A Political Theory of Post-Truth

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To my Grandmother Antanina Volungienė (1935–2018).
Who always cared—in her own special way.

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All academic things notwithstanding, life has a tendency of putting one's comfortable ivory tower into perspective, forcing a reconsideration of both the substantial and the temporal limitations of what one is doing. Hence, above everyone else, this book is dedicated to my Grandmother who died when I was midway through the process of writing this book. After all, even within post-truth there must be some kernel of materiality. And the ultimate kernel of materiality that cannot be feigned is that of life and death. Life and death of our own and life and death of those whom we hold dear. We may live on as mental or digital effigies but that is an entirely different matter.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This section of the book postulates a clear break with cultural tradition, caused by post-truth, and locates some of the book's key arguments in the context of already existing literature. Attention then shifts towards a consideration of what it means to provide a political theory before outlining the structure of the book.

Keywords Enlightenment · Truth · Political theory · Enjoyment Freeden

The Enlightenment is now truly and properly over. Of course, both historically and culturally, it has been over for quite some time, at least since the Romanticism. However, even the romantics aspired for some higher Truth, albeit subjective and not necessarily rational. Truth still existed as an aspiration, even with a capital 'T'. In a very roundabout way, the Enlightenment still lingered, later inspiring positivist thinking and progressivist ideologies. Indeed, 'modernity saw the ascent of reason, the birth of the modern sciences, with their search for 'objective knowledge about the world' (Berthon and Pitt 2018: 220), seemingly leaving no room for alternative, emotion- or belief-based social worlds. Nevertheless, we now increasingly have to deal with a post-truth condition. Admittedly, establishing such an absolute distinction—indeed, an opposition—between the present and the preceding historical and cultural tradition might seem pretentious (and it perhaps is) but this

opposition nevertheless serves a serious purpose, namely, isolating the essence of the present condition and exploring the ways of thinking and acting that set the present age apart, to a degree embracing an otherwise bold assertion by Berthon and Pitt (2018: 220) that 'rationality is a function of particular cultures and times'. Indeed, it must be accepted that '[e]very society has its founding legends that bind it together, shape its moral boundaries and inhabit its dreams of the future' (d'Ancona 2017: 31), those legends standing beyond verification and factual accuracy. The Enlightenment and the scientific revolution have displaced the primacy of myths with hard facts that, however, cannot have the same emotional, even visceral, appeal. Hence, post-truth does signal something that is both 'post' and a return, a re-legitimation of arguments based on their emotional appeal and symbolic value and subjective rather than impersonal truth. To that extent at least, the Enlightenment is really dead. After all, this book is about a foundational rupture characterising the social world that we live in.

It might well be that '[y]earning for "Truth" […] is one of those cyclical things' that come to the fore of attention 'when we feel we've somehow lost the collective ability to distinguish truth from lies, fact from opinion' (Marsh 2017: 192). Of course, as Baggini (2017: 7) correctly notes, the very fact that post-truth is talked about demonstrates that truth still matters. That is entirely correct. However, the mere fact that something is the object of enquiry does not automatically mean that it is a current feature of our lives. For example, the fact that Medieval or Ancient Greek studies are vibrant disciplines does not imply that we still live in Ancient Greece of the Middle Ages. In fact, as will be demonstrated in this book, truth is not discarded completely, i.e. post-truth does not have to involve discarding truth and embracing lies; it refers, instead, to the blurring of distinction between the two. Hence, it is the ambition of this book to move beyond the ubiquitous oversimplifications of post-truth as well as narrow emphasis on its crudest manifestations, such as 'fake news'. Instead, post-truth is seen as deeply embedded in everyday practices and developments (most notably, mediatisation) and innermost human drives (primarily, the striving for pleasure as a means of persevering in existence). Hence, what matters is how we experience and emotionally connect with information. Moreover, there is a need to resist apocalyptic diagnoses of e.g. 'cynicism and defeatism' in the acceptance of our inability to distinguish between truth and lies (Baggini 2017: 7–8), which presumably leads to relativism that only further

reinforces post-truth. In fact, there is very little passivity in the visceral following of post-truth narratives displayed by audiences across different countries. In fact, the power of post-truth lies precisely in inciting optimism and action in the audiences, even if that inspiration is escapist in its nature. Thirdly, the book aims to demonstrate that post-truth is universal regardless of political conviction, challenges assertions that e.g. 'the great political schism to divide Western societies switched from being a left-right one to being about liberalism and populism' (Davis 2017: xii). Instead, one should be careful not to overly ideologize the division or think of it in terms of incommensurable dichotomies. This is also not a book about Trump (although he often lurks in the background) or bullshit (so often used in catchy titles of publications on post-truth). The author's aim is to simply craft (and graft) an understanding of post-truth that is as fine-tuned as possible, achieved primarily by bringing it within the ambit of political theory and media and communication studies but also drawing from domains such as aesthetics and neuropsychology. Hence, this book also manifests a need for interdisciplinarity in order to develop new and creative ways of thinking about politics (also see e.g. Ryan and Flinders 2018: 145).

The need to better conceptualise post-truth is even more pressing in the light of likely future developments, particularly should we approach what is now known as post-work: a situation where technological factors (primarily, automation and artificial intelligence) as well as environmental pressures cause a shift away from current working patterns to an extent that human labour is either eliminated or reduced to a minimum, maximising available free time. However, contrary to the utopian future of artisanship, joyous leisure and engagement in meaningful social and cultural activities painted by the optimists (see, characteristically, Beckett 2018), this will be an environment in which the demand for enjoyment and immediate gratification prevails, and the extra time available will have to be structured through new routines and narratives, leaving even more nodal points for post-truth narratives to enter circulation.

But what does it mean to construct a *political* theory of post-truth? The answer to that question is inspired by Michael Freeden's book *The Political Theory of Political Thinking* (2013). Freeden locates politics in a field of concepts that are essentially contestable and, therefore, need to be *de*contested, the latter seen as 'the process through which a decision is both made possible (accorded an aura of finiteness) and justified (accorded an aura of authority)' (Freeden 2013: 73).

Following from this assertion, it is not surprising that there has to be 'an explicit or implicit competition over the control of political language' (Freeden 2013: 72), which Freeden associates with ideologies while this book accords largely the same function to order-inducing narratives or any sort. Nevertheless, it is agreed that the main endeavour is to 'monopolise meanings concepts carry', such control being 'a basic feature of thinking politically' (Freeden 2013: 73). As a result, one of the key foci of this book is precisely on how post-truth narratives work in helping structure the world to give it an attractive aspirational meaning. Moreover, decontestation naturally points towards another observation—that '[t]he underlying rationale of politics is the quest for finality and decisiveness', although this quest is 'permanently frustrated by the slippery and inconclusive circumstances in which that quest occurs', always having to 'confront contingency, indeterminacy, and plurality, and make do with partial, temporary, and disintegrating arrangements, even when they are not immediately visible as such' (Freeden 2013: 22). It is indeed agreed in this book that inconclusiveness, contingency, indeterminacy, and plurality are the underlying features of political life, and that is precisely where post-truth narratives come into play, supplanting these actual conditions with a fantasy of mastery and coherence, endowing the world with seemingly undeniable sense and purpose.

To the political domain pertain the actions of first 'constructing a symbolic sovereign collective identity' and then, within that group, according significance to key variables, particularly through 'ranking social aims, demands, processes, and structures in order of importance and urgency'; creating, disbanding, and evaluating subgroups, articulating 'cooperative, dissenting, competitive, or conflictual conceptual and argumentative arrangements for groups' as well as determining policies, collective plans, and visions for the future (Freeden 2013: 35). This broad process of creating the conditions and frameworks for collective human life and its ordering provides the backdrop for the analysis of the main features and roles of post-truth in today's societies.

Ultimately, the ordering function of politics is, in line with Freeden's argument, seen as being about provision of imaginary finality and fullness through ultimate authoritative decisions that 'create the illusion that indeterminacy does not exist' (Freeden 2013: 22, 72). Therefore, thinking politically 'encompasses all thought practices that engage in *self-designation* as *the first and final* source of social order and of

decisions that possess an ultimate trumping quality'—essentially, the political equivalent of the 'big bang', making it futile to ask questions of what was before just as weal as if there was no before (Freeden 2013: 94). This 'arrogance', as Freeden calls it, is also applicable to post-truth which, as creation and presentation (as opposed to *re*presentation) of reality places individuals squarely within its own narrative universe, becoming the basis, upon which any decisions are come up with and enacted.

Admittedly, all of the above is characteristic of politics and political action in general and not exclusive to post-truth. Hence, construction of a political theory of post-truth involves not only demonstrating how post-truth fulfils the political criteria but also what the *specific* post-truth way of doing so is and what impact on political life it has.

1.1   Structure of the Book

Chapter 2 is aimed at exploring the nature of post-truth and placing it within a broader social and media context. Post-truth is taken to refer to a general condition of detachment of truth-claims from verifiable facts and the primacy of criteria other than verifiability in the audiences' decision to affiliate themselves with a particular truth-claim, such claims being pitched to audiences as narrative fictions that constitute their own lived realities and explain the world. In such an environment, getting audience attention is crucial, and the effectiveness of assertion of a truth-claim in itself becomes the key criterion of truth. Essentially, something becomes true because people believe in it and act as if it was true because they *would like* it to be true. In this context, polarising affiliative content enables the communicators to break through the clutter that has filled today's information landscape. On the side of the audience, meanwhile, 'online huddling' of the similar and the ensuing filter bubbles are seen as particularly effective in making the audience convince themselves of the valency of the message. Hence, it is possible to conceive of a truth market where the most attractive (enjoyment-maximising) proposition lures in the most customers. Moreover, it is asserted that the propositions themselves are not made randomly but, rather, are informed by a careful analysis of the target audience, determining in advance its feelings, tastes, anxieties, preconceptions, and stereotypes, thereby allowing the communicator to maximise expected audience satisfaction and observe reactions to the promoted claim in real or near-real time. The preceding is to be located within the passage from the Information Age to the Experience

Age, whereby affective relations with the world increasingly dominate, enabling snap decisions on any piece of information. This affective element is seen as particularly important in understanding post-truth, bringing forth the primacy of belief and intuitive appeal that characterise the competition between truth-claims in the post-truth condition.

Chapter 3 takes up and extends the discussion of the importance of affect in social interactions. Mediatisation is employed as a meta-concept, referring to the broad process through which various societal spheres and institutions (politics included) are subsumed under media logics. No less importantly, media are seen as becoming the primary tools for social interaction and construction of shared life-worlds and, therefore, key to forming our perceptions of ourselves, of others, and of the world, largely based on affective imprints left on ourselves and on others. Politics, entertainment, and other media content are revealed to have become largely indistinguishable: other domains are constructed, ranked, searched, and accessed in and through media, changing the meaning of leadership and group affiliation, mostly to bonds based on affective investment. Likewise, the self is mediatised though digitalisation of most relations with the environment and primacy of interactions through affective digital effigies over face-to-face encounters. A theory of affect is subsequently developed through recourse to the Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza who essentially places affective capacity as the essence of human existence. The discussion of Spinoza's philosophy opens with the idea of *conatus*—endeavour to persevere in existence, which is the essence of every animate and inanimate thing. And since *conatus* is best expressed through affective capacity (the capacity to be affected and to affect the environment in return), it is evident that *conatus* necessitates interaction, directed towards something that is expected to positively contribute to *conatus*, thereby causing pleasure. Post-truth does so through the inherent aspiration to promote a positive view of the self, thus positively contributing to conatus. Due to their affiliative nature, post-truth narratives are seen to act as emotional substitutes that ground collective endeavour to persevere in being as a shared aspirational striving, thereby liberating affects from the constraints of the physical environment. The latter observation is also important in the sense that in the wake of mediatisation of social interactions, we have seen a shift from primarily bodily interactions as main sources of affects to primarily mental interactions that produce affects through technologically mediated communication. Particularly such mental interactions, by not being

able to rely on embodied 'fact', mean that affectual exchanges make the self inseparable from the other, opening up the self for influences and ushering social creation of a shared affective environment that trumps the physical environment.

Chapter 4 initially considers the relationship between representation and truth through mimesis and verisimilitude and, therefore, the appeal of post-truth narratives as they prevail even despite their non-reliance on verifiable facts. Of key importance is the imitational character and triple remove of mimesis: it is merely an imperfect imitation of an artefact which in itself is merely a reflection of the ultimate idea of the thing, making post-truth a radicalised version of always imperfect representation. The analysis then moves to the aesthetic dimension of mimesis, also focusing on its imperfection but adding a degree of audience involvement as well, whereby the incompleteness of imitation opens a gap for the experiencing subject to enter a narrative and become immersed in it, causing further emotional appeal. Subsequently, the second element of similarity of representation—verisimilitude, or truthlikeness—is discussed. From a scientific positivist perspective, it denotes what works and what does not in explaining and predicting phenomena. Even though the complete truth might not (yet) be available, some theories are more truthlike than others and, therefore, superior. Therefore, if a post-truth narrative is capable of explaining and predicting the world as it is experienced by a particular group, it can be considered valuable solely through its verisimilitude. The latter attribute is reinforced through a take on verisimilitude borrowed from rhetoric and art as closeness to the audience's perception and reception of the world. The preceding is made even more pertinent due to the human need for a pre-understanding of reality, the latter being provided by narratives that seemingly demonstrate how things are and/or should be, thereby providing the basis of individual and collective identity. Hence, politics is dependent on stories that legitimise claims and inspire to action, whatever their factual basis. The mythical narrative particularly displays significant potency because a myth is concerned with explanation and attachment of significance to people, places, and events without the constraints of justification, thereby displaying affinities with post-truth. Moreover, narratives are also crucial for the formation and maintenance of memories and the self, the latter's function being to maintain identity stable and recognisable over time, retroactively if necessary, meaning that once we have embraced a (post-truth) narrative, it is seen as always having made sense.

Chapter 5 opens with considerations of the pleasure of illusion, particularly in the context of mediatisation, and the fictional nature of all expectations and purposive action. Such fictional goals are further strengthened through imagination and identification and have, as their ultimate impetus, the striving for pleasure, i.e. persevering in existence. Given the importance of the functional-pragmatic test in the mediatised environment, it becomes clear that truth has, at the very best, limited intrinsic value. The most important element is, instead, the conatus-enhancing deficit-covering pleasure, derived from the interactions of our affective effigies (as they have been described in the Chapter 3). The preceding, of course, has the effect of establishing a plurality of competing narratives and truth-claims, all serving, in their own different ways, a deficit-covering function. However, some of the competing offerings within this narrative market have a larger share than others. Part of the explanation is in the mimetic appeal and verisimilitudinal explanatory capacity of certain narratives. However, there is also a political explanation: hegemonic entrenchment of some accounts and their positioning as the grounding of the self for large sections of the population, with the appeal to reflecting and, through that appeal, creating 'the people'. Hence, applying a framework informed Laclau, the chapter concludes with an account of formation of dominant post-truth claims.

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Post-truth: The Condition of Our Times

Abstract This chapter presents post-truth as co-created fiction in which the distinction between truth and falsehood has become irrelevant, the latter being replaced by affective investment in aspirational narratives. In this environment, statements become true if audiences desire them to be such. That leads to creation of affiliative truths—ways of knowing, capable of mobilising audiences. The task of communicators is made easier by big data analysis that provides both the relevant characteristics of the target audience and a real-time insight into the performance of truth-claims. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the advent of the Experience Age and the necessity of a subconscious emotional 'click' with content that it has brought.

The idea of post-truth has become increasingly important in describing today's political life in particular and some important societal changes more broadly. The concept itself is intended to refer to, depending on interpretation, the primacy of unverified or outright fabricated claims in political debate, lack of general regard for truth within contemporary societies, dominance of emotion at the expense of knowledge etc. Likewise, the evaluation of the post-truth condition ranges from outright rejection to acquiescence to dramatic scaremongering. The aim of

this chapter, therefore, is to make sense of this concept by exploring the changes that it refers to, taking into account its psychological, social, and technological preconditions as well as the broader context that enables the spread and the power of post-truth. Moreover, one must also take into account the shift from the Information Age to the Experience Age. In the latter, affective relations with the world increasingly dominate, from the choice of political candidates to purchase decisions, both online and offline. It is this affective element that is particularly important in understanding post-truth, bringing forth the primacy of belief and intuitive appeal that characterise the competition between truth-claims in the post-truth condition.

Running throughout this chapter is also the question of the 'post-ness' of 'post-truth', with regards to both sceptics who argue that people still desire truth and are able to discern what truth means, thereby asserting that 'talk of a "post-truth" society is premature and misguided' (Baggini 2017: 6), and reductionists who, by focusing on a single aspect, such as the human propensity to select information in accordance with pre-existing worldviews (see e.g. Ball 2017: 179), ignore the broader psychological, technological, political, and media context. In fact, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, the 'post-ness' lies in broader transformations that have led to the dichotomy of 'truth' and 'lie' being largely superseded. Hence, this chapter also represents the necessity to move beyond presenting truth and post-truth in binary opposition terms, almost like an apocalyptic battle between the forces of good and evil (see, characteristically, d'Ancona 2017: 5). Instead, a much more nuanced approach is strived for.

2.1   Post-truth as Co-created Fiction

In order to formulate a theory of post-truth, its key defining characteristics have to be analysed first. Particularly, as with any attempt to conceptualise any period 'post' something, there must be a clear break with the past, a disruption that renders previous conventional wisdom irrelevant and demands new interpretations of the present (see, generally, Griffin 2017). Hence, the task in this section is to determine what changes have taken place, particularly in the domain of political communication, and how those changes are illustrative of a broader societal condition. Indeed, should some of the more dramatic assertions be correct, post-truth would pose a significant challenge to democracy: if the justification

of government power is in the free and informed consent given to such power by the citizens, then '[t]he attitude towards information that characterises "post-truth" politics is in direct conflict with […] democratic decision making' (Fish 2016: 212). Hence, it is important to acquire a detailed, in-depth, and nuanced understanding of the condition that we currently find ourselves in.

The term 'post-truth' has, in fact, been around for a while: already in 2004, Keyes defined it as the blurring of boundaries between lying and truth-telling and, likewise, fact and fiction (Keyes 2004). However, real interest in the term only gathered pace since 2016. As Mair (2017: 3) argues, what characterises post-truth is 'qualitatively new dishonesty on the part of politicians', particularly in terms of making up facts to support whatever narrative one is promoting instead of merely being 'economical' with truth. In other words, facts are no longer twisted, reinterpreted or conveniently omitted—they are made up and presented ad hoc simply because they fit a particular story or a broader agenda. After all, in an era where no institution (or class of institutions) has a monopoly of news any more, any account of event, a trend, or a phenomenon will have its counter-account, 'underlining how social reality is represented as a continually evolving assemblage of mixing diverse accounts' (Döveling et al. 2018: 3). To put it from another perspective, people are empowered to choose by themselves a reality in which they would prefer to live; as a corollary, if reality is simply a matter of choice, opponents face an even more difficult challenge in getting their facts across: facts that contradict a chosen reality can simply be opted out from (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). In such an environment, 'truth is simply a matter of assertion' (Suiter 2016: 27), the key question being who will manage to assert their claim more effectively. It is this effectiveness that becomes a measure for truthfulness: a claim must be true simply because people believe in it (i.e. it has been asserted effectively) or because people *would like* to believe in it.

