itself inadequate to understand promotional strategies

and even distracts attention from the many specific discourses of power which are currently at work in promotional cultures and from influential misinformation components such as playing on the emotions.

Nevertheless, Corner's specific definition raises some questions. It is unclear why the persistent dissemination of one-sided information, such as the systematic disparaging of minorities, could not count as a core aspect of propaganda. Moreover, sensationalist media outlets and tabloids may also use deceptive campaigns, although these are more volatile and lack the rigor and persistency which are characteristic of organized mass communication.

The rise of promotional industries

Overall, there are good reasons to distinguish propaganda from promotional cultures and their respective discourses of power. Since the 1950s, systematic political and commercial efforts to influence populations through PR, marketing, advertising, and other rationalized techniques of persuasion have become paramount (Miller & Dinan, 2008; Davis, 2013; Cronin, 2018). There are many reasons for the spectacular growth of the promotional industry (Miller & Robinson, 2019). One is that public opinion has become a preponderant factor in legitimating political and economic decisions. The need to persuade and to gain acceptance in the contest for policy support is omnipresent, ranging from legitimating foreign policy and warfare to feigning environmentally sustainable production methods. In conditions of greater visibility, 'strategies of publicity and promotion are part of the attempt to retain informational control' (Corner, 2007: 672).

Today, marketing and promotional rationalities are characteristic for all organizations and have also penetrated in areas traditionally outside the reach of the market, such as education and health care (Davis, 2013; Cronin, 2018). These rationalities are intrinsically linked to attention harvesting, and generally, entertainment is considered as an efficient format to catch attention and keep it. Marketing and advertising can be defined as an expertise in addressing the emotionality of the consumer, 'often via a highly aestheticized imagery, with the aim of giving goods and services the power to generate strong and attractive emotional resonance in the public mind' (Richards, 2004: 340). This indicates that marketing is an 'emotional' rather than an 'attribute-driven' approach to the promotion of commodities, eliciting true customer passion. Brand culture revolves around building authentic relationships with consumers (Serrazio, 2017).

PR practitioners create and speak to consumer communities centred around a company's brand. In this context, Anne Cronin introduces the concept of 'commercial democracy': a new vernacular form of democracy that speaks the language of representation and agency but is disconnected from conventional democratic practices. 'It displaces the political and, in the public's eyes, it relocates politics, power, and agency to the popular, the everyday, and especially to consumption' (Cronin, 2018: 4). PR, advertising, and marketing promise public voice and debate through consumers' engagement with commercial brands. Up- and outvoting systems (likes, emoticons, etc.) are closely related parts of this

commercial democracy, and they function as feedback loops of engaged consumers or fandom crowds.

Cronin emphasizes that consumer publics understand themselves primarily through consumption. In this new context, truthfulness and lying take on a modified significance.

> People do not expect unvarnished truths in promotional culture … Advertising creates its own plane of reality which is neither strictly true nor strictly false … Socially embedded understandings of advertising operate as 'advertising myths' which channel a wide range of cultural and economic concerns, and thus the social impact of advertising cannot solely be assessed according to issues of truthfulness or mendacity.
>
> (Cronin, 2018: 110–111)

The author relates this development to a post-truth condition in which fantasies and delusions are taken for granted. Obviously, 'make-believe products' are just entertainment and are not associated with lies. Promotional cultures rely on emotional engagement – evident in appeals such as 'make America great again' or 'take back control' – rather than on the ability to assess the veracity about any specific claim or data. Thereby people tend to identify with trustworthy representations of commercial democracy, all the more so when they feel that the promises of politics as usual have been compromised (Cronin, 2018: 115).

Tabloid populism and outrage marketing

Fake news and propagandic campaigns

Fake news is an umbrella term for deliberately crafted fabrications with the intention of influencing public opinion (McNair, 2018: 30). Fake news is often surprising and bizarre, and aims to create a scandal or a stir. In many respects, fake news reflects the accusing, emotional frame of tabloids. It clearly deviates from the biased and bold ideological vocabularies of powerful political movements and parties that Arendt examined.