Moreover, arguing with post-truth claims is both futile and counterproductive: first, if the communicator had wanted to convey more accurate information, they would have double-checked their claims, so correction is pointless; secondly, by arguing with post-truth opponents, one only draws more attention to their persona and the claims that they are making (Davis 2017: 40). Instead of verifiability of claims, key variable here is the impression of and reaction to the speaker, managed even through nonsensical or obfuscated claims: post-truth-claims are thereby

a form of signalling, displaying particular traits or allegiances to target audiences, and this signalling is much more important that the substance of the claims used for signalling purposes (Davis 2017: 32, 76–77, 117–119), particularly if such claims are desirable and, thereby, believable for the public. This signalling function had already been mastered by creators of TV shows, whereby one has to adjust to the ever-drifting attention of audiences that are never fixated on content but, instead, tuning in on and off, randomly disengaging from and re-joining the narrative (see e.g. Bennett 2006: 413), thereby necessitating clear signals to either shift back attention or to be kept broadly in tune with what is happening. This type of gaze is even more prominent in case of social media where narrative is co-created and not confined to a particular format (usually a format that is not conducive to nuance, due to limited attention spans and/or character limit) while the strife for the limited attention is rife (see e.g. Ott 2017), contributing, among other things, to the rise in prominence of emotion and experience,[1] as discussed later in this chapter. In this context, Trump—the reality television star—was perfectly placed to transplant signalling from televised entertainment to political communication (both online and offline) as signal-laden entertainment, thereby at least partially explaining outrageous claims from Obama being the founder of ISIS to the alleged criminal propensities of immigrants (even the earlier 'birther' conspiracy theory could be seen as a signalling tool, embodying in a radicalised fashion Obama's image among certain constituencies as both racially and ideologically 'alien'). It then follows that post-truth also involves affective investment by audiences in political actors that exceeds any claims being made by those actors. In other words, a political actor becomes more than their person or political programme (which, therefore, does not need to be verifiable any more). What matters is not whether any programme elements or the persona of a candidate are true (in the Truth-with-a-capital-T sense) but how much is invested by the audience. Hence, political actors and their truth-claims become true through affective investment.

Belief and affective investment indicate that opinions take primacy over facts and 'visceral and emotional' appeal trumps truth: post-truth is, then, 'an age where politics no longer functions through rational

[1] Experience and emotion should not be interpreted exclusively in a positive sense—hatred and abuse can equally act as emotional triggers (see e.g. Warzel 2016 for a discussion of Twitter trolling).

discourse' (Laybats and Tredinnick 2016: 204) but, instead, political statements are 'carefully calculated to get attention' (Davis 2017: xii). One could (and perhaps even should) be sceptical about the implied dominance of rational discourse in the politics of the past—after all, emotional appeal, misinformation, public relations, or outright propaganda are not something unheard of. And yet, reason and veracity had at least been present as basic principles of acceptable discourse, something that had to at least be feigned (Hopkin and Rosamond 2017). Correspondingly, there was some kind of underlying shared reality that had to be either embellished or covered up. By contrast, in post-truth, political (and other) narratives simply exist without a strict relationship to an underlying reality—or, rather, they simply construct a parallel reality of their own. Such narratives exist in a way similar to works of fiction[2] that are presented as viable alternatives to the lived environment. In fact, post-truth can be seen as escapist fiction taken further than any conventional artistic work could reach—whereas traditionally fictional worlds would 'offer no pretence of being real', providing mere pleasure or, at best, aspiration (Sloman and Fernbach 2017: 261), a post-truth narrative is a fiction that constitutes its own lived reality. Thus, any claims that post-truth consists of 'misrepresentations at best, and at worst, lies', even including a routinisation of 'blatant lies' (Bilgin 2017: 55) are somewhat simplistic, since the idea of a 'lie' is itself anachronistic in the post-truth environment. Of course, at some level it still does matter whether a particular truth-claim has some relationship with verifiable facts or not. However, as long as that claim is capable of becoming true through its own effects (i.e. through producing and/or sustaining a social world that people are willing to live in), that relationship is no longer important. Hence, the prefix 'post-' does not indicate that we have moved to 'beyond' or 'after' truth as such but that we have entered an era where the distinction between truth and lie is no longer important; hence, we have also moved beyond an era when a consensus about the content of truth was possible (Harsin 2017: 515; see also Döveling et al. 2018). Certainly, it is still crucial to stress that 'truth is not a philosophical abstraction' but, instead, a central feature of 'how we live and make sense of ourselves, the world and each other' (Baggini 2017: 108). However, the notion of 'truth' has to be problematised, particularly in

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[2] 'Fiction' here and below is used to draw a parallel with an artistic genre (usually, but not exclusively, literary) rather than simply meaning falsehood, untruth, or fabrication.

terms of how truthfulness is being judged. It must be asserted that in a post-truth environment, 'truth' is what works in a particular situation, i.e. that which enables making sense of oneself and the environment in a positively enabling way. While that goes against verifiability as a key value, a social world thus created becomes true through its own effects.

It is clear that in the post-truth environment 'facts' simply no longer provide a reality that can be agreed upon (Davies 2016). Somewhat paradoxically, this development could be seen as a side-effect of 'evidence-based politics' and other fact-intensive ways of managing political debate and the decision-making process: there has simply been such a proliferation of facts and fact-producers that trivialisation was a natural consequence; oversupply has led to depreciation in value (Davies 2016). Moreover, experts themselves are not infallible—in fact, they have been wrong numerous times, and expert opinion is also prone to change with new evidence becoming available (Baggini 2017: 38–39, 77–80). Such instability can further undermine trust, particularly since it is only post-truth narratives that remain constant and stable, therefore being more comfortable to lean upon. Hence, while humans may have adapted to live in a 'community of knowledge' (Sloman and Fernbach 2017: 13), that knowledge is neither infallible nor universally appreciated. At the same time, it is wrong to assert that a large proportion of the population has abandoned fact-seeking altogether as e.g. Lewandowsky et al. (2017) claim. What *has* changed, though, is the process or the criteria through which facts are sought and interpreted. Likewise, it is also *not* the case that post-truth is merely about erosion of trust in facts without a coherent representation of reality (again, see e.g. Lewandowsky et al. 2017) or that there is 'no stable, verifiable reality – only endless battle to define it' where victory is all that matters (d'Ancona 2017: 14). To an extent, victory is truly what matters—because effectiveness of assertion is indeed key in evaluating truth-claims—but, even though reality might have become contestable, some stability must at least be strived for in order to make one's narrative appear more plausible.

All this can be seen in a broader context of promotionalism, which signals a state of commodity relations and market values being extended to cover every single domain of life; once that logic dominates and promotion becomes the norm, the person themselves, their relationships with other people and the broader environment, and political candidates as well, become truly post-truth, since honesty and lie, authenticity and spin lose their definite meanings: after all, everything becomes

(self-)promotion (Hearn 2011). This is not exclusively a political issue: in a society characterised by competition that necessitates 'hyper-competitive self-branding, bragging, hyperbole' (Harsin 2017: 515), everybody is immersed in a series of post-truth games that involve weaving narratives out of statements and (re)presentations that are made in order to induce a desired result rather than due to their relation to verifiable facts (a job interview would perhaps be the quintessential example). Social media, meanwhile, is itself based around self-promotion: you are what you present (i.e. how you promote yourself), and it is that constant self-promotion that drives content creation, making other users entertained. In terms of political promotionalism, Barack Obama would, perhaps, be one of the pioneering examples, courtesy of his constant attempt to forge a 'cool' image through immersion in popular culture, permanent self-presentation on social media, emphasis on friendships with high-profile celebrities, and a general feel-good can-do attitude— all to the extent that 'Obama's coolness was his credibility' and stood in for 'the "truth" behind his words' (Hannan 2018: 218), although the trend could certainly be traced already back to the 1990s and the rise of politicians like Silvio Berlusconi and Tony Blair (see Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999). In such an environment, someone who consciously and openly engages in self-promotional acts is 'potentially the most authentic and truthful' (Harsin 2017: 515). Also, should one understand integrity as 'a basic continuity between his or her values and actions' (Hall 2018: 396), it becomes possible to see a post-truth politician as, in a way, acting with integrity. In this respect, Trump, due to his engagement in self-promotion that is so clear and blatant that it suddenly becomes open and transparent (and that includes truth-claims that are routinely being made without regard to their factual content), can be interpreted as being more authentic and acting with greater integrity than a sleek self-presenter, such as Obama. If every thing (human and nonhuman) and relationships between them are promotable commodities, then even the sometimes outrageous falsity of claims made by post-truth politicians (Trump, of course, immediately springs to mind here) suddenly becomes mundane: if everybody engages in telling stories that suit them, if, for that reason, the line between truth and falsity blurs, then the question of veracity loses its purpose, particularly if we are simultaneously offered a story that we would like to believe in.

Certainly, even without post-truth, perceived reality tends to change and be unstable, always amenable to new information (of which there

now is more than plenty). However, in order for reality to make sense (and making sense, intuitively in particular, is crucial to the appeal of truth-claims), even such change must be explainable or at least happen in a conceivable direction. That, again, necessitates an explanatory narrative, implying that the idea of a feel-good escapist fantasy be treated not as criticism (as in d'Ancona 2017: 15) but simply as a description of actual conditions of human life. Any account of reality must coalesce into a narrative in order to appear plausible and convincing, and only in this way it can appeal to large groups of people in an effort to control their thinking and actions (Miskimmon et al. 2013). In fact, as humans, we are conditioned from an early age to engage with stories, live our lives as stories, and memorise and engage with new things as stories (Newman 2016); crucially, things only acquire meanings once they are slotted into narratives (Davis 2017: 138) that crystallise 'what were just vague inclinations into solid ideas or "truths"' by playing on 'feelings and simmering passions already present, reinforcing opinions, hardening prevailing stereotypes and creating automatic reflexes' (Holmstrom 2015: 123). Through providing a meaningful account of what is taking place, narrative proves its worth in an alternative way: by literally making (i.e. creating) sense: as Baron (2018: 196) puts it, '[e]vidence matters, but narratives are also a form of evidence'. As already noted, post-truth is exactly about narratives—escapist fictions that allow people to suddenly feel good about themselves and the world in which they live, particularly—affective narratives that answer the 'need for simplicity and emotional resonance' and 'give visceral meaning to a decision that might otherwise appear technical and abstract' (d'Ancona 2017: 17). Likewise, since humans individually typically possess relatively shallow knowledge of most areas and tend to rely on generalised information of how things operate and of 'the deep regularities in the way the world works' (Sloman and Fernbach 2017: 12), it is both important and relatively simple to fill in any gaps with self-serving information that ultimately reinterprets and twists the meanings of such regularities. The importance of a catchy narrative to a truth-claim is, therefore, paramount.

In the above context, filtering of facts and manufacturing of 'alternative' ones come as no surprise. After all, one needs to 'create new realities for which contradictory facts need to be eliminated' (McGranahan 2017: 244). There must be just one set of 'correct' facts and data and that is the set supporting the narrative that one happens to believe in. If that was not the case, if competition was allowed, then the narrative would

open itself to questioning and verification and would struggle to become effective—and effectiveness, as noted above, is a measure for truthfulness (in a post-truth context, that is). Moreover, Mercier and Sperber (2017) offer a key insight by showing how the purpose of the development of reason in early human communities has been primarily about solving in-group issues rather than strict observance of facts and data, resorting instead on 'myside bias' whereby one remains blind about flaws in one's own (or in-group) argument while being particularly good at spotting similar weaknesses in the arguments of others. It is simply pleasurable to have one's argument confirmed, and thus people seek such confirmation at whatever cost (Gorman and Gorman 2017). To that effect, post-truth can simply be seen as collective maximisation of pleasure.

Once a narrative takes hold, subsequent filtering of facts is carried out by the adherents themselves as humans have an inclination to 'look for and accept information which supports our current beliefs' (Ball 2017: 180) and ignore data contradicting strong views that are already held—a tendency, known as confirmation bias (Strong 2017: 140). If one becomes convinced of something, it is unlikely that corrections or exposure to alternative information would change anything as previous opinions will still linger as 'belief echoes' (Thorson 2016). To make matters even more complicated, self-motivated filtering of facts is often behind the so-called 'backfire effect': when people get exposed to information contradicting their deeply held beliefs, this supposed debunking actually becomes counterproductive, entrenching them in their pre-existing positions even more deeply and eventually leading to individuals reaching the conclusion that they had wanted to reach anyway (Bridges 2017; Harford 2017; Lewandowsky et al. 2017). Moreover, since a false claim is repeated even while being debunked, it is thus given new currency. Particularly if such a claim is part of a convincing narrative, over time the arguments wielded against it will fade but the claim and its narrative will remain (because it is so convincing) and will get entrenched even deeper after being repeated so many times, even by fact-checkers (Harford 2017). It simply appears that humans tend to be rather economical with their thinking capacity, opting for recognisable ideas and cues (i.e. those already present in their cognitive schemes), saving their mind from the trouble of raising difficult questions and considering alternatives (Kahneman 2011). And even for those actually willing to consider alternatives, there is ample opportunity to 'shop around' and choose one's favourite narrative, i.e. one that approximates one's beliefs and prejudices as closely as possible

(Lewandowsky et al. 2017). Hence, instead of strategies for 'fighting back', either through public scrutiny or through education or news literacy of some sort (see, characteristically, d'Ancona 2017), one should focus on developing strategies for 'living in' the new times.

There is, however, an even deeper psychological element behind the rise of the post-truth condition—one that is, in fact, central to it and characteristic to the new environment. Post-truth political narratives can easily become aspirational: just like in personal life one often pretends to possess attributes and qualities that one wishes to have but does not have, taken to a political level, such 'aspirational lies' are about the aggrandisement of the collective 'we' (and, through that 'we', of oneself), making it great (again) (McGranahan 2017: 246). Effectively, since '[t]he information we are fed is largely based on the information we choose to consume' (Davis 2017: 65), we co-create a particular information environment by consuming certain messages, and it therefore only makes sense for communicators to tap into the aptitudes that have been demonstrated by the target audience. Hence, appeals to feelings rather than facts and focus on an assertion rather than evidence (particularly when contrary evidence abounds) is an effective strategy in post-truth (Horsthemke 2017: 275). In this context, the key criterion used to make a choice between competing truth claims is whether one would (or would not) *like* something to be true (Lockie 2016). Here one encounters '*primacy of anticipation over content*' (Marcinkowski 2014: 17), and that anticipation applies to both communicators and their audiences. The communicators anticipate their audiences to have a particular reaction in response to a particular message (and that anticipation is, as will be demonstrated below, increasingly informed) while the audiences expect their innermost drives to be satisfied regardless of the substance of the message. In the end, through the use of the full repertoire of available media, 'leaders and their followers co-create news and opinion, often through 'trending' hashtags that straddle the social versus mass media divide' (Postill 2018: 8). Hence, it is crucial to understand that audiences are not merely passively acted upon by post-truth leaders; instead, post-truth is co-created through the joint interaction of the communicators and their audiences (Mair 2017). Post-truth is not manipulation of some sort—it is collusion.

To reiterate, in the post-truth condition, if a piece of information, cloaked either as a supposedly factual statement or as an insinuation, feels

like it should be true (or, rather, if one would feel good if it was true), then it simply has to be true, relation to verifiable facts being immaterial (*The Economist* 2016a; Horsthemke 2017: 276). There is just one thing to keep in mind here: this 'feel good' factor is not necessarily about picturing the world as a happy place or selecting positive information only. In fact, menacing narratives that involve e.g. plots by malicious others can have a strong 'feel good' factor as well (and are, perhaps, even more efficient in arousing and mobilising audiences). Here one may refer to perhaps the strangest conspiracy theory of the 2016 US presidential campaign: so-called 'pizzagate', a story about an alleged paedophile ring involving high-ranking Democrats and operating from a Washington, DC pizzeria. What has proved to be attractive enough to make this conspiracy theory viral on social media was perhaps not necessarily the story in itself but its role as a reiteration of archetypal malevolent elites carrying out their dirty deeds behind everybody's back with impunity. Therefore, the story suddenly made sense by confirming mistrust and generalised suspicion. Hence, the 'feel good' factor implies feeling good about oneself, about having one's own opinions confirmed and thus increasing one's own self-worth. If the truth-claim was correct, that would amount to being patted at the back and told that one's prejudices had always been the paragon of wisdom—that is what makes a person feel good about the story (even if there is nothing inherently 'good' in it) and be desperate for it to be true, thereby making it true through its own effects (which is just as good in post-truth). It should no longer be surprising that post-truth-claims tend to spread more effectively, in terms of both faster spread and wider breadth of reach, than standard verifiable ones (Vosoughi et al. 2018) regardless of the formers' relation to verifiable facts. The reason is that these claims have been specifically designed for the purpose of appealing rather than informing, particularly by answering our emotional needs, beliefs etc.—they just intuitively make sense (Ball 2017: 242). Moreover, as Vosoughi et al. (2018: 1149) suggest, the sheer novelty of such claims might play a part: generally, novelty tends to be not only attention-grabbing but also instinctively seen as a decision-making aid (one feels the need to update their cognitive schemes) and is likely to induce information-sharing (by conveying an image of somebody who is 'in the know'). As a combined effect, the appeal and novelty factors are likely to propel post-truth to the top of the agenda under most circumstances.

Because of the aspirational character of post-truth, engagement in the new politics could easily be seen as a coping strategy for those who feel marginalised as it taps into 'feelings of anger and loss, of being left behind and defeated economically and perhaps culturally as well' (McGranahan 2017: 246). This is certainly partly correct: if one was not marginalised, dissatisfied with one's social world, then there would be no need to fall for escapist fiction of some sort. Also, engagement in post-truth politics conceived of as escapist fiction opens up another potential attraction: it is a means of venting anger and frustration that is still safer, easier, and more acceptable than e.g. taking to the streets (Bleakley 2018). However, there is an inherent danger in straightforward equation of marginalisation and post-truth, namely, that post-truth thus becomes seen as almost exclusively related to social, economic, or cultural deprivation. Such ideas are not only patronising and adding to that same marginalisation—they also suggest false remedies (that reduction of inequality would in itself somehow eliminate post-truth) and false immunity (that those not displaying evident signs of marginalisation, e.g. those who are relatively well-off, are somehow naturally post-truth-resistant). Rather, the scope of marginalisation should be taken as broadly as possible. It could probably be uncontroversial to claim that each and every person can, at some point, feel marginalised in some respect (and there is also a fine line between *feeling* and *being* marginalised, but feeling is sufficient in this case). Of course, when considered from some detached vantage point, not all kinds of marginalisation are equal as some needs are just more basic than others. However, economic deprivation, lack of self-realisation opportunities, dissatisfaction with one's preferred candidate having lost an election etc. (the list could be continued almost ad infinitum) can all be causes for resentment and, therefore, perceived marginalisation, which in turn makes one yearn for an alternative world in which the problem in question has never existed or has already been solved, thus likely opting for the escapist fiction of post-truth.

An additional factor prompting people to seek for aspirational narratives that provide the fiction of empowerment is what some theorists call a condition of post-politics in which all major divisions and conflicts are seemingly obsolete (effectively, an everyday application of the 'end of history' thesis), replacing contestation with 'techno-managerial planning, expert management and administration' (Swyngedouw 2010: 225). Essentially, since '[democracy] has defeated all competing political ideologies, the only remaining political task is extending it, tweaking

the procedures, refining the process' (Dean 2014: 261). Therefore, for someone who feels marginalised and alienated, there is no prospect of substantial change but only of incremental tweaks. In fact, there is even no more conventional way of expressing the frustration and yearning for fundamental reform because there is no more vocabulary for that—only the dominant discourse of the official consensus. Crucially, the entire language of democracy avoids any fundamental antagonism and conflict and 'proceeds as if the only thing really missing were participation', seeking, in a post-political fashion, 'to individualise, displace and manage political division' (Dean 2014: 270). Hence, any form of actual or perceived marginalisation is rendered, in principle, irrelevant. In order to make such rendering (akin to discarding the opinions and lived experiences of large proportions of the population) seemingly objective and natural, 'the constitutive split of the people, the inherent antagonisms and heterogeneities', necessary for proper politics, is replaced by official surface-level consensus, interest management, and expert knowledge that supposedly stops the buck and concludes any discourse by establishing a single correct interpretation and/or course of action (Swyngedouw 2010: 225). Indeed, in that sense at least, people *have* had enough—or even too much—of experts, to borrow Michael Gove's famous phrase. After all, it seems like even communicating seemingly 'objective' verifiable information, such as numbers, statistics, straightforward calculations etc. might not hold as much persuasive power as commonly thought (see e.g. Baele et al. 2018). If the solution to the post-political problem is taking collective action to re-politicise decision-making (Beveridge et al. 2014), then mobilising around aspirational emancipatory counter-narratives is a necessary means to achieve such a goal, whether that is an inspirational ambition to 'Take back control' of the Brexiteers (with the phrase likely being associated with regaining control not only from Brussels but also from out of touch traditional elites, i.e. breaking up the status quo in multiple senses) or voting for an alternative the main substantial selling point of which is the sheer novelty and feel-good factor, as in France's Macron or Austria's Kurtz. Paradoxically, the 'postness' of post-truth is, therefore, crucial in countering the 'post-ness' of post-politics.

The caveat, of course, is that while in the pre-post-truth environment the aspirational quality of a yearning for an alternative world would have involved charting a course for action and setting forth a telos to be achieved through active striving, post-truth as a form of escapist fiction

offers immediate gratification here and now (which makes post-truth very appealing indeed). And, of course, once people get used to immediate gratification, they demand even more, refusing to be patient regardless of the circumstances. Davis (2017: 190) aptly uses the so-called Lombard effect as an example: while trying to communicate in a noisy environment, one tends to raise their voice to speak over the noise but then, since everybody does that, the noise level just keeps on rising, forcing one to speak even more loudly and so on; the same can easily apply to post-truth discourse: in the presence of competing voices, one tends to embellish their pitch to make it more appealing but then everybody starts doing the same, so something even more exciting and appealing is necessary, producing a vicious circle of gratification.

2.2   It Is True Because We Want It to Be True

Post-truth political narratives (just like 'ordinary' political narratives) would be irrelevant without groups of supporters or, at least, affiliated individuals. However, since post-truth narratives do not enjoy fixed anchoring points, being a form of escapist fiction instead, social affirmation and collective belief acquire paramount importance: if post-truth narratives are true through their own effects, they are true as long as, and *only* as long as, they are capable of producing such effects. As McGranahan (2017: 243) suggests in her analysis of Donald Trump's campaign discourse, in a post-truth environment, 'affiliative truths' take hold whereby audiences respond in ways that are 'both affective and social in creating communities of both supporters and protesters'. The result is, then, production of a 'shared persona' that transcends traditional (e.g. location or class-based) identities (Marshall and Henderson 2016: 14). The same shared nature applies to knowledge, which is usually more collective than commonly thought. As Sloman and Fernbach (2017) demonstrate, very little information about the environment is actually stored by individuals themselves—instead, it resides in the collective mind and is shared among individuals. To that effect, all knowledge is communal and, once coupled with a mobilising 'us' and 'them' twist, affiliative.

While affiliative truths are certainly capable of polarising societies along the borders of different communities of 'knowledge', pre-existing divisions can inform affiliations and/or strengthen them even further, particularly through the 'use of social media for gathering large numbers

of people online in order to turn them into a militant support base and exploit their capacity for online mass co-operation' (Gerbaudo 2018: 7). Pertinent to affiliative mobilisation could also be the 'culture war' thesis in the United States, usually seen through the lens of diametrically opposed social and religious values, including on issues such as homosexuality, abortion etc. (see e.g. Layman 1999), even though the actual depth of the divide (whether this is a contest between different cultures or within a single culture) is contested (see e.g. Taviss Thomson 2010). Hence, alternative ways of framing would involve focusing on a multiplicity of culture wars taking place at different times, depending on the most salient issue in question (race, gender, education etc.) and thus providing a less essentialist account (see, notably, Hartman 2015) or, in an even more non-essentialist manner, on the inability to agree on which values are important as such (Jacoby 2014). As a further competing explanation, perhaps clear polarisation might have simply become more visible due to increased media choice (first through the proliferation of TV channels and then through the internet) whereby the radicals have become more mobilised and engaged and the moderates more likely to abstain (Prior 2010: 263). However, regardless of the actual depth and intensity of such divides, the very presence of difference is already an opportunity for driving a wedge into the fabric of a community, formulating a truth-claim on the 'us' versus 'them' basis. In a similar manner, cultural divides seem to have played a significant role in the Brexit campaign as well, defined primarily along the lines of openness vs order (Kaufmann 2016) or cultural rather than strictly economic class (Hanley 2017; on a new way of imagining class, see Savage 2015).

Such splits within the fabric of communities are open to narrativized imaginaries of materialised biases and supposedly confirmed opinionated constructs on either side of the divide (that could be anything from nightmares of being swamped by immigrants to something that approximates economically illiterate fascist nativists taking hold). Further deepening the affiliative cleavage is the tendency that in presence of conflicting attitudes there also seems to arise a distinct empathy gap as 'people have particular difficulty predicting the preferences and behaviour of people whose affective states differ from their own', thereby attributing differences 'not to differing moral sensitivities but to more accessible social-cognitive constructs such as intellectual deficiency or malevolent intention' (Ditto and Koleva 2011: 332). In other words, not only *they* think and act differently but also they do that because they are too

foolish to understand the truth (of which *we* have a monopoly) or, even worse, they are directly scheming to make everybody's lives worse or to destroy the basis of the political community. The latter aspect not only strengthens affiliative polarisation by itself but also is open to strategic exploitation whence the appeal of truth-claims is based not on attempts to at least simulate facticity but simply on the nastiness of 'them' as opposed to the virtuous 'us'.

Certainly, individuals have always tended to prioritise certain information and certain relationships over others, including based on criteria such as proximity of opinions; instead, the major change is 'not in kind but in scale' (Laybats and Tredinnick 2016: 204). Social media in particular have taken this 'homophilous sorting' to an entirely new level (*The Economist* 2016a), since in their ecosystem networks based on affiliative truths have become particularly effective in validating themselves: members become isolated from information that contradicts their beliefs as a narrative that circulates within the group and not only unites the members in their joint belief and shared opposition to the rest of the world but also provides an entire information infrastructure that is necessary to function in (their version of) the world (see also Benkler 2007). There is also a further element of belief: not only people believe that something is the case simply because they happen to believe that this is the case, but also this belief is strengthened by the assumption that theirs is a belief widely shared within the society even if that popularity is itself more about belief than verifiability (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). Hence, the importance of affiliation and creation of narrative supporter groups acquires another facet: once one starts spending a significant amount of time conversing with likeminded individuals and consuming information shared by them, the idea of one's preferred narrative being widespread and thus correct appears more and more sustainable.

The importance (or, indeed, centrality) of affiliative truths that are then shared and spread through the use of both traditional and new media is not at all surprising, given that even in general terms 'the media constitute a *realm of shared experience*; that is, they offer a continuous presentation and interpretation of "the way things are" and by doing so, contribute to the development of a sense of identity and of community' (Hjarvard 2008: 126). The only necessary step further that had to be taken from this generic shared experience of 'the way things are' to post-truth is liberalisation of truth by way of substituting verifiability with one's intention (or, rather, desire) to believe in a claim. The inherent

self-motivated (and self-serving) willingness to believe in a claim (or in its counter-claim) can easily be explanatory of the ferocity with which those already affiliated for and against a particular narrative are willing to promote their position. Such emotional load leads to particularly intensive engagement with content. Considering recent movement, at least by some social networks, towards engagement-centric, heavily shared and debated content at the expense of curated information, the importance of affiliative truths and the power of communities created through them is only likely to increase even further: such communities will become the main vehicles of sharing information and their internal interaction with such information will push the relevant content up the pecking order of social media news feeds (see e.g. Constine 2018).

Polarising affiliative truths and political actors who have mastered the art of generating such truths are significant drivers of content access and engagement, allowing media outlets to cut through the clutter that particularly characterises social media (which are key drivers of traffic)—after all, as Strate (2014: 95) observes, 'conflict provides an exciting form of content'. As a result, it makes perfect business sense even for mainstream news media to dedicate their attention to this kind of political discourse, very often without serious analysis that would only complicate coverage and make it less attractive (Lapowsky 2016; see Romano 2017 for a case study of Australian media's coverage of anti-immigration discourse), thereby helping to sustain and propagate post-truth narratives, along with the communities that they create, simply as a means of profiteering from the post-truth condition. In fact, while divisive utterances would otherwise remain confined to networks of already engaged hard-line devotees, it is media coverage that frames such truth-claims as worthy of attention for the mainstream audience as well: after all, if everybody is talking about it, it is something not to be missed (Romano 2017: 63). That is not completely new and exclusive to post-truth: already for television, 'the search for the sensational and the spectacular' as well as dramatisation of events were of paramount importance (see Bourdieu 2001: 248). What social media has done is taking that competition for attention to a whole new level, according advantage to those already in the know how to produce the (televised) extraordinary (e.g. Trump, courtesy of his showbusiness experience, or Italy's comedian-turned-politician Beppe Grillo).

In the context of affiliative truths, it is worth noting that particularly in the online environment, and even more so on social media, the cost

of creating new communities is negligible. Such communities tend to be united by some shared desires, interests, and conceptions of the world and are, as such, self-validating, producing and reproducing desires, interests, and conceptions of the world (McGranahan 2017: 246). Indeed, this 'online huddling' and an overall retreat into communities of the like-minded (d'Ancona 2017: 49) does produce a situation where it suffices for a truth-claim to become trending for critical distance to be erased. Very often such communities are intentionally manufactured by political or business actors: such human accumulations simply exist because they are revealed through big data analysis (as demonstrated below) to share certain characteristics that are important in a particular situation (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 187). Such communities 'would not be possible without the measurement and activity assessments delegated to algorithms and statistical programs' (Passoth et al. 2014: 282) but they are nevertheless crucial for the spread of post-truth by providing a fertile ground for escapist fictions to grow.

Moreover, self-validation of online communities based on truth-claims is further strengthened by the fact that user-generated content, either posted by ordinary individuals or by 'opinion leaders' of various sorts, coexists on par with the content created by established media organisations, despite potentially differing wildly in its quality, with such information egalitarianism significantly aiding the spread of untruths and half-truths (see, among others, Lapowsky 2016; Rutenberg 2016; *The Economist* 2016a). In such an environment, information selection is based less on its authoritativeness and more on its wide circulation (Laybats and Tredinnick 2016: 205). As Hannan (2018: 220) puts it, '[i]n a discursive economy in which the basic unit of currency is a status update, popularity often carries more persuasive power than the appeal to impersonal fact', thereby becoming the predominant truth arbiter. Although one has to expand Hannan's narrow focus on status update with something more inclusive, such as content placement, to include anything that is shared, posted, tweeted, uploaded, or otherwise placed, the general line of the argument is absolutely valid nonetheless. Here it must be stated that while the advent of the social internet ('Web 2.0') promised greater democratisation, it has not only fulfilled but also exceeded this promise, bringing about, among other things, democratisation of truth (d'Ancona 2017: 47). Traditional forms of authority, particularly based on the credibility of the source (individual credentials,

institutional reputation etc.) are no longer enough because anything can be contradicted, and doubt can always be sown, dragging any discourse into 'a polarising war of facts' (Lockie 2016: 235), i.e. shifting discourse to the affiliative dimension. In this context, other criteria for trust (or, rather, belief) in the truth (actually or supposedly) inherent in the message must be found. Particularly, if one is permanently in receipt of information that is contradictory, if sets of facts are always parallel, or alternative, to one another, and both sides appear to coexist on an equal footing, then selection of sides based on one's own preconceptions and beliefs can easily seem a reasonable strategy: if there appears to be no fundamental difference, then at least one side makes a person feel good (Lapowsky 2016). The impact of the now-dominant online communication environment goes even further: not only information, both true and untrue, spreads more quickly online but also social reinforcement and positive feedback (though likes, comments, and shares) can rapidly inflate the value (including perceived truth value) of emergent claims regardless of the substance behind them (Laybats and Tredinnick 2016: 204).

The disintegration of traditional information hierarchies has been not only the result of social media's news feed design but also, more generally, of today's information environment being characterised by 'fragmentation, segmentation, and targeted content', effectively creating a 'truth market' where one can choose the most attractive offering from a wide range of options on the stalls (Harsin 2015: 330). Fragmentation of the media environment allows politicians to engage in galvanisation and mobilisation of core electorates instead of trying to attract the median voter: since there are outlets catering for almost any set of opinions and voters can be reached directly, it pays off if target audiences can be mobilised by employing 'strategic extremism', including through content that traditional media, while performing its gatekeeper function, would filter out, e.g. due to the expectation that it will be perceived as offensive by those close to the median position (Lewandowsky et al. 2017; see also Glaeser et al. 2005). Also, the prominence of traditional news media has declined due to the depletion of the ranks of news media outlets and downsizing of the remaining ones as a consequence of both the financial crisis and competition from new media (Rutenberg 2016), thus further weakening the gatekeeping function traditionally performed by the media.

Moreover, there are structural factors in social media's internal mode of operation that contribute to mobilisation along affiliative truths.

Crucially, the social media algorithms that select content displayed to particular users out of the deluge that is constantly uploaded, tend to feed content that the individual user is expected in advance (based on their previous behavioural pattern) to agree with and limit exposure to unpalatable content. Such algorithmic selection will ensure that the person is exposed to custom-made information experience that neatly corresponds with one's own pre-existing views (Lewandowsky et al. 2017), thereby creating a filter bubble where one is constantly exposed to one side of the story only or an echo chamber where our opinions (and opinions of those who agree with our opinion) are infinitely repeated back to us (Laybats and Tredinnick 2016: 204). In this way, the effect of self-validating communities and their filter bubbles is likely to be increased even further, leading to even deeper radicalisation and entrenchment in one's views (*The Economist* 2016a). To that effect, it comes as no surprise that 'social media can be perceived as an important tool of influence that can be used to shape public attitudes and behaviours' (Biały and Svetoka 2016: 30). While the latter assessment has been originally produced in the context of strategic communications and state-sponsored manipulation of information, it is applicable more broadly than originally intended: manipulation of information is perhaps simply an inherent feature of today's environment in which truth-claims produced by actors of all sorts compete for audience attention in order to affiliate individuals into self-validating communities so that they themselves can propagate the claims that had brought them together, thereby sustaining the effectiveness of one post-truth narrative or another.

Still missing, however, is an account of how affiliative truths are made to be so affiliative. It is by now clear that post-truth involves political actors 'openly tailoring a pitch to a selected segment of the population by entertaining its members with fantasies and myths that have a particular appeal to them' (Davis 2017: 115). However, even post-truth narratives cannot be created completely ex nihilo: their appeal must be based on something shared, such as selected episodes of collective memory and experiences of the past, however inadequate, truncated, and mutilated, as in nostalgia for a collective fantasy of an alleged golden age to which the community must now return, as in imperial Britain of the Brexiteers or some 'great' America of the past (de Saint-Laurent et al. 2017: 148–149). Hence, 'regimes of post-truth' can be created with particular efficiency when 'resource-rich political actors attempt to manage the field of

appearance and participation' (Harsin 2015: 331). Essentially, 'populations corresponding to beliefs and opinions are planned, produced, and managed by big data-driven predictive analytics and resource-rich strategic communication' (Harsin 2015: 330), the aim of which is to make sure that the narrative that is being constructed corresponds with audience preconceptions, prejudices, and most pressing desires as closely as at all possible, thereby almost guaranteeing success ex ante.

Meanwhile, in order to determine the characteristics of a target audience and hence tailor their narrative accordingly, political (and other) actors rely on big data, i.e. enormous sets of unstructured data that necessitate sophisticated analysis (see e.g. Chen et al. 2014; Lim 2016). Big data are defined by their huge volume, velocity (created in real or near-real time), exhaustive scope (when potentially $n=$ all, i.e. all possible data about everything), relationality (ease with which one dataset can be connected with another), and flexibility (new fields can be added or existing ones expanded) (Kitchin 2014). The expansive volume of big data is the consequence of both its generation (anything of value and interest can be collected) and, as McQuillan (2016) demonstrates, perhaps even more importantly, the data-intensive nature of the prediction-making process itself whence prediction of the likelihood of a particular action might easily necessitate correlation of hundreds of seemingly disparate features (browsing history, location, season, time of day, connections with other individuals, which also includes the relevant features of *their* profiles etc.). Mostly, big data is created by users themselves, which is a permanent process in the current era of ubiquitous connectivity: messaging records, social media posts, browsing and search history etc. as well as data generated by various connected smart devices and appliances that gather and transmit data by default is collected, collated, and analysed, sparing data users the need to specifically collect what is necessary for them, ultimately allowing for complete quantification and datafication of the subject, from their walking patterns to meals ordered and friends met (Papsdorf 2015: 995). The more convenience, user-specific tailoring, and proactivity there is in the services one uses, the more data is ultimately being collected (see e.g. Tiku 2018).

'Datafication' is a key term here, referring to a process whereby any online action is turned into exploitable data, and that data in turn becoming the epicentre of business models, either as a tradable commodity or as a key input into business planning (Lyon 2014). As Murdock

(2017) notes, although data of some sort have been used for consumer monitoring and business maximising for a long time already,[3] it is the sheer size, detail, and descriptive capacity of big data that makes it exceptional. Crucially, such data is easily commercially available, since collection, packaging, and sale of data is at the heart of the business models of many internet-based companies today, particularly those providing a nominally free service to the end user, often without the latter being aware of the use of the data that they generate (Global Commission on Internet Governance 2016: 40). As data, relating to large populations and extended periods of time, is collected, combined, correlated, and analysed, it 'can provide an extremely detailed picture of a person's life' (Global Commission on Internet Governance 2016: 31), thereby informing decision-making processes. Hence, while, in engaging with particular voters, political actors would have previously used crude categorisations that judged people by where they lived or some other macro-scale demographics, today's campaigners 'increasingly target specific individuals, employing multiple layers of data to undertake predictive analytics' (Anstead 2018: 33). Even if not necessarily building an intimate and detailed picture of every particular individual (that would be too resource-intensive and raise privacy challenges), data mining techniques are usually intended to discover patterns and trends or ascribe individuals to groups in accordance to specific traits (Xu et al. 2014) in order to then inform content creation and delivery. Such ascription to groups usually happens even without the individuals concerned being aware of the fact—one can only presume having been ascribed based on the consistency of particular messaging directed at them (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 187). And even though one might largely agree with Papsdorf (2015: 997) that data-informed decision-making leads to greater rationalisation, it is a rationalisation of an instrumental kind: maximising chances of success through choosing an optimal strategy and/or achieving the goal in the most cost-effective way but without any normative imperative. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is illustrative here: while the harvesting of user data has allowed for campaign planning in the most rational-qua-efficiency-maximising sense, it may not have led to the most rational outcome as far as electoral choices of the affected societies are concerned.

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[3]The same can also be applied to politics—see e.g. Anstead (2018).

In addition to strategic pre-planning of the message, another example of the use of big data is sentiment analysis or opinion mining: by using natural language processing tools, one is increasingly able to gather the opinions and attitudes of a target population towards a particular issue, political actor, or even a piece of information in real time (Serrano-Guerrero et al. 2015; Balazs and Velásquez 2016; Sun et al. 2017; see also Davies 2016). Such awareness of the public sentiment then allows real-time management of one's communication strategy, refining certain elements and adding or removing others to make the narrative more appealing. However, it is not only the content of one's online footprint (such as comments and messages) that matters: metadata is at least just as important because analysis and cross-referencing of connections, locations, and other factors as well as behaviour and communication patterns can reveal a detailed picture of the relevant group just as well (Bernal 2016: 246), particularly in terms of establishing correlations (causal explanations seem to be more problematic—see Lim 2016; McQuillan 2016). Moreover, results of big data analysis can be not only descriptive but also predictive, particularly when correlated across different sets (Hu 2017), and therefore be used to model how a target population would react to certain messages and how particular content would most likely spread within that population. In addition, when both the content data and metadata are analysed and combined (e.g. social media post analysis and geospatial data), precise population characteristics, distribution of views and opinions, and further segmentation of the audience (and of the message directed at each of those segments) are enabled (see e.g. Agarwal et al. 2018). And whatever data is extracted, is immediately communicated back to the audience members by offering more of what people seem to want, be it targeted advertising for consumer goods or political narratives (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 187). Post-truth communication, inasmuch as it is informed by big data analysis, expands in the same way in which product recommendation algorithms work on online shops: if your target audience likes A, it will also like B, so why not combine them under the same truth-claim.