Fake news is part of a broader category of disinformation, related to the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false, revealing a wilful attitude to mislead, including manipulation and deception (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In the context of political campaigning, disinformation is often related to news devised to defame authorities, for example, high-profile hoaxes claiming that President Emmanuel Macron was being funded by Saudi Arabia, had opened an offshore bank account in the Bahamas, and was in a relationship with his step-daughter (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

In the last decades, the digital media networks have proliferated and intensified the scale of fake news. Some features of media ecology have stimulated this development (Bakir & McStay, 2018). First, the 24-hour news cycle, including

the discharge of non-stop breaking news, tends to encourage the use of unchecked PR material and page-ready content. Second, more and more news stories contain emotionalized content and visuals which elicit affective reactions in social media audiences. Third, a growing number of people are profiting from online advertising.

According to Andrew Chadwick, fake news – together with social media bots and politically motivated hacking – belongs to 'the dark frontier of the hybrid media system' (Chadwick, 2017: 272; see also Bakir & McStay, 2018). However, only a small fraction of communication in this hybrid system concerns fabricated fictitious news. By contrast, misinformation, related to behaviour that inadvertently misleads and distorts (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019), seems to be an ineradicable aspect of news creation and sharing. When dealing with heated political debates, scandals, and breaking news, many news outlets fail to adequately inspect information, exaggerate the event, or start speculating and disseminate rumours. The domain of misinformation consists of poor journalism, satire and parody, provocation, emotional involvement, and inflammatory expressions. Emotional involvement seems to be a prominent engine of misinformation, although motives to disregard the rules of careful reporting may also relate to partisanship, power, and profit (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019).

Media outlets which systematically trumpet lies about political opponents, such as Fox News, are sometimes labelled as propaganda machines. In the late 1990s, Fox News switched to persistent campaigning for armed interventions in the Middle East, systematically disseminating false information about Iraq, including all kinds of fabrications of nuclear weapons (McKnight, 2013: chapter 8). Another example is the spread of the so-called 'Birther myth' that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and would therefore be an illegal president. Fox News presented 50 items on this topic in 2011 without any correction (McNair, 2018: 50, 78).

However, propagandistic campaigns do not function as a dominant strategy in Fox News and related tabloidized news outlets. Generally, Fox News talk-show presenters tend to agitate and provoke, trying to denounce elites and their political correctness, and highlighting the virtues of rebellion and competition. Truth and fiction, facts and fantasies are constantly mixed together. However, compared with the propagandistic overtones of tabloid campaigns – as was evident during the Brexit crusade – online platforms and social media have far more possibilities for the application of disguised propaganda methods: creating disinforming postings, thereby using false identities and hidden sources, etc. (Farkas & Neumayer, 2018; Daniels, 2009).

Congruence between tabloid and social media news reporting

Many researchers see the expansion of social media and digital news provisions as a revolutionary change, which has introduced a new media culture. Social media are depicted as a platform of the voice of the ordinary people. It is even assumed that fake news and biased news stories which circulate in the media

sphere nowadays, are derived from social media and the internet, and subsequently picked up by mainstream media. However, much evidence points in the opposite direction. There is a strong case to be made to assume that classic tabloid formulas have enlarged their scope and have left their mark on social media communication. Although scandal hunting and naming and shaming methods have traditionally been viewed as 'archetypical tabloid news practices,' they are now practised by a multitude of online news and social media sites. These practices, premised on maximized exposure and moral outrage, have become the basis of a new business model that has been adopted by nearly all news outlets (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017; see also Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). A contributing factor is – as pointed out in the introduction – that tabloids have successfully entered the ad revenues market. As ever, they excel in crafting articles with sensationalist headlines and attention-grabbing images and topics.

In a comprehensive study, Chadwick and colleagues found that dysfunctional news-sharing behaviour is a potential outcome of the tabloidization of the UK social media environment.