Moreover, although production of content still involves significant skills and resources, advances in automation can make the process more efficient: just like automation is transforming most production processes, bots (or 'politically motivated software agents') can easily be deployed to both create and disseminate narratives (Woolley and Howard 2016;

Woolley 2018), and their influence has already been alleged in numerous election campaigns (Burgess et al. 2018). With the development of cognitive technology, automated production and placement of tailor-made information based on the raw materials available is a thing of the very near future. Hence, the future of data-driven post-truth is one in which autonomous software agents, powered by advanced AI capacities, automatically source and analyse data and raw information, produce precision-targeted content in whatever format necessary, supply it to target audiences, collect and analyse feedback, and readjust the content accordingly (see, generally, Wiesenberg et al. 2017; also, on automation of data analysis and its capacity to anticipate the future, see e.g. Lyon 2014). Indeed, the ability to use algorithmic content creation will allow production and modification of targeted messages on an industrial scale, particularly since audiences seem to be increasingly acceptant of algorithmically produced stories, assigning same credibility to human- and algorithm-produced ones (see Wöllker and Powell 2018). Such automation would surely take post-truth even further.

Given that there already is a major problem pertaining to the lack of transparency of the tools used for the accumulation and processing of data and its subsequent employment, primarily for reasons including protection of trade secrets (code) and the necessity of specialised skills to understand the code involved (see e.g. Dourish 2016), the disconnect between audiences and the narratives they simultaneously give rise to and fall for is only going to increase. This projected increase, in turn, only further underscores the idea that in post-truth, the relationship between truth-claims and verifiable facts is immaterial. To reiterate, post-truth is not about lies in the conventional sense (since a lie still retains a relationship with verifiable facts, albeit a negative one) but instead refers to the prevalence of narratives that only bear relation to pre-existing opinions and emotional entanglements of target audiences, creating new social worlds that are narrativised (and, as Dourish (2016) stresses, big data analysis results must *always* be narrativised to make sense) versions of the data universe that had inspired them. In fact, in a world where data is collected, used, and repurposed and decisions based on repurposed data are themselves collected and repurposed to inform new decisions, the question of whether there actually is truth beyond data and data-informed decisions that create even more data becomes increasingly difficult to answer.

2.3   From Information to Experience

If there is a certain Angst within the domain of politics or, at least, an acute sense of the unknown and unpredictable (see, rather characteristically, Farrell 2017), it is at least in part due to voting preferences in the post-truth era being formed in ways that defy conventional wisdom. Nevertheless, it is still broadly true that in ranking their electoral preferences, voters aim to maximise their satisfaction. What has changed is that satisfaction is now best defined not in terms of a utility calculus along the lines of conventional economic rationality but as maximisation of the sheer experience of satisfaction in consuming a political choice. That could be interpreted by an outside observer as either liberating or threatening (or, perhaps, both) but it is simply something that one must learn to deal with. And even though allegations of e.g. democracy being turned to entertainment date all the way back to the television era (see, perhaps most notably, Postman 1985), it is with social media that the dominance of experience has reached its full fruition.

Like any new phenomenon, post-truth did not come about completely out of nowhere. Instead, it demonstrates the impact of broader social processes, and for that reason, one of the key aspects of the 'post' of post-truth is moving beyond the so-called Information Age. Although one can still quite often encounter discussions of the Information Age and the fundamental changes it has brought about, the proposition here is that there is an even newer revolution going on. While the Information Age has been all about the ability to access and, if necessary, accumulate unprecedented amounts of information, all of that information being, at least theoretically, equally close and equally available, the Experience Age is all about interaction, momentary encounter, and instant experience-based connection with a given piece of information or lack thereof (see, notably, Wadhera 2016). The Information Age has produced an information overload, and the Experience Age is, at least in part, an attempt at dealing with it through the employment of an affective criterion: the experience of—and pleasure in—encountering and potentially consuming a particular piece of information. If today's media environment is characterised by an abundance of outlets and sources of entertainment, interactivity that allows for user empowerment and an increased feeling of self-worth, and mobility that allows for non-bounded interaction with the media (Mazzoleni 2017: 140–141), then content filtering based on experience and maximisation of satisfaction is the natural answer.

Rather than being a nostalgic—indeed, romantic—reaction to the digitised availability of the entirety of our reality (and even more than reality since the latter can be digitally augmented), fostering the rise of seemingly 'authentic' experiences (see, characteristically, Jenkins 2017), the Experience Age is about arousal of satisfaction in a general sense, enabling the consumer of information to maximise their pleasure derived from the consumption process. And that is something that providers of the information consumption experience should be perfectly capable of doing due to the amount of data about target audiences that is available, enabling the tailoring of experience (Schaap 2017).

Without stretching the argument too far, it can be asserted that, from the perspective of the audience, experience is the primary expectation: audiences have no desire of being merely passively exposed to information; instead, they expect affective connection, something that makes the story stick emotionally and allows people to be part of it (Newman 2016). The capacity to create data-informed accumulations of individuals, discussed above, also reinforces the expectation, on behalf of the audiences, of tailor-made, individual-specific, and unchallenging (i.e. not contradicting one's worldview) content. After all, if people are increasingly used to receiving information that is constructed with their pre-known interests, wishes, and preconceptions in mind, anything that does not follow the pattern is easily seen as uninteresting or even irrelevant. Hence, not only the audiences simply 'want to be entertained' (Newman 2016)—because of user empowerment, caused by primarily social media and data-driven tailoring of information, communication has to be adjusted to the 'me' age, in which 'the best content is the kind which makes the reader the star' (Newman 2016). Hence, engagement (political or otherwise) is becoming increasingly 'me-centric' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 180; see also Langlois et al. 2009; Fenton and Barassi 2011). Similar trends can also be seen to underlie the drive towards gamification in domains ranging from civic engagement to education: it is one's individual 'mission' and 'progress' and a dynamic competition which allows showcasing oneself that engages people in such activities, making them crave for more (Papsdorf 2015: 995; see also Bateman 2018).

A further factor necessitating quick pre-cognitive criteria for decision-making (again, experience/emotion playing a key role) is 'constant connectivity and 24/7 living' which is caused by today's media devices (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 108) and the associated 'constant flow of fast-moving content' which 'prompts to feel in order to express and

gratify one's […] desires instantly through clicks, comments, and shares' (Harsin 2017: 519). Indeed, we have already been preconditioned to that by the television era as one characterised by fragmentary information, rapid transition between fleeting images, and constant arousal of visual sensation—a concoction that is 'not conducive to deep, critical and challenging reflection' but instead promotes 'shallow, uncritical and unchallenging mental preoccupation', based on 'any sensation that can be excited through passivity and minimal thought', thereby reinventing the entirety of public discourse (Hannan 2018: 216; see also Postman 1985). And since the basic principles had already been internalised in the television era, those skills could be easily applied to a new, even more exciting, environment. Moreover, the ever-increasing demand to keep themselves permanently open to connection, interaction, and acquisition of new information (from the latest viral meme or cat video to information about significant political events) and 'the new intensity of time-challenges' that arise as a result, force humans to develop 'practices of selection' that help them to 'drastically *select from* the environment' thereby making the information overload as well as its overwhelming permanence and speed more manageable (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 113). This environment also strongly disfavours slower and more elaborate reasoning and well as lengthy arguments, prioritising momentary emotional appeals instead, which is conducive to actors capable of establishing affective rather than argument-based relations of support (Harsin 2017: 519). In this sense, the Experience Age is about the (self-)management of experience, maximising some stimuli and minimising others that are seen as less pleasurable. Speed in choosing what to consume and what is most conducive to such maximisation becomes paramount and here emphasis should indeed be on emotions as drivers of quick response and rapid decision-making (Davis 2017: 135). It might well be true that '[t]he public has developed a Twitter-sized attention span' (Lapowsky 2016), which makes it imperative to momentarily attract audience attention without any realistic hope of people focusing on the detail. However, this is not necessarily an issue properly of the audiences' own making. Instead, it is very strongly about the pressures created by the media of today: the question that one often asks themselves tends to be 'do you spend time checking a source for a new story or do you spend time checking social media reactions to your last story?' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 117; see also Schlesinger and Doyle 2014). These are exactly the time-conflicts that contribute to the rise of post-truth.

There is also a broader interrelated problem—'not just one of one of lacking time for reaction to communications, but lacking time for *interpretation*, that is, for making *narrative sense* of what one is supposed to be up-to-date with' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 114). If meaningful narratives of sense are no longer available (at least in terms of making sense of the world and interactions with the world), one can only construct the present haphazardly, out of intuitive and emotional connections with the bits and pieces of information and/or larger take-away narratives that are offered as substitutes for the broader social making of sense. In an environment of ever-increasing speed and simultaneity of interactions and ever-increasing awareness of the temporality of everything, which, in turn fuels even more demand for speed (see, generally, Couldry and Hepp 2017: 104–108), a natural question to be asked is why waste time verifying and thinking deeply. Moreover, particularly in case of truth-claims that are centred around emotionally loaded euphemisms (such as those of a country being 'swamped' by migrants and/or terrorists), their translation into plain verifiable language does not necessarily remove ambiguity, particularly due to the variety of personal meanings; for example, provision of actual numbers may not necessarily ameliorate anxieties about proliferation of foreign signs and foods or the insecurity felt when in the presence of foreigners; likewise, low numbers of radicalised individuals will not reassure someone fixated on the idea that even a lone wolf can cause havoc (see Romano 2017: 56). Overall, it is much more time-efficient to rely on shortcuts, such as an emotional click with a story or a piece of information. This, again, is not an environment that lends itself easily to careful considerations of the truthfulness and veracity of claims. Instead, what 'clicks' is what gets accepted.

Interpreted through the lens of the Experience Age, post-truth could be seen as a domain of 'citizen-consumers' (Harsin 2015: 332) who place themselves at the centre of the truth market and aim, as any consumers do, to maximise the utility and satisfaction received from their act of consumption. While Harsin overemphasises the extent to which such citizen-consumers are deliberately manufactured by political actors while ignoring their mutual co-construction of post-truth,[4] the emphasis on a

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[4] The same mistake is also repeated by d'Ancona (2017: 141–142) for whom consumerism as a prevalent societal attitude encourages passivity, which in turn, is seen as characteristic of post-truth, thus also ignoring the collusion between the producers and consumers of post-truth fiction.

consumerist attitude is a noteworthy one. Intense stimulation occupies a dual place in today's economy: on the one hand, it could distract attention from prevailing consumption practices while on the other hand, its attention-grabbing capacity lends itself to commodification whence experience itself becomes both the product and the currency (Jones 2012: 646). After all, as the idea of post-truth implies, 'truth is not falsified, or contested, but of secondary importance' (*The Economist* 2016b), i.e. the criterion for adopting a particular opinion or embracing a particular claim is no longer its verifiability but rather its stickiness. Hence, what makes the present information environment stand out is the prevalence of affective storytelling that carries a strong emotional appeal and thereby both attracts attention and incites attachment to the narrative (d'Ancona 2017). Essentially, political communication is about 'blending entertainment values with political values' (Marshall and Henderson 2016: 3); in that context, 'using emotional cues helps to get audiences' attention and to prolong engagement' (Suiter 2016: 27). In this environment, packaging—and, indeed, branding—becomes more important than content in effectively—which, in this case, means *affectively*—asserting one's truth-claim. In fact, Harsin (2017: 515) goes as far as to rebrand post-truth to 'emo-truth', i.e. emotional truth as something that breaks through the repetition of well-polished promotionalism, i.e. something exceptional and attention-grabbing. For that, controversial topics, political incorrectness, bellicosity, sarcasm, mockery, and disrespect for the rules of 'civilised' conversation (read Trump beyond all this) or at least some sort of awkward unruliness that is simultaneously assertive and even seemingly daring (think of Boris Johnson) are instrumental. Of course, what works in captivating audience attention and maximising their experienced gratification depends on the particularities of a given social network as well: as Hannan (2018: 219) insightfully puts it, '[i]f Facebook is a high school popularity contest, then Twitter is the schoolyard run by bullies'. Nevertheless, the key element of cutting through the noise still holds—it is just the means that differ.

There is strong (and ever-increasing) competition for attention in a largely entertainment-dominated media environment, replete with consumerism, popular culture, and mere noise (Dahlgren and Alvares 2013: 54), organised, as already shown, through incessant supply and use of information that enables description and prediction of target audiences and their consumption practices. This consumerist attitude can easily lead to political disengagement in favour of more accessible and more

immediately available forms of entertainment. Indeed, as argued by Prior (2010: 266), '[e]ntertainment fans abandon politics not because it has become harder for them to be involved […] but because they decide to devote their time to media that promise greater gratification than the news', highlighting different preferences rather than divergent abilities or resources. Hence, while traditional media have, in the past, excluded undereducated or otherwise cognitively deprived groups, 'entertainment fans in the current high-choice environment exclude themselves' (Prior 2010: 266). In this respect, post-truth could be seen as bridging the gap: providing politics-related content coupled with satisfaction, particularly—satisfaction with the confirmation of one's opinions. Also, Prior's assessment demonstrates why the claim that people fall for post-truth because of their incapacity to understand *the* Truth misses the point: while that could have been said about media environments of the past, the current situation is more accurately explicated through the dominance of experience and maximisation of satisfaction.

As evidenced in the above, experience is a key factor in the competitive struggle between media of different kinds and it combines the entertainment value of content with its presentation and ease of access (Abramovich 2017)—anything that would make engagement with information more attractive (more exciting, stimulating, and pleasurable) than e.g. switching to a gaming or messaging app. In this context, the capacity of breaking through the noise and outperforming any potential alternative is of absolutely vital importance (Suiter 2016: 27). After all, 'modern media can offer intense experiential immersions with strong affective valences' (Dahlgren and Alvares 2013: 54) and any message that does not follow the suit is almost by definition put into competitive disadvantage. Moreover, since affective identification with and investment in a truth-claim rests on confirmation of opinions and subjectively held 'truths' rather than factual claims in a disinterested and dispassionate sense, the urge to check one's facts might simply not be there (Gilead et al. 2018). Therefore, the optimism about fact-checking and its potential to become a key weapon in the struggle against post-truth by providing unbiased (and therefore, it is claimed, convincing) information is simply naïve unless, of course, fact-checkers reinforce their information with an even stronger emotional load than that of the original statement (see e.g. Ball 2017: 255). Indeed, 'a simple untruth can beat off a complicated set of facts simply by being easier to understand and remember', particularly because pure fact tends to be boring and unattractive, hence,

not memorisable (Harford 2017). But then, making facts attractive almost necessarily involves cropping and framing them, in turn defeating the very purpose of fact-checking. Hence, when it comes to any straightforward advice for 'stopping the spread' (Ball 2017), one must simply acknowledge that these may provide mere consolation at best and self-deception at worst.

A clear consequence of the above is the rise in importance of 'simple and expressive forms of communication', characteristic of which could be pictures, memes, or emojis (Biały and Svetoka 2016: 19). Any more complex, text-based communication is invariably conditioned to offer a similar quality of momentary impression in order to stand any chance in competitive struggle. Content simply has to be here and now and has to captivate attention here and now (Biały and Svetoka 2016: 23). Political communication, therefore, faces a noteworthy struggle, since '[p]olicy is complicated, yet post-truth politics damns complexity' (*The Economist* 2016b). The need for simplicity in order to appeal to as broad an audience as possible is clearly stressed in a study on Spain's *Podemos* by Casero-Ripollés et al. (2016: 386): there, adjustment to media demands takes centre stage and if that means sacrificing a proper argument for bite-size pieces of information, then that is what has to be done. Overall, then, '*Podemos* prioritised the creation and diffusion of popular statements addressed to ordinary people and used all of its available discourse tools to that end' (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2016: 386). A similar simplifying strategy was also clearly observable in Trump's discourse (see e.g. Kayam 2018). As a result, there has to be something that cuts through all the complexity and makes people believe in a particular policy proposition. An affective load added to a story is an obvious way of achieving exactly that. Here, *Podemos* is also notable for openly embracing emotional content to mobilise support: during the 2016 elections, '[s]ixty-two percent of the posts published by *Podemos* on Facebook […] included emotional content, mainly positive emotions, such as hope or enthusiasm'; even the choice of the party name, meaning 'we can', is equally fitting to this strategy (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2016: 386). A very similar strategy can easily be detected even earlier, in Obama's famous 2008 electoral campaign and heavy use of slogans, such as 'Hope', 'Change', or 'Yes, we can' (see e.g. Hodge 2010).

Likewise, meticulously argued debates on competing propositions or well-argued suggestions or policy proposals are futile as '[l]engthy, detailed disquisitions do not fare very well against short, biting sarcasm'

or 'against comments that, however inane, rack up a far greater number of likes' (Hannan 2018: 220). In fact, trolling has become a highly inter-active activity, with citizens trolling politicians, politicians trolling citizens back and not shunning away from trolling one another, perhaps even elevating trolling to 'a new genre of political speech', in which 'expertly trolling' an opponent has become a virtue in itself (Hannan 2018: 221). Such an atmosphere, particularly in combination with decline in the insti-tutional gate-keeping role of political parties, potentially leads to person-alisation of politics, particularly—the rise of charismatic leaders; hence, likability and the capacity to galvanise and mobilise supporters instead of traditional structures of institutional authority (such as party hierar-chies), ideological appeal, or demonstrable accumulation of experience become criteria for success (Costa Lobo 2018). In fact, such newly-char-ismatic political leadership can be thought of as a celebrity performance: as Street (2018: 2) asserts, 'we understand better the political process by seeing its participants less as representatives and their citizens, and more as performers and their fans'. That celebrity-fandom nexus operates in two ways: one the one hand, as a status consciously cultivated by politi-cians themselves through 'the behaviour of celebrity politicians as celeb-rities (as opposed to politicians)' (Street 2018: 2), i.e. cultivating fame and following rather than substance behind the glitz and glamour, and, on the other hand, the attitude of voters who are less concerned with the underlying propositions than with the emotional identification of fandom. Such 'electoral art' (Street 2018: 9) points to post-truth lead-ership as embracing the fictionality and escapism that goes with the glitz and glamour of celebritisation. Moreover, due to post-truth being based on satisfaction of pre-existing audience opinions, stereotypes, desires, and fears, the likability of leaders is of a particular kind. Hauser (2018) introduces a useful term: that of a metapopulist leader, which he iden-tifies primarily with Putin and Trump. While traditional populists strive to exploit a dichotomy between the 'elites' and the 'masses' while cap-italising on specific grievances, the metapopulist leader is consciously 'devoid of underlying substance and is not a bearer of consistent mean-ings', replacing their own personality with malleable discursive construc-tions (Hauser 2018: 77–78). Being essentially empty, '[t]he metapopulist leader is alienated from the entire signification that they represent even if they can still express a momentary investment in some fragment of a sig-nification'—such a leader is nothing but a blank screen onto which each audience member projects their fantasies (Hauser 2018: 78).

Indeed, 'feelings, not facts are what matter', and if others do not *believe* your facts (i.e. if they do not feel good about the same propositions as you do), that only further entrenches the us-versus-them mentality (*The Economist* 2016b). After all, as Davis (2017: 145) asserts, '[w]e are species with a herd instinct, and thus we tend to follow the crowd'. Of course, the fact that a decision is emotion-based does not necessarily mean that it is 'irrational' (even in some conventional sense of rationality)—the deep-seated emotion might be a result of long-term problems and neglect by politicians of very serious issues or of certain societal groups, making such a decision simply an affective release of objective frustrations (Fox 2016). Also, the above could be seen as a reintroduction of moral or, at least, value-based arguments into a world that has been neutralised and stripped of actual decision-making capacity pertaining to the question of 'the good', the latter being effectively outsourced to non-political domains, such as science (Fox 2016). Moreover, Gladwell (2005), for example, emphasises the importance of snap decisions and stresses their value as evolutionary survival tools that can provide judgements no worse (an, on some occasions, even better) than reasoned deliberation. And yet, all that might be true (and even then, further proof would be needed) only under conditions when there are no actors ready and willing to manipulate the human propensities of the Experience Age. It is precisely the willingness by political (although not exclusively political) actors to abuse the current conditions of human social life (and the willingness of the audiences to participate) that causes the worst excesses of the post-truth era.

Finally, there is some criticism of post-truth that has to be taken into account. Discussions of post-truth can be labelled 'patronising' (Fox 2016) or 'elitist' (Brown 2016) and not entirely without a reason. Indeed, 'post-truth' can easily be used as a derogatory label attached to political discourse that one simply does not like or to groups of people that are, implicitly or explicitly, deemed to have a lower cognitive capacity than one's own and therefore are to be looked down upon, which is certainly both patronising and elitist. Labels of 'post-truth' can also offer an easy escape for allegedly truthful politicians and commentators wishing to distract attention from the complexities and internal contradictions of their own arguments by suggesting that the problem is not with the argument anyway—it is with the audience which is incapable or unwilling to understand it (Brown 2016). For others, meanwhile, it is not truth as such that is facing challenges but merely truths accepted

as self-evident by traditional political actors as well as 'experts' of various kinds, implying that the negative connotation attached to the idea of post-truth 'denigrates the very centrality of truth-seeking in contemporary constitutional orders' (Jasanoff and Simmet 2017: 752–753). However, post-truth, if properly conceived, is neither derogatory nor the preserve of some particular group. Nor it is (contrary to e.g. Davis 2017: xii) the preserve of one side on the political spectrum. In fact, we are all part of it—it is simply a general attribute of the times.

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Enabling Post-truth: Mediatisation and Affect

Abstract This chapter first analyses the context of post-truth, namely, mediatisation, understood as the dominance of media logic in most social spheres. Such dominance has profound influence on both the political and the personal domains. In both cases, affective capacity has become of prime importance since encounters primarily take place in and through the media, meaning that one's social existence depends on the effectiveness of leaving an affective imprint on others. A theory of affective capacity is provided through a snapshot of the philosophy of Spinoza, focusing primarily on the centrality of striving to persevere in existence. The latter, in turn, refers to a deficit at the heart of existence which is the cause of a relentless (but futile) desire to achieve the pleasure of fullness.

Having established the key characteristics of post-truth, it is now time to explore its key underpinnings. The first element to be analysed in this chapter is mediatisation. It is taken as a meta-concept denoting a process through which various societal spheres and institutions (politics included) are subsumed under media logics. As media occupy an ever-more important place in today's societies, the entire process of co-creating a social lifeworld has shifted to media environments, and that

often involves media acting as dominant partners. It therefore comes as no surprise that affect becomes the main means of exerting and affirming one's own existence, directly leading to the Experience Age and post-truth. Since the argument espoused in this book strongly takes into account the ever-increasing role that media of various sorts play in everyday life, an understanding of the process of mediatisation is crucial in appreciating the scale and the importance of changes in today's societies.

The second part of this chapter aims to provide a theory of mediatised affects through recourse to the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. The discussion opens with Spinoza's idea of *conatus*—endeavour to persevere in existence, which is the essence of every animate and inanimate thing and the key motivator of action. And since the practical manifestation of *conatus* is best expressed through affective capacity (the capacity to be affected and to affect the environment in return), it is evident that *conatus* necessitates interaction. Notably, conatus also refers to a deficit of existence: the fact that each and every thing has to strive for perseverance only demonstrates that existence is never perfect and something is always missing. It is from striving to cover this deficit that purposeful action truly emerges. However, in the wake of mediatisation of social interactions, we have seen a shift to primarily mental interactions that produce affects through technologically mediated communication. Particularly such mental interactions, by not being able to rely on embodied 'fact', mean that affectual exchanges make the self inseparable from the other, opening up the self for influences and ushering social creation of a shared affective environment that trumps the physical environment. Even the self becomes somewhat 'post-truth' through technological extension of the self into an affective digital effigy of the self and the resulting mediatisation of affective capacity. And if humans become disembodied and defined through their mutual affective capacity, so do truth-claims (they become disembodied from verifiable facts). Such dual aspirational improvement of the self (through a mediatised effigy and an empowering narrative, both not necessarily grounded in verifiable facts) positively contributes to the endeavour to persevere in being, thereby signalling that post-truth, as such a contribution, is good and virtuous. This leads to a functional-pragmatic criterion of existence (of both people and claim-truth relations): if it works by causing affects in others, it must be true through its affects; this applies equally all interacting objects as well as to truth-claims.

3.1 Answering the Question: What Is Mediatisation

Post-truth and the Experience Age are strongly dependent upon, if not caused by, today's media environment. Hence, it is important to appropriately conceptualise the effect that contemporary media have on the society and its institutions, and that aim is primarily approached through a discussion of the concept of mediatisation. The latter concept 'reflects the increasing interest in explicating the interdependence of media change and social change' (Adolf 2017: 12). It is used to explicate a process of social change whereby the media increasingly influence and penetrate various social spheres (such as politics), exerting a strong influence over them, not just as mediators (i.e. conveyors of a message) but also through their very existence, omnipresence, and internal logic (Strömbäck and Esser 2015). Although some would see fragmentation, diversity, and polycentricity of today's media as 'opening a faultline in the mediatization of politics' (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2016: 381), such assertions miss a significant point: although mediatisation through traditional media is clearly challenged, that has only brought about a new step of mediatisation, making it much more laden with social and other types on new media. Hence, while the first theories of mediatisation had been developed for the broadcast era, mediatisation is not about any particular type of media—it refers to the media *in the general sense*—whichever type comes to dominate the media environment at a particular time. Of course, one should not go as far as to say that mediatisation nullifies the agency of non-media actors—instead, traditional actors are (or at least attempt to be) working *within* the conditions of mediatisation to maintain their agendas and privileged positions (see e.g. Strömbäck and Esser 2014; Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015); however, the *way* in which they are acting is media-determined, with actors consciously mediatising themselves, i.e. adapting to the current environment (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2016: 391).

It is claimed that mediatisation 'captures on the one hand the increasing spread of technologically based media in society; and on the other hand, how different social domains are more and more shaped by this media' (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018: 17), extending various social domains (such as politics) and blurring the boundaries between them (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018: 20). One reason why mediatisation has become so prominent and clearly pronounced is the *function* of the media: it plays a crucial role in both creating and framing public opinion

as well as setting the agenda, forcing actors to submit to media's rules (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 250). Hence, because 'perceptions and knowledge of politics are highly mediatized', it clearly follows that 'the event representations created by the media and disseminated through news outlets have relevant effects on citizens' perceptions of politics' (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2016: 381), highly incentivising actors to tailor their actions so that media coverage is as extensive and as favourable as possible. But there also is a broader explanation: the general expansion of media consumption that has turned it into a paramount feature of everyday life. To that effect, if one is not available on and open to be experienced through the media, it is almost the same as not existing at all. The ubiquity of screens, not only those of computers but especially of smartphones means that media consumption is permanent, located everywhere, and can be highly personalised in terms of both content and access (Miller 2014). Hence, politics, communication, and entertainment easily become hardly distinguishable, all subsumed under the internal logic of the media, and extremely conducive to the experience-based post-truth environment. As a result, it is not accidental that the title of this section alludes to both Kant (in his explication of the Enlightenment) and Lyotard (postmodernism): mediatisation, in its current stage (referred to by Couldry and Hepp (2017) as 'deep mediatisation'), is seen as a fundamental shift in the way the world is conceived of and lived in.

In today's world, the importance of media has grown to an extent that they 'have become co-constructive for the articulation of various social fields in their present form: politics, economics, education, and so on' (Hepp et al. 2015: 321). In effect, the social world is '*fundamentally interwoven with media*' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 16). In this new environment, 'media are institutionalizations and materializations of practices of communication' while simultaneously shaping those practices as well (Hepp et al. 2018: 4). Moreover, instead of being mere technologies that various institutions, from businesses to political actors, can put to use, the media have become a key part of the operations of such institutions while at the same time having reached a level of authority and self-determination whereby those same institutions submit to media logic (Hjarvard 2008: 106). In this process, society (or some other, more specific, institution) 'to an increasing degree is submitted to, or is dependent upon, the media and their logic' (Hjarvard 2008: 113) while 'core elements of a social or cultural activity […] assume a media

form' (Hjarvard 2004: 48). Management of media (or heavy use of such professional services) becomes a must for any actors aiming for success in their field (Mazzoleni 2017: 142) either in power struggle or in the implementation stage. On the other hand, such dominant media should not be seen as a unitary bloc: in fact, the relatively coherent corpus of traditional media organisations has itself become mediatised whereby the information landscape adjusts to the modus operandi of new, especially social, media, becoming 'a fragmented structure, in which different segments of the population are exposed to different facts, different spectra of opinion and different ideas about the legitimate boundaries of political discourse' (Hallin 2018: 8)—very much along the lines explored in the previous chapter. Focusing on mediatisation thereby helps to understand the media's role in processes of socio-cultural change (Couldry and Hepp 2013: 197).

When discussing mediatisation, it is very tempting to concentrate almost exclusively on traditional news media and social media as the main actors of the media landscape as far as post-truth is concerned. Nevertheless, there are other crucial elements of today's media that should not be overlooked, namely, search engines, algorithms, and databases that are 'embedded in our everyday life, affecting our sense of and participation in our social worlds' (Andersen 2018: 2). In fact, it can even be stated that 'the "logic" of archiving, searching, and ordering items has led not only to a change in the meaning of media but also to a change in culture' (Andersen 2018: 2). In terms of searching, the very access to information and content of whatever description has now expanded enormously, to an extent that we are immersing ourselves into 'a culture of search', in which searching for information, previously a laborious and resource-intensive task, has been turned into a 'mundane cultural activity' that effectively brings about a co-presence and interrelation of, literally, whatever kind of content (Andersen 2018: 7). But also, as a corollary, only content that is easily searchable and retrievable through search (and ranks high enough among search results) can truly be deemed to exist (or, at least, to exist in a meaningful and relevant way). Algorithms, meanwhile, are tasked with ordering all that availability by ranking, suggesting, and increasingly, also creating content (Andersen 2018: 9) to an extent that they have now become 'a means to know what there is to know and how to know it, to participate in social and political discourse and to familiarise ourselves with the publics in which we participate' (Gillespie 2014: 167). That, of course, confers

great power as things, attributes, ideas, behaviours, content, and humans themselves are sorted, classified, and put in hierarchical orders (Hallinan and Striphas 2016: 119). All of that, however, would not be possible without the archiving and organisation provided by databases that have, in many ways, become today's substitutes for memory, cultural, scientific, or otherwise, thus enabling actors compiling and maintaining them to act as gatekeepers for what is known and forgotten, deemed to exist and not to exist (Andersen 2018: 11–13). Overall, such developments point towards our reality, including what we take to be true and existent, thus becoming increasingly dependent on archived digital content being algorithmically sorted and ranked and retrieved through search, inserting a digital layer between the self and the world and making interactions primarily only possible through that layer. This is also the layer through which the dilemmas of truth and post-truth are to be interpreted as verifiability pertains to the ability to find supporting data within this layer, making the capture and logging of data, the criteria for its ranking (authority of the source, popularity etc. as well as the quantification of such criteria) employed by search algorithms, and the ease of result retrieval into variables of utmost importance.

It is not only disparate institutions that are being affected: the entire social world is '*changed* in its dynamics and structure by the role that media continuously (indeed recursively) play in its construction' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 15). In fact, while back in 2008 Hjarvard could still plausibly assert that '[t]he concept of mediatisation […] does not embrace the notion that mediated reality reigns supreme, or the contention that conventional ontological distinctions have "collapsed"' (Hjarvard 2008: 111), the advent of post-truth has clearly demonstrated that a new layer of 'reality' that has been either discursively augmented or completely manufactured altogether can be added almost at will. The latter is not particularly surprising: after all, a social world that is meaningful can only be constructed through communication, and communication is enabled by media of various sorts (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 31). Hence, the only structural feature potentially limiting the proliferation of parallel social worlds would be the absence of willingness of political actors to attempt at creating them and of audiences to accept them. As already shown, such willingness is far from absent from both sides. Hence, it is the willingness to collude in creating parallel fictions which, taken collectively, constitute the post-truth environment, that characterises mediatised agency in the sphere of politics. Therefore, the claim that

multiplication of sources and uncontrolled proliferation of views have been arrested while '[m]ainstream news has re-asserted its centrality and it is surer of its basic functions' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015: 1321) definitely sounds naïve. Instead, as shown in the previous chapter, fragmentation and partisanship with only limited moderative role of mainstream media could be seen as characteristic of the present environment.

Mediatisation directly enables the post-truth era. After all, any human grouping and their 'forms of meaningful belonging', particularly pertaining to groupings that have been created through adherence to a narrative of a particular kind, must have meaningful boundaries, and such boundaries are created through communication, i.e. through the use of media (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 169–170). In a nutshell, these are groups that communicate the same or very similar opinions about key issues, regardless of the relationship of such opinions with verifiable facts.[1] Media offer both the *content* for groups of various sorts to gather around and the *means* for that gathering (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 175). Humans gather around cultural artefacts, pieces of information, opinion, or interpretation, and then organise themselves through and embed themselves in communicative practices pertaining to the core subject. Consequently, whatever has united such individuals, becomes self-reinforcing and self-validating through shared (mediatised) interaction: if not real in terms of correspondence with something that underlies it, then at least real through its own effects. To that extent, connective action (creating and herding communities, particularly online) is increasingly crucial, in contrast to earlier emphasis on collective action (see, most notably, Bennett and Segerberg 2013). In such an environment, shared belief in a particular narrative, including escapist fiction of the post-truth kind, easily becomes the basis for collective identities that become self-affirmative and self-reinforcing, thereby merging the fictitious and the real.

Mediatised political participation allows for new forms of playing out the public's 'voice' and the 'output' of political processes that are both rendered strongly consumerist in nature, particularly through inducing submission to charismatic authority who, in turn, is conditioned

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[1] Crucially, the value attached to the relationship with verifiable facts (or, at least, to the very attempt or possibility of establishing such a relationship) markedly differs between post-truth and pre-post-truth (not to be confused with Truth) environments (as shown in the Chapter 1).

'to continuously "prove" his legitimacy, determination, and strength', thereby compelling the followers to surrender immediately (Iosifidis and Wheeler 2018: 117; see also Weber 1998: 78). The current, fragmented but extremely pervasive, form of mediatisation means that politics is not only expressed and conducted through the media—it is also consumed in the same way as branded goods are—to each, their favourite brand. That brand consumption is direct, with political actors reaching out to mobilise support without intervention from any formal structures and, therefore, without needing the significant organisational resources that had previously been necessary for campaigning (Hallin 2018). That then allows for an immediate connection between a leader and an audience, with the audience investing in the leader's voice, thereby identifying affectively (since emotions, as per the previous chapter, are of paramount importance). Certainly, Trump is the first to come to mind here but other actors are equally relevant, particularly political parties that had sprung out from (and to an extent remain) grassroots movements, such as *Podemos* of Spain or, at least in the earlier stages of its existence, Syriza of Greece (with Italy's Five Star Movement sitting somewhere in-between, particularly when under the leadership of Beppe Grillo) or political leaders whose rise to prominence had necessitated subversion of traditional party hierarchies, such as Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn. In all those cases, affective investment of a newly-acquired support base as a result of social-mediatised politics had been crucial in creating and sustaining momentum. Moreover, the 'output' part in this environment now refers not only to actual result of political processes but also to the interactive nature of social media. In other words, the investment in a political actor and the pleasure of having found the voice is already an outcome and, what is even more pleasurable, one that offers immediate gratification. And that gratification is solidified and made continuous by the proliferation of hyper-partisan news sources that strengthen and sustain identity, encourage further interaction, and maintain people engaged, making the relationship more wholesome than a diet of bare tweets would be (see e.g. Hallin 2018). Overall, such commodification of participation only reaffirms Witschge's (2014: 351–352) point that audience practices, instead of challenging mediatisation, only work to affirm it, clearly taking place within and actively adjusting to the new paradigm, thus further underscoring the collusive relationship between the audiences and the communicators at the heart of post-truth.

Also of crucial importance is Schulz's (2004) idea of mediatisation as substitution, extension, amalgamation, and accommodation: following this perspective, communicative activities are being substituted from direct (e.g. face-to-face) to mediatised, no longer bound by time and place (if communication is not face-to-face, actors do not need to be at the same place and participate in the communicative act simultaneously), mediated and interpersonal activities being increasingly merged (even intimate communicative acts acquiring a mediatised element), and such activities increasingly coalescing under media logics. While such a change is most easily relatable while imagining changes to personal communication brought forth by various messaging, video conferencing etc. programmes and applications, it is equally applicable to political communication, e.g. replacement of door-to-door campaigning with communication through social media. For Hjarvard (2008) as well, mediatised communication allows multiple simultaneous interactions unconstrained by time and space, management of such interactions in a way that accords a desirable advantage to the communicator (mostly in terms of managing self-presentation and controlling the direction of the interaction, something that is much more complicated in a face-to-face situation), and control of information which can be withheld or released at the time of one's choice. Such an environment allows for extensive planning of communication, only further strengthening the attention on serving the expectations of the audience. In this drive to meet expectations, the process of communication constantly moves in full circles as acts of communication and conversation (as well as broader engagement with such communication) are turned into agglomerations of data, collected automatically via a plethora of platforms, and this data is then fed back into the process of communication, informing the content of future communicative acts and also the perceptions that we have of both ourselves and of 'others' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 29; Hepp et al. 2018: 5–6). Again, this is a key enabling condition for narratives that are based on audience preferences, likes, and prejudices, determinable in real or near-real time, thereby creating the post-truth condition.

Not only social domains are being mediatised—the self is as well. That happens in several major ways. One is the (re-)presentation of ourselves: how we appear in our digital forms, particularly through our social media profiles. As far as social interactions are concerned, we increasingly exist more through those digital effigies of ourselves than through our physical selves as mediatised interactions replace face-to-face ones.

The second way is through our digital selves as accumulations of data based on our digital footprint and held by private corporations that are then able to profit from such data. As Murdock (2017: 131) stresses, '[t]he construction of these digital doubles or doppelgangers provides corporations with unprecedented opportunities to reach into the most intimate corners of everyday action and direct attention and action', informing both targeted advertising and targeted political communication, thereby (as shown in Chapter 2) significantly contributing to post-truth. Moreover, such digital doppelgangers—as well as completely fictional personalities—are no longer merely confined to stacks of data: with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and computer-generated imagery (CGI) tools they can acquire both visual presence and a mind of their own, operating social media accounts or representing real (or fictional) humans in other digital settings (Katz 2018). In this way, the line between an actual self and a digital—media—self is increasingly blurred, making even personhood a matter of post-truth: after all, if a digital person is a source of a pleasurable experience of consumption, and mediatisation ultimately leads to digital encounters becoming the primary means of encountering the world (which in itself is becoming increasingly mediatised in everything from access to information and imagery to augmented or virtual reality), one might legitimately ask whether it still matters if that digital person corresponds, or at least relates, to some physical person or not. While that might seem exciting, as Katz (2018) notes, potential for manipulation, propaganda, and hostile influence operations is also ripe. And even in a more everyday sense, the substitution of face-to-face communication with its technologically-enabled mediatised version has already changed communication from an inter-human one to that between digital doppelgangers or between our doppelganger and digital systems of various bodies and institutions (see Papsdorf 2015: 992–993).