> Alongside fake news, there is the everyday online production and circulation of information that is exaggerated, sensationalized, selective, or assembled from a web of partial truths in hybrid networks of reputable and less reputable sources … In the United Kingdom, the inconvenient truth is that key among the media that matter are articles published by large-circulation, mainstream tabloid outlets, whose daily stock-in-trade has always been news of dubious civic values. Tabloids have played significant roles in shaping British political life, and there are few signs they are giving up their long-standing political missions.
>
> (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O'Loughlin, 2018: 4258–4259)

The authors refer to a study indicating that the 100 most-shared news stories on social media about UK politics in 2016 revealed no evidence of fake news fabrications, but contained a great deal of problematic content taken from tabloid newspapers (Chadwick et al., 2018: 4259). The most venomous example was an article published by the *Daily Express* titled 'Major leak from Brussels reveals NHS will be KILLED OFF if Britain remains in the EU.' Whereas many researchers assume that tabloid dominance has considerably reduced – as a consequence of declining print circulations and expanding online news organizations – the authors emphasize that tabloids attract huge audiences to their websites and mobile news applications, and that tabloid news brands are thriving online. The *Mail* and the *Sun* reach about two-thirds of the total digital audience in any given month. The advent of a new generation of independent news websites such as *Buzzfeed*, *Vice News*, *Huffington Post*, and *Breitbart* does not diminish the fact that tabloids have successfully adapted to digital shifts in the circulation of news.

Concerning the issue of motivations for sharing exaggerated or false news, the research of Chadwick et al. points out that many social media users want to disrupt the rationality and veracity of political discussion and decision-making. As

AU: Regarding your query on 'the Sun', the article is newspaper and magazine titles are lowercased and set in roman font when the title appears as part of a sentence.

a matter of fact, those with civic motivations also tend to share exaggerated and fabricated news. The authors also found that misinformation is quite likely to go unchallenged. Social media correction is far from satisfactory and is unlikely to become widely practised. They suggest that these tendencies symbolize a 'tragedy of the social media commons.'

> Over time, this may lead to low levels of awareness of the quality of different news types, a damaging cultural expectation that 'anything goes' when sharing news online, and the impossibility of establishing a common ground of facts that enable citizens to engage in meaningful discussion across political divides. In short, animated by tabloid news, politics on social media may become a shouting match – of the deaf.
>
> (Chadwick et al., 2018: 4271)

There are many similarities between tabloid blaming and shaming strategies used in tabloid campaigns and those of vigilant mobs on social media. Current forms of misinformation in social media seem to be a continuation and intensification of tabloid styles and tropes. An American social researcher, Whitney Phillips, found that there is a rhetorical overlap between trolling subcultures and mainstream journalistic activities such as sensationalist disaster coverage. In particular, the creation of meme generators like Oprah Winfrey's 'over 9000 penises' allowed troll subculture to become visible, accessible, and marketable. Facebook memorial page trolls – RIP trolls – 'enact a grotesque pantomime of precisely the corporate logic that transforms tragedy into a business opportunity' (Phillips, 2015: 71). For example, RIP trolls disproportionately provide news about white teenage suicides and murdered or kidnapped white children. As in mainstream media is the case, white, middle-class, and photogenic victims seem much more marketable.

   Phillips emphasizes that there are striking similarities between 'ostensibly aberrant trolling behaviours' and behaviours normalized by media outlets such as Fox News and its agitated anchor-men. Both invest in spectacle, push for success, deploy emotionally loaded language, and exactingly exploit the human-interest angle. In fact, expressing provocative issues such as 'LOLing' at tragedy, misogyny, and racism can be seen as parroting tabloid tropes. However, the sub-culture itself often embraces the obscene, racist and sadistic aspects of 'lulz' – i.e. Schadenfreude – and is caught up in fetishist humour which does not really appeal to massive audiences, and which mainstream news outlets cannot afford to popularize. This may explain why exploitative behaviours by trolls are generally condemned, whereas those of corporate media are often 'accepted as being par for the capitalist course' (Phillips, 2016: 68).