Certainly, some social domains are more susceptible to mediatisation than others, and among those that are the most susceptible are the domains that significantly depend on interaction with and participation of the audience, such as religion, sport, education, or politics (Livingstone and Lunt 2014). But even here an important caveat exists: mediatisation, as permeation of media logics, must be taken to affect a broad social domain as such and not a particular aspect of or item within a domain (Livingstone and Lunt 2014: 706–707). Hence, the proper object of enquiry would be mediatisation of politics and not mediatisation of a particular politician or a particular party. The essential question,

nevertheless, is not one of *whether* politics has been mediatised but rather one of *degree* to which it has been mediatised (Strömbäck 2011a: 426). It must, after all, be admitted that 'mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 250). As stated by Witschge (2014: 246), it transpires that 'the agenda of politics is more and more set by media logic'. After all, media are no longer simply a means of political action but, rather, have become key structural elements and enablers of social and cultural practices (Hjarvard 2013: 3). In fact, mediatisation of government takes place both directly (as in sourcing and management of news) and indirectly, through 'the embedding of media stories, values, and time cycles into everyday action' (Garland et al. 2018: 497), incentivising politicians to 'base public policy upon media opportunities' (Flew and Swift 2015: 112). For governmental bodies and agencies (although also for political actors broadly conceived), the challenge is that they 'need followers to be able to communicate effectively, and in order to have followers, they have to be attractive to citizens'; however, this attraction can easily come at the expense of key organisational principles (such as hierarchy and non-spontaneity) as well as a reputation for steadfastness and seriousness (Olsson and Eriksson 2016: 199). The same applies to such bodies' relation with journalists: as Laursen and Valentini (2015: 37–38) note, their press representatives constantly need to balance between remaining credible and impartial on the one hand and promoting their institutions (an activity that can easily undermine a reputation for credibility and impartiality) in order to make themselves attractive and get their message across. Even though some political actors are by definition engaged in popularity contests (such as parties and individual politicians), the constant drive to remain popular, affectively engaging, and relevant might very easily push such communication into post-truth territory.

A popular suggestion is that mediatisation (even if the term itself is not explicitly used) does away with political leadership as such, allowing groups to organise themselves spontaneously through social media, thus allowing true grassroots thrusts to come through (see, notably, Shirky 2008; Castells 2012; Hardt and Negri 2017). As a result, it is claimed, 'hierarchical structures have been overturned and dismantled within the movements', signalling not only a 'crisis of representation' but also 'a deep aspiration to democracy' (Hardt and Negri 2017: 8).

However, actual practice does not seem to confirm the above. In fact, once one looks into movements that rather explicitly present themselves as leaderless (*Occupy* would perhaps be the most prominent example), 'the persistence of "covert" leadership roles and functions' becomes evident, particularly in fuelling, catalysing, and sustaining movements (Boler et al. 2014: 439), even though that leadership of often 'connective', i.e. one that facilitates collective building of a brand which 'replaces collective identity with marketing strategies and formal organisation with social networks' (Bakardjieva et al. 2018: 900–901; see also Poell et al. 2016). In fact, connective leadership of collective brand-building is perhaps *the* crucial element: for a movement to be created and maintained, there has to be a conscious drive in connecting (or facilitating connection of) individuals (or their mediatised (re)presentations) otherwise dispersed in the (social) media landscape. Such connective role enables collective investment in an object of shared enjoyment (the brand) in a way that is inclusive as stipulated by the logic of the Experience Age: everybody has not only to maximise their pleasure of consumption but also to feel that they have a stake in and are integral to (or, even better, are stars in) that process of collective consumption and ensuing satisfaction.

The otherwise invisible 'digital, immaterial, and affective labour' (Boler et al. 2014: 451) of new leadership roles in mediatised movements may be less evident but they are still crucial in both shaping and maintaining the movement (see also Gerbaudo (2017) on 'digital vanguards'). Hence, even though the structures of contemporary movements seem to be (or are purported to be) horizontal, standout figures are present nevertheless, fulfilling many of the classical leadership tasks, including the setting of objectives and directions, maintenance of identity, and mobilisation of support, albeit in somewhat different ways that reflect the changes brought about by mediatisation (Bakardjieva et al. 2018: 912). However, because such leaders are often obscure, acting as influencers, group administrators and the like and are, therefore performative (as opposed to formally appointed), polycephalous (one influential account can be managed by several individuals), and largely anonymous, accountability associated with a formal leadership role is lacking (Bakardjieva et al. 2018: 901, 912).

It might seem far-fetched to treat such leaders as e.g. Trump and Macron in a manner similar to the one just described. After all, one thing those leaders certainly do not shun is attention and being seen at centre stage. Nevertheless, the key issue here is that of affective leadership

(seen, following Boler et al. (2014: 440) as 'affective "glue" which takes material and immaterial forms') and steering of a collective brand, both also illustrative of the Experience Age discussed in the previous chapter. Here one must also remember Street's (2018) emphasis on celebrity politics and the star-fan relationship that characterises much of today's politics. Indeed, this celebrity stardom relates not that much to formal 'qualifications' as a celebrity (for example, Donald Trump and Beppe Grillo were celebrities before entering politics while Emmanuel Macron, Sebastian Kurtz, or Pablo Iglesias were not)—what matters is the willingness and the ability to cultivate a particular type of relationship where the leader becomes the focus of raucous following and affective investment rather than something chosen on the basis of substantial qualities. Thereby, leaders come to embody and personalise an affective 'we' of the followers. Trump, for example, is to be seen, among other things, as an electoral incarnation of Alt-Right, a movement that conforms with most of the significant traits of contemporary mediatised movements, including not only heavy use of but, in fact, sustenance through (particularly social) media (having, in fact, originated there), amorphous and subversively rebellious nature, otherwise largely polycephalous leadership etc. (Hannan 2018: 219; see also Nagle 2017). Of course, Trump cannot be caller a *leader* of Alt-Right in the traditional sense of the term. He, however, during the election campaign became perfectly placed to act as a *figurehead*, an object of affective investment who suddenly helped to materialise and embody at least those features of the collective brand that were electorally relevant. This type of leadership as affective investment is particularly conducive to the present era of the mediatised levelling of communication hierarchies where '[t]he "amateurs" celebrated by digital gurus, who have seen their jobs being threatened by the economic crisis and the impending automation revolution, have gone on to become trolls' of a particular kind—those who are no longer 'lone wolves' but instead 'go on forming packs of wolves, that is, online crowds preying on all those figures they perceive as being part of the establishment by which they feel wronged' (Gerbaudo 2018: 8). Crucially, the 'trolls' of the preceding quote, just as post-truth itself, should be taken in an ideologically-neutral way: as Postill (2018) correctly notes (partly in response to Gerbaudo), they should be taken to include not only followers of right-wing affiliative figureheads (such as Trump or Le Pen) or their left-wing comrades (e.g. Corbyn or Sanders) but also builders of a centrist technocrat brand (e.g. Macron or Rivera). In either case, such packs will not be

inclined to follow conventional leadership hierarchies of the type invented by the detested traditional elites but will, instead, invest their emotion in a leader with whom they can affectively identify.

In fact, personalised affective leaders may very well be a solution to one of the key problems faced by (actually or allegedly) autonomously self-organising 'acephalous bodies' as conceptualised by Hardt and Negri (2017: 13): that the turmoil of leaderless leadership 'can make the public dizzy when statements come from different speakers neither of which wears a badge, or a star on their shoulder', making it excessively difficult to make sense (Bakardjieva et al. 2018: 912). Affective personal leaders are in place not due to some appointment or anointment (hence, even when they are part of 'formal' politics, they are outsiders of some sorts) but primarily because they move the people (or at least the people on their side of the affiliative divide). We may be less willing to have leaders telling everyone what to do (hence, the rather non-hierarchical nature of today's movements) but we still need an object of shared affective investment that would offer immediate gratification and promise even more in as short a term as possible. Such political leadership, as correctly identified by Harsin (2017: 513), draws very heavily from the consumerist culture of 'constant self-promotion and self-branding/commodification', so pertinent to the mediated public sphere. Instead of appointment, leadership becomes something of a commodity to be consumed, implying, of course, the need to maximise the pleasure in the consumption experience, hence, the necessity for leadership to also be affective. However, such leadership does not necessarily have to remain informal all the time: as demonstrated, perhaps most notably, by Jeremy Corbyn, the informal affective 'outside' can, in fact, turn itself into formalised 'inside' by overwhelming and, ultimately, overtaking traditional hierarchies (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2016: 392).

Notably, affect can be seen as one of the emergent attributes of mediatisation. That makes sense not only in the light of the preceding discussion of the Experience Age but also in terms of the very logic of the current stage of mediatisation: if the increasingly dominant way of interaction is through digital encounters rather than face-to-face physical presence, then the only way in which such interaction can be made tangible and the presence of both sides affirmed is through mutually affecting one another. And given the nature of the media environment already discussed, affect through emotion seems to be the most prominent. Hence, mediatisation-related changes 'not only engender prompt exchange

of information and opinion but also foster a globally mediatized emotional exchange, leading [...] to *digital affect cultures*' (Döveling et al. 2018: 1). Publics themselves become highly affective in the sense that they 'come together and/or disband around bonds of sentiment' (Papacharissi 2016: 308; see also Papacharissi 2014). Affect thereby can be defined as 'something that people engage in, a practice of relational nature', thereby placing emotion 'in a larger framework as something that people *do*' (Döveling et al. 2018: 1). In a mediatised environment more than in any other, emotions are collective and relational, enabling any participant to bring 'something new that constitutes the emotion as a fluid moment', although one that is simultaneously sutured through relations of power (Döveling et al. 2018: 1; see also Burkitt 2014). That, in turn, leads to discursive creation of the 'own' and the 'other', emotional alignment with the similar (i.e. those partaking in the same affect) and against the unintelligible 'other' as well as a sense of belonging that binds the individual with others partaking in the same affect 'as global flows of emotion condense into pockets of cultural, social, and ideological intelligibility where one emotion makes sense whereas others necessarily do not' (Döveling et al. 2018: 4). Nevertheless, such affective publics still exist partly as presences (as agglomerations of individuals who feel like they belong together) and partly as potentialities (their capacity for collective action is, likely, not actualised). In order to turn into full actualities, such agglomerations still need leadership but one that is as affective as the drive that has brought the individuals together.

As such, mediatised affective leadership necessitates personalisation, which is often seen as another trait of mediatisation of politics (see e.g. Driesens et al. 2010; Strömbäck 2011b; Isotalus and Almonkari 2014). Such personalisation is seen in terms of increased audience interest and investment in, media attention to, and political organisations' reliance on leaders as personalities and personal brands. Once again, that signals affective (although, contrary to Boler et al. 2014, material) leadership as opposed to that based on ideas or a convincing case being put forward. Although Trump or Macron may be the first leaders that spring to mind (with other media-savvy politicians capable of strategic self-mediatisation (for an elaboration of the idea, see Strömbäck and Esser 2014) including figures like Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, Albert Rivera, or Pablo Iglesias), one also has to remember Barack Obama whose victory was made possible by him being a hyper-mediatised candidate. That included not only massive social media presence but also creation of himself and

his candidacy as experience through constant presence in television shows, particularly those dedicated to entertainment or, at least, infotainment, mastery of trendy humour, thereby making a vote for Obama hip and cool, and fun, transforming experience into political ethos and rallying support around essentially empty but affectively arousing slogans, most notably—'hope' (Hannan 2018: 218–219; see also Hodge 2010). That is, perhaps, as clear an example of politics being subsumed under media logic (the very essence of mediatisation) as it gets.

At the same time, it is important not to overdramatise some of the changes, and therefore mediatisation should be seen as a gradual long-term process rather than a sudden irruption (see e.g. Couldry and Hepp 2017). In fact, it has been changing practices in business and everyday life with every new invention at least since the telegraph came into use (Kortti 2017), if not since the invention of the printing press. However, it might be the case that since several key innovations (particularly with regards to digital (including but not exclusively social) media, datafication, development of Artificial Intelligence tools etc.) have been introduced at very short intervals, they have produced an unprecedentedly strong *combined* effect. Properly understood, mediatisation should also be seen as operating across the registers of media in the broadest sense possible in terms of both construction of events and cross-media interaction within the process of construction (Couldry and Hepp 2018).

Admittedly, mediatisation researchers can sometimes be accused of using the term as a catch-all concept, 'a brand label for an approach' instead of delimiting its proper use and scope (Billig 2013: 114). If the latter strategy is adopted, then any account of mediatisation can easily end up being 'much too simplistic and analytically unsatisfactory' (Ampuja et al. 2014: 122). In that respect, mediatisation could be seen as a 'conceptual bandwagon' rather than a key concept (Deacon and Stanyer 2014). However, at the very least, focus on mediatisation opens up a series of important considerations of changes in media and their consumption and the impact of such changes on broader social transformations (Lunt and Livingstone 2016: 465). As such, mediatisation is perhaps best seen as a 'sensitising' (i.e. awareness raising) rather than a 'definitive' concept (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). After all, as Jansson (2018) asserts, more attention should be paid to ways in which the media have become taken for granted in life and the societal tensions and contradictions that arise as a result. It is hoped that this book represents a step precisely in the direction of analysing such tensions and contradictions.

Finally, the process of mediatisation should not be taken as absolute in the sense of the media's primacy and autonomy from other domains being total, as if the media were a cause without a cause. Hence, when, for example, Mazzoleni (2017: 142) asserts that new media in particular 'do not respond to any steering industrial or commercial imperative', such statements should be treated with a dose of scepticism. In fact, there would be no commercial media if they made no business sense, i.e. if they would not follow industrial imperatives. Hence, while 'centralised control' (Mazzoleni 2017: 142) is indeed avoided in a political sense, at least in democracies (although not absolutely either—state-run surveillance programmes have to be taken into account), control is still exerted through the digital architecture of (new) media (here one may remember Lessig's (2006) dictum that 'code is law'), and that architecture is tailored according to the business needs of the platform owners.

3.2   Mediatised Affective Capacity: A Spinozist Theory

This section is aimed at better understanding human agency and developing a theoretical framework of post-truth, including the drives and motivations that lead people towards embracing post-truth in today's mediatised environment. The key inspiration here is the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and, more precisely, his *Ethics*. Spinoza is important, first and foremost, as one of the key theorists of affect. Indeed, affect has already featured prominently in the accounts of post-truth and mediatisation, and the latter in particular, because its substitution of face-to-face interactions with virtual ones posits affect as the main way of maintaining one's existence. Closely related to that is the importance of desire, more precisely—desire for pleasure—in Spinoza's thought that clearly corresponds with experience and maximisation of satisfaction Admittedly, it would be unwise to transplant Spinoza's seventeenth-century ideas verbatim. As a result, some key elements will have to be rethought in the light of the present context. Nevertheless, such rethinking is also conducive to the overall aim of this book as the ways in which Spinoza's ideas have to be reframed reveal a lot about the changes that have taken place with mediatisation. Moreover, there is an affinity between Spinoza and Ernesto Laclau whose ideas will prove crucial in the final chapter while discussing the political aspects of the present theory of post-truth. That affinity is not accidental: Spinoza was an inspiration to the French psychoanalyst thinker Jacques Lacan while the latter has informed the

thinking of Laclau, and particularly his theory of signification, which is the main takeaway of Laclau in the final chapter. Hence, framing the theory of post-truth through the lens of Spinoza's though appears to be a natural choice.

In order to fully understand Spinoza's potential to contribute to understanding post-truth, one needs to first delve into his conceptualisation of particular things, such as human beings. In this context, the key proposition is undoubtedly the following: '[e]ach thing, insofar as it is in itself, endeavours to persevere in its being' (*E*IIIp6). Indeed, this endeavour, or striving (*conatus* in Spinoza's Latin), is 'nothing other than the actual essence of the thing' (*E*IIIp7). Clearly, then, 'as an individual thing exists, it is exercising a power to maintain itself in existence' (James 2016: 116). The ability to interact with the environment and affect one's surroundings (or, as will be demonstrated later in this section, the ability to partake in affective exchange) is of absolute importance: the more is encompassed by one's *conatus*, i.e. the more nodal points for interaction with the environment a particular thing has, the more reality and, therefore, existence belongs to it, and vice versa (*E*Ip9). *Conatus* thus refers to 'our capacity to affirm […] affects in exchange with other bodies that increases our power and capabilities' (Carnera 2012: 81). Hence, our entire existence is dependent on affective exchange.

The constant striving to persevere in existence implies that existence is never full: there simply would be no need to strive for perseverance if it was full and self-sufficient. Instead, there is a permanent deficit of existence which every newly acquired power is supposed to fill but cannot fully achieve that nevertheless (see Kalpokas 2018). Of course, some interpreters of Spinoza (see, notably, Balibar 1998: 107) would disagree with the framing of *conatus* as deficit—for them it refers to something 'essentially positive'. However, the very presence of *conatus* as striving and the necessity of affective exchange clearly infer that every particular thing is never identical to its ideal state, and this difference between the actual and ideal is the deficit. Hence, not only *conatus* but also a deficit of existence is at the heart of every thing. In fact, one must go even further: because *conatus*, as striving to persevere in existence, can only exist if it is caused by a deficit, the deficit of existence must constitute an even deeper essence of human existence. Therefore, every thing, human beings included, is structured around a deficit that it strives to

fill or cover, thereby giving rise to *conatus*, the essential feature that characterises that thing. Through *conatus*, being is produced out of nothingness, out of a deficit. And it is that deficit that motivates action: as further elaborated in the final chapter, we cannot face the vacuousness of existence and therefore strive to fill in the gap with ever-new affective interactions.

Affect can, of course, be defined generally as the consequence of a particular encounter which 'takes the form of an increase or decrease in the ability of the body and mind alike to act' (Thrift 2004: 62). As argued by Deleuze (1988: 123), 'a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body and its individuality' to the extent that an individual's very existence is based on being conceivable and intelligible to others (see e.g. Della Rocca 2008: 36). The two-way relationship characteristic of affect is captured very well by Jones (2012: 648): '[t]he affective capacity of a body can be seen as the extent to which it can have an impact on the world around it while absorbing what the world throws at it'. Although it is easier to imagine affect as a two-way interpersonal interaction, it is, as Pile (2010: 8) correctly asserts, transpersonal and draws from many bodies simultaneously.

For Spinoza, affects seem to primarily originate from physical interactions of things: '[t]he human body is capable of perceiving very many things, and the more so, the more its body can be disposed in several ways' (*E*IIp14). However, that does not isolate the mind, since 'the human mind must perceive everything that happens in the human body; therefore, the human mind is capable of perceiving very many things' (*E*IIp14d). Spinoza's parallelism between the body and the mind would simply render impossible separate affections or the affection of one without the other (Hübner 2017: 41). Modifications (positive and negative alike) in both the attributes of thought and extension (i.e. in both the mind and the body) 'occur in encounters between the individual and other finite things' (Brown and Stenner 2001: 89), and in face-to-face conditions those encounters used to clearly be primarily between things—extensions rather than thoughts, the latter being modified as a corollary. However, in today's mediatised environment the affective capacity of the mind takes clear pre-eminence: the current environment is more about thoughts encountering thoughts. Here one deals with affective capacity without an immediate physical presence and

physical affect but with the presence of mental affection instead. Due to the changes brought forth by today's communication technologies, a co-consciousness is being established that extends across both space and time (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 106). Prior to the current stage of mediatisation, '*we were where our bodies were*' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 90), more or less confined in affective capacity to the physical confines of existence whereas today asking where people are is relatively pointless as their physical and affective presence often does not necessarily coincide: a person might be sitting e.g. on a train, at a park, or in a classroom while simultaneously being engaged in multiple online affective interactions with individuals who are themselves physically present at multiple locations globally. Nevertheless, as Damasio (2018) demonstrates, the bodily element never goes away: even in an era of primarily mental affects, the body is not sidelined and the parallelism between the body and the mind still holds. It is not a disembodied mind that experiences the affects: instead, the mind needs the participation of the body for the relevant experience just like the body needs the mind to inform it as to what it is to be experienced.

Since an experienced affect (being affected) is in the affecting and not the affected thing, it likewise depends on the characteristics of the affector rather than the affectee. As a result, every type of thing affects us in its own unique and characteristic way, and there are as many different types of affects as there are different types of external things (*E*IIIp56). At the same time, however, it is impossible not to affect one's environment in return. First of all, since, as has already been shown, being affected diminishes one's power and, therefore, existence, exclusive outside affection would ultimately nullify one's own existence, violating the *conatus* principle. And secondly, strict causation applied by Spinoza precludes the existence of purely passive objects; instead, '[n]othing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow' (*E*Ip36), meaning that the very fact of our existence is unavoidably affecting others. To this extent, affective capacity (inward and outward) can only be seen as 'a constant feature of the human condition' (Ruddick 2010: 27) and one that is constantly caught within a process as 'a state of *becoming*, not being; a social act, a co-production' (Ruddick 2010: 30) or, as Deleuze puts rather cryptically, 'passages, becomings, rises and falls, continuous variations of power that pass from one state to another' (Deleuze 1997: 22). In either case, constant fluidity in and through affective interactions is crucial. Such an endless turmoil of interactions is particularly

evident today, when people are under an increasing expectation that they keep all channels open at all times, permanently directing themselves towards and opening to the world (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 113). That means maximising the capacity of affecting others and being affected in return. However, that also means potentially stretching affective capacity to its very limit where human relationship with the surroundings can no longer be managed properly but has to rely on shortcuts of various sorts, emotional ones being the strongest (hence, the Experience Age). If all is just one big set of interactions happening at an increasing speed and placing increasing demands, only those interactive nodes that offer exceptional stimulation will attract sufficient attention to be experienced at least relatively fully.

From a Spinozist perspective, affects not only (positively or negatively) contribute to our perseverance in existence: they are our main means of encountering and perceiving the world, which we do in a non-neutral fashion, immediately attaching a certain load, depending on how we are affected: as James (2016: 116) puts it, '[w]e encounter frightening enemies rather than men with weapons, welcoming friends rather than people with open arms, and these affects in turn shape our conscious and unconscious desires'. In this context, passage to the Experience Age and the ensuing post-truth condition are to be seen as a radicalisation of what has already been the case: while previously affective encounters had to be rationalised and fitted within dominant schemes of interpretation, the current situation amounts to liberation of affects through their immediate non-reflective application. Particularly in the online environment, the expression of the self can, and therefore has to, be maximised (Papacharissi 2012; Maireder et al. 2017) while the constant flow of stimulation progressively numbs the ability to detect less captivating affects. Moreover, today's incessant connectivity makes multi-tasking (including in affective terms) a must, thereby affecting any sense of what is present by importing 'the time-signals and time-related obligations from multiple activities into a *single* time-flow' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 111). One's cognitive and affective capacities are stretched while co-creation of the social world is made increasingly amorphous, again determining that only the most pleasure-maximising affects are detected by us and, as a corollary, that only the most-pleasure-maximising affects transmitted by us are detected by others.

Through the primacy of affective interactions, the dichotomy between exteriority and interiority must also be brought into question. As Jaquet

(2017: 71) asserts, 'Spinoza reveals that *what we believe to be internal is in reality external*', i.e. 'what appears as a determination from within is a determination from without that is ignored'. The same inextricable relationality is also picked up by Deleuze (1988: 125) by stressing that a body's 'interior is only a selected exterior and exterior, a projected interior'. In other words, affective exchange, i.e. the state of being affected and affecting in return, immerses all things into causal chains where even an action of which one is a cause has been determined by an earlier instance of being affected. Indeed, as research into the workings of the mind demonstrates, personal identity, at its core, is 'essentially linked to *the other*, that means the person we talk to and to whom we are responsible, be it a real or imaginary person' (Fuchs 2007: 380). Even more so, this social aspect of identity is internalised to an extent that '[t]here is an inner witness in most of our actions and intentions to whom we could give an account of what we did and justify what we are doing—an *implicit other*' (Fuchs 2007: 380). And in today's mediatised environment, communicative interactions are central, bringing forth an at least partly indeterminate socially co-created environment which takes primacy over the determinable physical environment. After all, '[c]ommunicative action is inherently "social": it is a practice of interaction', the latter in turn being structured through norms, rules and patterns acquired through socialisation, which is yet another form of interaction (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 30). Clearly, affective capacity is key here. Hence, 'what we think to be ours and belonging to us in an intimate and singular way […] is in part the result of the intervention of external causes, of the way in which we are affected by them and how we imagine them' (Jaquet 2017: 71–72). Coupled with the tendency to imitate affects, the above leads to appreciating the fact that even 'our judgments are not, strictly speaking, ours' but rather 'carry the trace of the way in which external things affect us' (Jaquet 2017: 72). Hence, decisions are typically made on the basis of expected decisions of others (Davis 2017: 144), which again brings back Spinoza's agreement in nature and imitation of affects. Also, such imitation opens up the self for internalisation of truth-claims that cause shared pleasure, particularly because, in doing so, the claims in question bring forth joint fulfilment of *conatus* as striving to persevere in existence.

Notably, as Jaquet (2017: 74) stresses, 'exteriority must be differentiated from otherness', since '[t]he others are not external if we agree in nature' and are therefore embroiled in a variety of affective exchanges.

The interactive nature of human existence can evidently be seen on the social level: after all, the social world is intersubjective since it is only understood through the many interactions that take place and shape between individuals, these interactions in turn being shaped by ones that had taken place before and providing foundation for those that will take place after them; but this intersubjective existence is also shaped through individual experiences of the environment, i.e. of everyday reality as it is both accessible through and affected by our bodily capacities (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 18–19). Hence, normally, there is both a mental and a physical aspect to interaction. However, we seem to be moving towards an era of both personalisation and disconnection of the mental/social from the physical, in particular through technologies (computers, tablets, smartphones etc.) that create enhanced capacities of displaying the self (from blogs to social media), and that, through 'the market and culture of apps', have 'regularised individual participation, visibility, sharing and networking' (Marshall and Henderson 2016: 8), thereby mediatising affective capacity. In fact, even the interplay between the social and physical worlds can be affected—in a sense, mediatised—through augmented reality and other technological innovations. Rather disturbingly, then, as Couldry and Hepp (2017: 99) insightfully note, a physical environment in which one has internet connection (through a wireless, mobile, or any other network) is significantly different in experiential and affective terms from one in which such capacity is limited or absent.

There has indeed been 'a change in the *basic* conditions for any social actor to exist *as such*: the self is expected in many societies to be available for interaction through digital platforms and even feels a certain pressure to represent itself on these platforms' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 145). One must also expand social affective relationships to encounters between humans and non-living things. Physical encounters between these two kinds of things are, of course, naturally occurring phenomena, and clearly formed part of Spinoza's consideration when theorising affects as beginning with a bodily impression. However, today one has to open themselves to the inclusion of 'software equipped with the ability to act and pass itself off as a human being and a social Self on social networking platforms', thereby opening 'a new frontier of human experience, that of robosociality' (Gehl and Bakardjieva 2017: 2). No less profoundly, the way in which humans '*are in the world*' has changed in this world of 'self-*projection*' and 'self-*promotion*' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 148). As Kwon and Kwon (2015) demonstrate, there is an

incessant need to constantly present and assert a certain version of the self, both symbolically (e.g. through publicly arrogating certain attributes) and literally (e.g. through selfies). In this way, '[t]he digital image inserts a technical framing into the present, expanding bodily affectivity' (Clough 2008: 6). One could easily label this new age—the Experience Age—as the age of an almost Baroque-like embellishment of the self, and this paradigm shift also has a direct effect on how affective capacity is played out. In fact, affect, disembodied from the physical extension of the person, becomes paramount, going beyond what Spinoza had conceived. The human person is *in* their disembodied affect, and thus the striving to persevere in existence becomes about maximisation of the affective capacity of the digital effigy of the self. But this change also has an even broader corollary: if even at the heart of human existence—the domain of the self—disembodiment takes hold, it is not surprising that truth claims experience their own version of disembodiment as well: what characterises a truth-claim is its affective capacity rather than correspondence with something that underlies it, such as verifiable facts. And a truth-claim with a strong affective capacity is capable of imprinting itself on the affective effigies of the human selves, affecting the affective capacities of such selves and subsequently becoming entrenched in the social world through the affective interrelations of those effigy-selves on whom it had imprinted itself.

The self has to be *managed* and *performed* (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 145–146)—this, in a mediatised environment, is a true art and craft of the self. This idea of the self as a work of art further adds to the disconnect between the verifiable and represented truths, discussed in the previous chapter. If one is constantly immersed in crafting an embellished effigy of the self, one is more likely to omit an effort of verification in other circumstances as well—verifiability is simply relegated in the order of values, or else, the ever-increasing gap between the embodied self and the effigy of the self would become unbearable. Here, post-truth in and of itself clearly becomes a kind of substitute endeavour to persevere in existence by striving to eliminate negative emotions. Similar processes are put forward even in certain Spinoza-inspired projects for improving the general social and political welfare of societies: for example, Trott (2017) would put forward as a revolutionary strategy identification of the painful passions and replacement of them with their opposites—pleasurable emotions that increase our affective capacity and, hence, existence. That might indeed work, but the revolution would be of a certain kind—one

offered by the Experience Age. Indeed, the Experience Age and the related post-truth condition play on pleasurable affects that, in Spinoza's thinking, positively contribute to the striving to persevere in existence. If post-truth narratives enable individuals to maximise their satisfaction with themselves and the environment, they definitely are pleasurable affects in Spinoza's sense, increasing the power of existence.

The central role of *conatus* enables Spinoza to equate existence (or reality), power, perfection, and virtue. Definitely, since the existence (or reality) of a thing lies in its capacity to affect the environment, existence and power to affect must be one and the same (see e.g. *E*Ip9s). That allows Spinoza to subsequently assert that 'the perfection of things is to be estimated from their nature and power alone' (*E*Iapp). Again, the more power a thing has, the more it exists and, since perseverance in existence is the essence of each thing, more power to persevere leads to being a more perfect example of an existing thing of one's kind. Moreover, since perfection equals power, it must also equal reality (*E*IVpref). And then, since it is virtuous to persevere in existence and become a more perfect example of one's nature, virtue and power must be the same as well (*E*IVd8). As Spinoza puts it, '[v]irtue is human power itself', defined through *conatus*; therefore, '[t]he more […] each person endeavours to persevere in his being, an is able to do so, the more he is endowed with virtue' (*E*IVp20d). Hence, particular strivings for acquisition as well as acquisitions already achieved, i.e. manifestations of power-qua-existence, characterise every particular thing; in other words, 'a thing's *essence is determinable as particular exercises of power*, that is, as particular cases of striving' (Hübner 2017: 46). And in today's mediatised environment in which digital social interactions take primacy, power and virtue is found in that which increases one's social presence, including post-truth narratives that serve to fulfil the desire for an aspirational enhancement and fulfilment of the self. To that extent, by applying Spinoza's analogy, post-truth is good and virtuous.

Moreover, particularly when it comes to complex things, and human beings in particular, *conatus* as an endeavour to persevere in existence, is not simply instinctive—it also contains, at least in its active form (i.e. when the mind is conscious of what is happening and why), a cognitive aspect. It is this conscious endeavour that Spinoza understands as will, while when applied simultaneously to the body and the mind, it becomes an appetite; meanwhile, 'desire is appetite together with a consciousness of the appetite' (*E*IIIp9s); by implication, then, appetite and, thereby,

desire are 'nothing other than the very essence of man' (*E*IIIp9s). As per above, this appetite, or desire, means permanent striving for pleasure, meaning, in turn, an increase in the power of existence. As a result, maximisation of satisfaction while choosing to consume a particular media product, information included, becomes not an aberration but a natural corollary to human essence, i.e. the striving to fill the deficit at the heart of existence.

Despite his rationalism, Spinoza did admit that most judgements that humans make are emotive in their nature: 'it is in accordance with his own emotion that each person judges, i.e. estimates, what is good, what is bad, what is better, what is worse, and finally what is the best or what is the worst' (*E*IIIp39s). This characteristic has potentially perilous consequences for human sociability: while the substance of social bonds is in human agreement in nature, from emotive decision-making 'it follows that men can vary both in judgement and in emotion' (*E*IIIp51s)', thus severely hindering agreement and sociability. Nevertheless, some collective striving still has to be established, leading to a collective striving to persevere in covering the deficit of existence. This is where post-truth narratives may enter Spinozist thinking as substitute strivings to persevere in existence or attempts to fill in the foundational deficit. Particularly under the premise outlined in the previous chapter, namely that that post-truth politics might be particularly attractive for those facing some form of (actual or perceived) marginalisation (i.e. being aspirational in nature), we can easily treat post-truth as a strategy of persevering in existence through adherence to affiliative, aspirational, truths by conflating emotive judgement with collective aspirational practices. Meanwhile, the aspirational quality of post-truth is primarily determined, as already shown in Chapter 2, through a collusion in producing political narratives and aspirations rather than being passively affected. In other words, adherents of post-truth narratives tend to strive to be active in a Spinozist sense—to be effective causes in their interaction with the environment. Here it must also be noted that '[o]f all the emotions which are related to the mind insofar as it acts, there are none apart from those which are related to pleasure or desire' (*E*IIIp59). By this reasoning, then, post-truth cannot but produce pleasure.

Admittedly, Spinoza would be among the first to stress the potential inadequacy of compelling narratives that give simple explanations of the world and human action. Indeed, it is, following Spinoza, a common fallacy of humans that they persuade themselves of all things happening

because of them or, at least, in relation to them and are thus 'bound to consider as most important in each thing that which was most useful to them, and to reckon as most excellent those things by which they were best affected' (*E*Iapp), even despite the fact that Nature in itself is neutral towards human successes and failures. This fallacy arises from a certain economy of effort whereby humans tend to fail to appreciate the causal complexity of nature, instead applying their own criteria of order and organisation: 'when things are so arranged that when they are represented to us by the senses that we can easily imagine them, and consequently can recollect them easily, we call them well ordered' and vice versa (*E*Iapp). Likewise, as noted in the previous chapter, a post-truth narrative will more than likely trump one that relies purely on verifiable factual accuracy just by being well-ordered and, therefore, more memorable—after all, without a grounding in facts, narrative structure is the main thing such narratives can lean upon for both their appeal and internal stability. Here, the importance of narratives is paramount, since they establish and maintain order. Nevertheless, since they produce fallacious perceptions of agency and causation, post-truth narratives could be seen as, at best, producing convoluted and confused representations of agency and causation. That presumption, however, rests on a world that had not yet been mediatised and loaded with a purely social version of reality, in which the self becomes immersed within narrativised environments, based on data and creating even more data for the same narratives to be enhanced or new ones to be built in a hermetic fashion until reality itself becomes a narrative that is being told to both oneself and to others. Hence, such narratives are never 'solitary works of isolated writers of their own life stories' but are, instead, 'constituted by a complex interaction between first-, second- and third-person perspectives. The others are not only the implicit authors and witnesses, but also the co-authors of our life stories' (Fuchs 2007: 380). That is a clear testament to affective capacity as we exist in and through the affective capacities of both ourselves and of others. That is particularly so in the context of mediatisation whence such affective interactions are increasingly the domain of digital effigies.

For Spinoza, truth and error are highly contextualised. In fact, 'the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines'; instead, 'the mind errs only insofar as it is considered as lacking an idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines as present to it' (*E*IIp17s). And here immediately one is faced with a challenge: exclusion of existence

is significantly less straightforward in an era dominated by primarily mental affects and mediatised access to the world. After all, what does it mean to have an idea of the presence or absence of existence of a particular thing, be it a human person or an artefact, that is only accessible in (or, at least, through) the media, social or otherwise, or affects us as a digital effigy (or, at least, avatar) in an online environment? Here, presence or absence is best understood not in an absolute but, instead, in a functional-pragmatic sense: if it works, it must be present. In other words, if something (increasingly—a digital something) causes an affect in us, we simply cannot have an idea that involves its absence. For example, when a digital effigy of a person interacts (i.e. exchanges affects) with a digital effigy of another person (and it must be noted that a single person can have, and usually has, multiple effigies in multiple contexts) and one effigy is imprinted with the affect of an other (and vice versa), it is immaterial whether the imprinted affect bears relation to the bodily presence (and bodily characteristics) of the person behind the affector effigy or not—the affect is imprinted on the affectee regardless. Not only the preceding is yet another manifestation of the primarily mental form of affective relations but also it is an indication of a novel criterion of truth and falsity. Both have to relate not to something absolute (like in the physical environment, where one can always check whether an object is present at a predefined place or not) but functional-pragmatic: something is true because it causes an affect (it becomes true through its own affect) and, likewise, false if we had considered something to be present but have failed to become affected by it. However, a notable caveat must be that the functional-pragmatic criterion of truth and falsity cannot provide for universally valid judgements: a determination of truth and falsity is exclusive to a particular social environment and, even more narrowly, to a specific interactive context within that social environment.

Next, one has to revisit, by way of an update, Spinoza's claim of the primacy of the bodily aspect of affect. In times when bodily encounters and face-to-face interaction are the norm, it is correct to say that 'the mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body' (*E*IIp23). Essentially, inclusion or exclusion of existence can in itself only be adequately applied to physical objects that either have or do not have an affective encounter and, thus, either leave or do not leave their imprint on the physical bodies to which the mind is parallel. Hence, mental affects necessitate their own criteria of (non)existence, and such criteria should relate to their ability or inability to leave

an imprint on the mind (i.e. be accepted or not accepted as noteworthy) and through that imprint, following Spinoza's parallelism, determine the body to action. When it comes to narratives, both empowering and disempowering ones can be conceived of as true in the sense that they leave either a positive or a negative, pleasurable or painful impression. In the same vein, all affiliative truths have to be regarded as true in the sense that they foster either promotion or negation (thus leaving an imprint on the mind) but only positive affiliation produces action. One might object that even those negatively affiliated may appear outwardly active in the sense of striving to negate or counter the truth-claim. However, following Spinoza's classification, such strivings can be seen at best as attempts to counter the negation of (social) existence produced by the relevant claim. Meanwhile, if one falls for a narrative that increases one's self-value by e.g. externalising (actual or perceived) failure and blame, that narrative 'works' by producing positive affective results within the ambit of one's (increasingly mediatised) social interactions while, in all likelihood, also fostering agreement in nature and collective partaking in the aspiration among those affiliated with that particular truth-claim. Then, emotion conflated with non-universally adequate (functional-pragmatic) knowledge becomes true, active, and positively contributing to the endeavour to persevere in existence through its own affects.

Notably, once a proponent manages to narrate a particular truth-claim into existence and it becomes the backbone of a socially interactive environment, reason must also be subjected to the functional-pragmatic treatment: reasonable is that, which works as reasonable in this particular socially interactive context, proving its reasonability through the positively affective results (those that help promote the striving to persevere in existence) that are being achieved by using it as a criterion, thereby enabling a multiplicity of truth-claims. Again, such application must be seen as, and only as, context-specific. If that, which is thought to be reasonable, passes the functional-pragmatic test, it unavoidably becomes the basis for agreement in nature within that specific context, leading to aspirational affective interactions and shared perseverance in existence. After all, the key idea is this: we strive (as we have to) to achieve what is useful to us, what increases our power of existence (meaning, by implication, that our impetuses are, insofar as we are active, aspirational) within a particular social milieu composed of a plethora of simultaneous interactions across space and time that characterise the present stage of mediatised human sociality. Since *conatus* never ceases due to the deficit of existence

at the heart of human essence, this aspirational drive, striving for greater power, virtue, perfection, and pleasure (all being the same) also never ceases, thus continuously generating new contexts for interaction, even if that means embracing post-truth.

Given the aspirational quality of post-truth, it becomes a particularly apt tool for collective achievement of a shared experience of pleasure and temporary negation of the deficit of existence (a negation that, as will be demonstrated in the final chapter, can always be *only* temporary). One might object, of course, that falling for a pre-manufactured narrative that has specifically been designed to appeal to the preconceptions of the target audience refers to being acted upon rather than actively promoting one's own existence. However, to reiterate once again, post-truth is a collusion, so we cannot assume that those falling for post-truth narratives are passive, i.e. that they are primarily acted upon. In fact, they are involved in active acclamation, realising the aspirational nature of existence, reflected in the constant endeavour to persevere in being. It is in the acclamative action—collective public exaltation—that a truth-claim acquires its political meaning and significance (see, notably, Schmitt 2008: 273), thereby becoming worthy of having been made (i.e. becoming an artefact within the political domain only through being acclaimed) while at the same time the acclaiming public is transmuted (or transmutes itself) from an agglomeration of individuals to its collective presence as 'citizens with an opinion' (Kennedy 2004: 133). Such is, then, the contemporary transformation of even a striving based on (contextually) adequate knowledge.