The economy of emotion

The above does not cancel out the fact that social media have brought significant changes in technology affordances (search engines, algorithms, software robots, etc.) and its aggregative capabilities. Examples of these are filter bubbles which

tend to focus user attention only on those contents which match their interests, and mobocratic tendencies which re-forge individual users into 'online crowds' of partisan supporters (Gerbaudo, 2018). With this in mind, Vian Bakir and Andrew McStay point out that the contemporary information disorder thrives on an 'economy of emotion.' There are many economic incentives to produce emotion-activating messages and visuals which correspond with group behaviour in networks, gauged by technologies such as facial coding, voice analytics, biosensors, and analysis of emotions in words and images. Networked communication adopts technologies that pertain to record and assess emotions (Bakir & McStay, 2018). In this way, the possibility of manipulating public sentiment by using emphatically optimized news fabrications has become an acute problem (McStay, 2018).

Big Tech giants have a special interest in mediated emotional life and have developed emotion-recognizing artificial intelligence and media products such as home assistants and headline-grabbing humanoid robots, which are permeating human–computer interactions. These technologies are increasingly able to track emotions and gauge emotional tastes (McStay, 2018). There is a growing emotion micro-targeting media sector, including conversation analytics companies such as IBM, Cambridge Analytica, Crimson Hexagon, and Narrative Science, which is ready to offer 'empathically-optimised automated fake news' (Bakri & McStay, 2018). As is well known, prior to the 2016 scandal, Cambridge Analytica boasted that the firm could categorize people according to their personality type and mental makeup, thereby opening up chilling possibilities of affective management and emotional control. The application of this personality-type micro-targeting was destined to support the British 'Leave' campaign and Trump's campaigns during the US presidential election in 2016 (Zuboff, 2019: 277). In the light of the above, it is not surprising that many researchers, journalists, and politicians fear that the role of digital advertising and emotion targeting in causing disinformation may result in the deterioration of the quality of public opinion formation.

Conclusion and discussion

Promotional and agitational mass media: Some comparisons and problems

I have dealt with two different branches of mass media, one focused on promotional strategies, the other on outrage marketing. Each of the two branches has its complexities, specialities, and subdivisions, so it is almost impossible to make meaningful comparisons. What follows is only a rough sketch. First, both branches depend on campaigning, although for different reasons. Promotional campaigns comprise expert-led persuasion techniques in order to obtain informational control. By contrast, tabloid campaigns – including tabloidized news in social media – comprise sensationalist and embarrassing news items, thereby generating agitated publics and mobs. In many respects, both branches are each other's opposites. Populist media outlets aim to tackle and undermine 'the establishment' and often rely on attack and 'make war' frames ('enemies of the

people'). On the other hand, promotion and PR industries form a control system, managing sale and support strategies to get to grips with customer behaviours. They enforce adhesion and loyalty by stimulating authentic and unique feelings.

In spite of these differences, there are remarkable links between PR and tabloid campaigns: both revolve around emotion marketing, although pushing it in opposite directions. PR aims to adapt and mould customer feelings and experiences, while tabloid outlets have embraced a business model of provocation and moral outrage. More importantly, both are part of anti-political trends: promotional industries create homogeneous brand-oriented publics, cultivating non-political identities; tabloid media claim to represent the voice of the people, thereby brushing aside the ideals of reasonable deliberation as 'elitist,' 'fake,' or 'misleading.' For these reasons, I think the two branches can be dubbed rightly 'connected pathologies of our contemporary antipolitical malaise.' Both pretend to be democratic, using 'the audience decides' and 'your brand' formulas, in deference to the likes, tastes, and rankings of 'the people.' However, in reality, pluralist views on social problems are denied, whereas the need for settlement of conflicts and citizens' responsibilities to keep public institutions intact and vital, are disregarded.

The developments discussed above can be defined in terms of mediatization, a process in which social institutions are saturated and inundated by the media (Hjarvard, 2013). Social institutions such as universities, charities, health services, and the marginalized 'quality press' have become more and more dependent on public attention formats and styles which are characteristic of 'media logics,' such as simplification, entertainment, and personal drama. Generally, mediatization theorists have ignored the economic dimensions of this process, the marketization of imaginaries, stock phrases and visuals, and the control that private corporations, often part of major communication conglomerates, exercise over public communication (Murdock, 2017; Hyvonen, 2017). Non-commercial media have also become part of these marketization trends, using advertisements and sponsor messages. Correspondingly, there is an incessant dissemination of mediatized commodities which penetrate consumers' life worlds (Jansson, 2002).

For adequate analyses and responses to these colonizing forces, we rely on the 'good old' practices of critical social theories, including critical criminology: highlighting harmful activities of powerful actors, and, if necessary – to use Loader and Sparks' terminology – initiating 'heated up' discussions about secrecy and corruption in those branches. Critical criminology investigates networks of powerful individuals and institutions, the ways in which they campaign, lobby, and shape the public agenda, and also the ways in which they impair democratic politics and distort public debate.

This last point is of importance in this context: spin doctoring, PR, and campaigning run counter to discourses and conversations in public forums, social institutions, and life worlds. Mediatized imaginaries capture citizens in their role of consumer, and do not appeal to their deliberative capacities. Nor do emotionalized mass media formats stimulate citizens' willingness to take account of other peoples' perspectives. Hence, some authors identify a deteriorated quality of public communication (Santos, Louçã, & Coelho, 2019), whereas others perceive a 'commercial

expropriation of the public sphere' (Buroway, 2008). We may conclude that healthy public deliberation – as proposed by Loader and Sparks – is hampered and distorted in many ways by the dysfunctional forms of mass communication sketched above.

Insulationism?

This necessitates the appraisal of Loader and Sparks' rejection of 'insulationism': creating buffers against emotive public sentiments. I want to say first that I sympathize with the authors' belief in the immanent possibilities of democratic politics and with their criticism of the idea that criminology could function as an antidote to 'illiberal heat' and 'vicious politics.' We should not place our hopes in insulated institutions of policy formation, guided by agents of reason and expertise, the 'privileged knowers.' However, we could view insulation in another way, namely as efforts to safeguard spaces of public deliberation from media powers and their commodified imaginaries. I think there is a strong case to be made for protection against sensationalist mediatized images around issues like immigration and crime, as well as protection against promotional strategies, capitalizing on feelings of anxiety and threat, in order to sell more social safety programmes (ranging from facial recognition technologies to G4S services). We are in dire need of uninhibited spaces of public opinion formation which can facilitate deeper democratic deliberation. Deliberative polling is an option, although here, again, the epistemic elements are given priority too quickly (Van Stokkom, 2012). It seems more important to create deliberative spaces which draw upon citizens' judgement capacities and their preparedness – as Arendt calls it – to think representationally.

I believe Loader and Sparks are in some respects too eager to dismiss the idea of 'insulated spaces' (Loader & Sparks, 2010: ch. 4; Loader & Sparks, 2013). In a recent publication, they again criticize efforts to remove 'intrinsically contentious and impassionate issues from the heat of public combat in order to mitigate the worst effects of emotionalism and political gaming' (Loader & Sparks, 2020: 109). The authors argue that protagonists of this view 'inevitably want to reduce the scope of democratic politics.' I do not think that this is necessarily the case. On the contrary, the scope of politics can be widened by excluding mediatized formats and frames, thereby stimulating the exploration of controversial issues, and what Loader and Sparks call 'democratic experimentalism.' Thus, my claim is that not all types of insulating should be regarded as species of contemporary anti-politics. Although emotions are inevitably part of any deliberation and, as a consequence, it is impossible to insulate impassionate standpoints (Van Stokkom, 2012), deliberative settings could be organized in such ways that they minimize the replication of mediatized monologue-type shouting matches and related excitement formats.

Moreover, heated debates in mass media campaigns risk reducing political issues to rigid pro and contra viewpoints and encourage citizens to respond in a predictable way: to applaud or condemn. This is confirmed by research into 'partisan branding': magnifying political struggles in dualistic terms forecloses the

willingness of citizens to explore the complexity of public issues and to interpret deviating phenomena. Ultimately, only the limited emotional repertoire of anger or empathy is used (Karlberg, 2002).

The challenge is to develop alternative communication services and (net-worked) spaces of deliberation which enable citizens to debate public questions as fully as possible, such as the future of punishment and crime control, as much as possible freed from detrimental news formats, clickbait, advertising, and micro-targeting strategies. Perhaps the first internet initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s – prior to the advent of commercial internet empires – and non-profits such as Antenna Networking and Free Press Unlimited could serve as an example. On the other hand, researchers, professionals, and experts could consistently criticize the confrontational formats of talk shows and refuse to cooperate with journalists who have the urge to deliver sensationalist news coverage.

Publicly acceptable facts and opinion formation

Philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2018) and many other protagonists of agonistic politics – a political current which emphasizes positive aspects of political con-tests – point out that we do not need necessarily more truth, but rather spaces for a vibrant clash of political positions. They criticize our post-democracy predica-ment, in which politics is reduced to technical questions to be handled by experts, thwarting meaningful popular debate. Some of them emphasize that truth-based solutionism is hostile to the democratic ability to give voice to different political projects and groups (Farkas & Schou, 2020). In many respects, this agonistic perspective comes close to the enactment of politics which Loader and Sparks envision. However, agonist politics might lead to further militancy and polariza-tion, and it remains unclear how a divisive society can be held together. I think Arendt's vision is more promising because she emphasizes that contestation takes place in political settings which belong to all citizens, guaranteeing a unified pub-lic sphere (Roberts-Miller, 2002). This reflects the civic republican component of her philosophy, which is lacking in agonist and liberal political theories.

As I set out earlier, Arendt's philosophical approach is helpful to interpret current forms of 'anti-politics.'.= She maintains that the political domain is increasingly captivated by spin, PR, and advertising industries and that the *demos* is approached as a consuming mass. In addition, she points out that political players are seduced to tell mendacious stories, because their future-focused rhetoric is imbued with imaginative thoughts. Compared with idealistic perspectives on public commu-nication (such as Habermas' precept that 'participants must mean what they say' [Habermas, 1998]), Arendt pays far more attention to the inherently deceptive fea-tures of politics and the troublesome role of epistemic expertise, which tends to seize control over public communication. She makes clear that presenting facts in veritable ways does not depend on expertise but rather on the trustworthy expres-sion of disconcerting experiences and its recognition by the audience.

Finally, some words about this last issue. In 'Truth and Politics,' Arendt (1977) pits persuasive opinion against evidence and declares the former as the proper

mode of discourse. She criticizes the idea that scientific methods are the sole arbiters of true knowledge and that proof is our sole access to truth in the political realm (see Zerilli, 2006). The key is to make factual truths meaningful in such a way that the public acknowledges that something is the case. Hence, Arendt did not exclude truth claims as such from the political realm, as Habermas (1977) mistakenly emphasized. The point is that she uncouples these claims from the speaker's ability to ascertain the validity of statements. Importantly, she maintains that revealed factual truths have short lives when they are not acknowledged. Often, the matter-of-fact revelation of dramatic facts by news presenters remains misunderstood or meaningless. This shows that the issue revolves around transforming truths into 'publicly acceptable facts' (Zerilli, 2006). And this explains why Arendt highlights the role of witnesses who are prepared to speak forthrightly about their experiences and the problems they have faced. Their stories might engender a common understanding.

If we want to reinvigorate politics, it is important that citizens are given the floor and talk about their problems and worries. In this context, 'The parliament of the invisible,' a project initiated by Pierre Rosanvallon (2014), is exemplary. Non-consulted citizens are invited to tell their stories about injustice and deprivation, and to reveal their needs. Rosanvallon points out that these personal forms of representation – possibly complemented by literary and documentary forms of representation – could be integrated into political opinion-forming. This approach makes clear that politics is about public recognition of experiences of those who have been wronged or have witnessed misconduct. It might be conducive to a better politics of handling crime, corruption, and deprivation.

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