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CHAPTER 4

Making the Theory Political

Abstract This chapter opens with a consideration of the relationship between representation and reality by discussing mimesis and verisimilitude to account for both the immersive inadequacy and criteria for truthlikeness of narratives. The chapter then proceeds with a consideration of the social and personal importance of narratives as structurers and upholders of identity, social as well as personal. The second part of the chapter first considers the relationship between post-truth and postmodern relativism before focusing on competition between and entrenchment of truth-claims (thereby providing partial stability to the social), mostly focusing on the ideas of Laclau while also updating some of his claims for the current environment. The chapter concludes with a discussion of striving for pleasure as a deeply engrained motivating principle of human action.

Keywords Mimesis · Verisimilitude · Narrative · Memory · Identity
Laclau · Affective investment

This chapter opens with a discussion of the relationship between representation and truth through mimesis and verisimilitude and, therefore, the appeal of post-truth narratives as they prevail even despite their non-reliance on verifiable facts. It first traces the Ancient Greek origins of mimesis, particularly focusing on Plato's emphasis on the inadequacy of mimetic representation. The analysis then moves to the

aesthetic dimension of mimesis, also focusing on its imperfection but adding a degree of audience involvement as well, whereby the incompleteness of imitation opens a gap for the experiencing subject to enter a narrative and become immersed in it. Subsequently, verisimilitude, or truthlikeness, is discussed. From a scientific positivist perspective, verisimilitude is an inextricably practical concept: it denotes what works and what does not in explaining and predicting phenomena. Even though the complete truth might not (yet) be available, some theories are more truthlike than others and, therefore, superior. Therefore, if a post-truth narrative is capable of explaining and predicting the world as it is experienced by a particular group, it can be considered valuable solely through its verisimilitude. The latter attribute is reinforced through a take on verisimilitude borrowed from rhetoric and art as closeness to the audience's perception and reception of the world.

Emphasis then shifts to the human need for a pre-understanding of reality, provided by narratives that seemingly demonstrate how things are and/or should be. In fact, narratives have been shown in psychology research to be the basis of individual and collective identity. Hence, politics is dependent on stories that legitimise claims and inspire to action, whatever their factual basis. But narratives are also crucial for the formation and maintenance of memories, understood as multi-layered accounts of the past that inform the present and thereby form the substance of identity. Not only we tell stories about ourselves but also our identities are always at an intersection between personal narratives and the hegemonic practices of collective memory. A crucial role in this process is also played by the self, which is born out of reflexive action and maintains identity as stable and recognisable over time, retroactively if necessary.

The final part of the chapter deals with considerations of the pleasure of illusion, particularly in the context of mediatisation, and (returning to the fictionality of post-truth) the fictional nature of all expectations and purposive action. Such fictional goals are further strengthened through imagination and identification and have, as their ultimate impetus, the striving for pleasure, i.e. for covering the deficit of existence. Given the importance of the functional-pragmatic test in the mediatised environment, it becomes clear that truth has, at the very best, limited intrinsic value. The most important element is, instead, the conatus-enhancing deficit-covering pleasure, derived from the interactions of our affective effigies (as they have been described in the second chapter). The preceding, of course, has the effect of establishing a plurality of competing

narratives and truth-claims, all serving, in their own different ways, a deficit-covering function. However, some of the competing offerings within this narrative market have a larger share than others. That is explained through hegemonic entrenchment of some accounts and their positioning as the grounding of the self for large sections of the population, with the appeal to reflecting and, through that appeal, creating 'the people', drawing primarily on Ernesto Laclau.

4.1   Living to Tell the Tale

The title of this subchapter intentionally quotes the autobiography of Gabriel García Márquez, one of the greats of magical realism. This literary movement has certain similarities with post-truth, particularly in the presence of quasi-mythical narratives in which a story is more than just a story but, at least in part, an allegory, telling its own truth that is unconcerned with the constraints of strict adherence to what is realistically possible or, rather, one that is 'realistic' in a different way—one that prioritises explanation of the lived environment, particularly in cases where creation of alternative worlds has more explanatory potency than strict adherence to verifiable facts. Considering post-truth as a form of escapist fiction that trades verifiable facts for a narrative that had been specifically constructed to maximise the pleasure of consumption by creating an alternative reality tailored to the audience's needs (or, rather, desires), it is highly relevant to begin by reviewing two concepts that deal with an account's relation to reality (albeit in different ways): mimesis and verisimilitude. It is held that both can shed light on the inner workings of post-truth narratives as well as on the reasons for their acceptance. Subsequently, the structure and role of narratives themselves is discussed while also extending that to the domain of the self, including memories as internalised narratives.

Mimesis was conceived of in Ancient Greece as mimicry, representation, or imitation (Gebauer and Wulf 1995; Clay 2000: 18), referring to 'what people do, not what things are', a relationship '*between an action* (i.e. a *process*) *and its model*' (Bakker 1999: 16). However, it was most probably Plato who first used it as a theoretical term in three different but interrelated senses: first, as dramatic impersonation, second, as learning through imitation of behaviour and, finally, 'both the total act of poetic representation and the audience's emotional identification with the performance' (Haskins 2000: 8–9; see also Bakker 1999: 17). For Plato,

however, mimesis was something that had to be rejected, primarily due to 'its woeful inadequacy and incompleteness with respect to the subject matter and its corrupting effect on the listener' (Haskins 2000: 9). As for the first issue (inadequacy), the crux of the matter is that mimesis, for Plato, is concerned not with the thing in itself but with representation and appearance only (Plato, *Republic* XIII: 598b), thereby making any consideration of truth secondary at best. In fact, for Plato, mimesis suffers from a *triple* remove from reality: first, there is the idea of the thing, second, the thing as such, produced e.g. by a master craftsman and already merely approximating the idea of the ideal thing, and third, mimetic representation (*Republic* XIII: 597b–598b; see also Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 38–37; Kalpokas 2016: 127). Therefore, Plato takes mimesis to relate to the lower, irrational, part of the mind only (*Republic* XIII: 600e–601b, 603a–605c). To a large extent, post-truth embraces the structure of Platonic mimesis: it is not concerned with facts (or, even more broadly, tangible reality as such) but, instead, engages in narrating *a version of* reality that is meaningful primarily in its own discursive universe. Nevertheless, post-truth can be seen as taking a step even further—whereas mimesis strives for representation of reality, however faulty, post-truth is about *presentation* of a form of reality.

It is not surprising that mimesis has become a prominent concept in art and, particularly, literature studies. Perhaps most famously, Auerbach applies mimesis in his fundamental study of Western literature as 'the interpretation of reality through literary representation or "imitation"' (Auerbach 1957: 489). There is, however, more to mimesis than art: in fact, it can easily be seen as a paramount principle of human life, since by being 'an imitative representation of life', mimesis also constitutes 'a fundamental property of human symbolic activity' (Feldman 2005: 503). Notably, mimesis is prior to language and even prior to humans, particularly if extended to refer to imitation of bodily behaviour. In its most primitive form, mimesis provides for bodily representations which, when shared across a community, solidify into conventions defining that community (Zlatev 2008: 148). In fact, 'the concept of bodily mimesis […] can be both supported by and help make sense of evidence from primatology and neuroscience', since 'it suggests a particular evolutionary scenario: from proto-mimesis, which is largely shared by primates, to mimesis proper for which humans are uniquely adapted […] to language itself' (Zlatev 2008: 148). Now referring back to the desire arising from the deficit of existence and its primacy over any other potential drives

that could instigate human action, a mimetic, imitational, aspect must be present there as well. Indeed, one could refer to mimetic desire as one that relies on 'incarnate models of desire' (Rosenberg 2017: 155), thereby transferring knowledge of what is to be desired by the adherents of a community, the latter itself being made present through a shared identity-founding story, i.e. self-mimesis (post-truth or otherwise, although perhaps any community, with regards to its supposed objectivity, must be, to an extent, 'post-truth', or in Anderson's (1991) sense, 'imagined'). Hence, a narrative that makes sense and gives meaning, one that provides a shared understanding of what (re)presentation of reality should be taken for granted and how the desire to follow conatus should be followed (a community's self-mimesis) is key.

On a personal level, the mediatised effigy-self is a (re)presentation, an exercise in mimesis as the self is (re)presented to the world and done so not as a thing-in-itself but as a version of the self, optimised for affective impact on others and positioned to be affected in return. After all, 'except in entirely automatic exchanges, all representation provokes a more or less intense affective reaction' (Costa Lima 2013: 150), and that affective exchange is the true locus of mimesis, the latter then relating to both the subject and the object, the affectee and the affector. Even if mimesis is to lead towards the loss of one's self in that which is put forth, mimesis must still refer to co-production: the object of mimesis (an artefact, an action, or a narrative) only materialises in an affective interchange between the creator of the object (the affector, whose affective capacity is mediated by the object of mimesis) and the one who apprehends that object (the affectee, whose affective capacity is also mediated by the object of mimesis). Hence, the mediatised self also arises from an affective interrelationship between the self and the environment and is constantly determined and re-determined through that interaction rather than being a mere representation or imitation of some 'actual' self. The object of mimesis is not only actualised but, in fact, exists in and through the different effects had on each of the affectees and each of those will very likely be different from the one intended by the affector (the person behind the effigy-self or the author of an artefact or a narrative); to further underscore the point, the object of mimesis 'exists and is alive only in the cross-fire of affects produced in its receivers' (Costa Lima 2013: 150). It is in this affective exchange that the functional-pragmatic truth of the object of mimesis materialises, lending post-truth a characteristic feature: that of becoming true through its own effects.

The gap between formal representation and lived symbolic activity is bridged courtesy of the immersive quality of mimesis. For example, in Adorno's aesthetics, 'mimesis is a process by which the experiencing subject is absorbed, relinquished, or assimilated into harmony with the aesthetic object', thereby erasing the antinomy between the self and the other (Nicoll 2016: 24–25). However, such erasure is not a peaceful coming together of disparate elements: in fact, mimetic encounter represents a 'forceful struggle' in the aesthetic experience arena (Adorno 1997: 345). Instead of harmony or peaceful exchange, the object can make the subject 'lose their footing' and 'forget themselves and vanish into the work' (Adorno 1997: 244). Indeed, the mimetic encounter subsumes the self. That also brings up the second problematic aspect of mimesis as expressed by Plato: its captivation of the audience as if by a spell (Haskins 2000: 9; Kalpokas 2016: 127) whereby '[w]e surrender ourselves, let ourselves be carried along' (*Republic* XIII: 605d). In a similar fashion, although arguing from a different theoretical position, the aesthetic valence of the object is to be found not in the object itself but in 'the nature of the response that it is designed to elicit' (Matthen 2017: 6), thereby stressing the crucial importance of the collusive nature of aesthetic experience: it is in the balance between being affected (allowing for an affective imprint on oneself) and affecting in return (imprinting the aesthetic halo of the mimetic object with an imprint of one's own mode of existence), between losing oneself and making the author's plan lost. In either way, that implies a particularly deep engagement as we immerse ourselves in the affective encounter anyway. Particularly with mediatisation in mind, whereby affective interactions of effigy selves account for if not the entirety, then at least the majority of relevant reality. A mimetic structure that simultaneously directs interactions and, through participant immersion, is also co-constructed by them stands in for any verifiable factual constraints. Post-truth, as defined by the irrelevance of the distinction between truth and falsehood, is then a natural condition: it suffices that the (re)presentation (truth-claim) is effective in entangling individuals in this simultaneous internal–external causation.

Since the relation between representation and an underlying reality has already been rendered problematic by mimesis, it is now time to engage with some of the controversies regarding verisimilitude, or truth-likeness, of claims. Much of the debate on verisimilitude has taken place

within the philosophy of science, where the key function of verisimilitude is broadly understood as to 'specify rigorously what it takes, in general, for one theory to be *closer to the truth* (or *more truthlike*) than another' (Oddie 1981: 237). Generally, two aspects are necessary: '*actual* closeness to the truth of a theory' and 'the *estimated value* of this closeness under some empirical evidence' (Zamora Bonilla 1999: 333–334). Under an alternative definition, 'verisimilitude is a matter of how closely a model's postulated causal weightings replicate the true causal weightings'; in other words, it is a matter of whether, and how well, the causes that are truly the most important ones have been captured by the model (Northcott 2013: 1477). That is to be preferred over a more expansive definition, given by e.g. Cevolani and Tambolo (2013a: 922) for whom '[a] theory is highly verisimilar if it says many things about the target domain, and if many of these things are (almost exactly) true'. Notably, being simply data-rich and having a large proportion of that data in sync with reality (or what is known about it) is not enough. That is particularly the case if one considers that mere greater approximation to truth is not the only (and perhaps not even the main) cognitive virtue: one also has to take predictive and explanatory power into account (Volpe 1995: 580). The latter, however, opens up possibilities for post-truth to enter the fray (although, perhaps, more so in social interactions than in e.g. natural sciences): if a truth-claim is well-structured and provides a compelling narrative, then it can exert a strong explanatory power and have predictive potential as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Essentially, verisimilitude becomes an important factor due to the inherent limitations of human knowledge: not only many inquiries fail to reach the truth of the matter but also 'in many inquiries it is extremely unlikely that the aim will ever be achieved' (Oddie 1986: 163). To that effect, verisimilitude enables progress without simultaneously demanding that the full truth be suddenly revealed: it suffices that a theory becomes more truthlike than ever before or a new, more truthlike, theory replaces an old one, even if neither account for the full truth (Oddie 1986: 163). In other words, there is still effective progress in cases where 'a false but highly verisimilar theory' replaces one that is both false and less verisimilar (Cevolani and Tambolo 2013a: 923). Verisimilitude, hence, bears a pragmatic aspect: it is about what works as true, particularly when a proposition's or a theory's exact relationship with truth is not entirely clear (Cevolani and Tambolo 2013b). Indeed, while on the one hand, empirical knowledge provides a benchmark according to which a theory

is assessed, on the other hand, even a theory that has been falsified does not lose its value automatically as 'a false theory can offer a description of the empirical facts more or less close to the true description of these facts' (Zamora Bonilla 1999: 335). This unavoidable inadequacy of knowledge clearly infers, then, that even though 'the (whole) truth is seen as the ideal goal of inquiry', realistically, 'the main cognitive goal of scientific research is assumed to be the search for highly verisimilar theories, i.e. theories which, although presumably false, are close to the truth' (Cevolani and Tambolo 2013a: 927). After all, many scientists themselves understand that they may well be incorrect; in fact, 'they are pretty certain that the accepted corpus of scientific knowledge contains mistakes' while simultaneously being 'convinced that accepting such a corpus is their best option for approaching the truth' (Cevolani and Schurtz 2017: 220–221). If even the best scientific knowledge might not always produce ultimate and unchanging truth, then post-truth is, perhaps, not such a radical aberration. Of course, it does depart from things past in terms of its indifference for the distinction between truth and falsehood. However, just as emphasis on verisimilitude makes us more mindful of the practical explanatory value of empirical knowledge, verisimilar post-truth is that which explains the world and provides practical guidance, albeit appealing to a different understanding of 'what is'. If for empirical scientific knowledge measurable and verifiable phenomena provide the basis for 'what is', then for post-truth knowledge such basis lies in the lived experience of the adherents.

A (scientific) theory shares some traits with a narrative, particularly since it is not that much about the discovery of individual facts as they stand but about '*laws* or *regularities* about the world' (Zamora Bonilla 1999: 334). There are, thus, two factors on which a theory's epistemic value depends: first, 'the *similarity* between the image of the world offered by the theory' and one deriving from the empirical regularities that are already known, and second, 'the *amount of information about the world* that those regularities provide' (Zamora Bonilla 1999: 335). That is, in fact, precisely what an effective post-truth-claim must strive for: fitting within the ambit of what is known about the world by the audience (although such knowledge itself need not be factually accurate, just held so by the audience) and providing a maximum of explication of that information, particularly in a way that fits the audience. Thereby the possibility of a 'click' created through the conflation of verisimilitude and experiential satisfaction is maximised. But then,

depending on the desired foundations for that 'click', even judging the relative verisimilitude of several statements or explanations could well be highly complicated since 'they may not be, and are in fact quite unlikely to be, addressing an identical set of questions' (Suganami 2008: 342). Different narratives will address different needs and anxieties of the target audiences and, as such, can hardly be compared against one another: what will be verisimilar to some (due to addressing *their* concerns and conforming with *their* experience of the world) will not be verisimilar to others, for whom the emphasis is on completely different matters being explained or whose experience (and thus judging benchmark) is entirely different. As a result, in the absence of hierarchies of knowledge (and such disintegration in the wake of mediatisation is the main differentiating factor between post-truth verisimilitude and pre-post-truth verisimilitude), proliferation of truth-claims displaying subjective verisimilitude is unavoidable.

Moving towards its artistic incarnation, verisimilitude allows one to appreciate the lack of a 'natural' relationship between the object and the perceiver as this relationship is always ridden with questions of interpretive authority and struggle to arrogate such authority (Tresch 1997: 275–276). Without such direct and natural relationship, what the perception of a work of art can lean upon is 'a compelling sense of reality and truth' (Helmick 1995: 505). Hence, the gap between some underlying 'truth' and its perception is very similar in both scientific and artistic verisimilitude. Meanwhile, from an author's point of view, achievement of verisimilitude would amount to imparting 'a feeling of familiarity, reality, and truth' by employing an abstract medium (Helmick 1995: 505). The above applies particularly well to fiction, since due to language being 'a symbolically coded form of communication' it is impossible for the writer to put forth 'a clone of the truth being expressed'; the only way of overcoming this deficiency is through allowing the reader to imagine the described reality, thereby causing 'a sense of verisimilitude to arise in the reader' (Helmick 1995: 505). Here one should emphasise precisely the *sense* of verisimilitude as the key factor that attracts audiences. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that in conveying a narrative, the degree of verisimilitude must match the nature and needs of the target audience (Lindsay et al. 2009: 231). Today's emphasis on data and conforming to pre-mined audience perceptions notwithstanding, it has been noted at least since Cicero that popular repute, or *fama vulgi* can, at least under some circumstances, replace truth and forms a testimony

in itself (Kempshall 2011: 285, citing Cicero's *Topica*); popular beliefs and rumours may be false and deceptive but they 'can also represent the common opinion of the community (*consensus civitatis*) and, as such, should be allowed to stand as public testimony' (Kempshall 2011: 286, citing Quintilian's *Instituto Oratoria*). The art is, therefore, not to completely manufacture arguments but to use what already circulates among the public as supporting material for the case being made, rendering credibility and appropriateness to a particular case, rather than certainty, the key goal to be achieved (Kempshall 2011: 285, 295). Notably, the narrative will seem plausible to the audiences if its subject 'conforms to nature [...], to popular custom (*mos vulgi*) and to the expectation or opinion of the audience (*opinio eorum qui audient*)', all of which will, in combination, 'give it the appearance, or similitude, of truth (*verisimilitudo*)' (Kempshall 2011: 320–321, citing Cicero, *De Inventione*). Rhetoric thus becomes a completely teleological activity in which the aim is to achieve an intended effect on the audience while the means are situation-specific but always subservient to the goal. As a result, verifiability and all that pertains to it are secondary to the effect produced: 'the truth or falsity of the argument makes no difference if only it has the appearance of truth' (Boethius, *De Topicis Differentiis* c.f. Kempshall 2011: 319). Hence, the more closely a pre-existing audience experience of truth is mimicked, the more truthlike—verisimilar—the narrative will be perceived to be, bringing us back to one of the main principles of post-truth communication. Notably, the functional-pragmatic nature of post-truth-claims manifests itself again and the more so the more verisimilar the claims are: such claims are true through its own affects. In other words, if a truth-claim causes an emotion that it would have caused if it was real, it is real, at least within that specific context; and as seen in the discussion of the Experience Age, if something makes sense emotionally, or experientially, it also makes sense evidentially.

Both mimesis and verisimilitude are, of course, key features of any narrative structure, and post-truth-claims are no exception. It has already also been stressed, particularly in the first chapter, that narratives are of paramount importance to the way in which human life is to be lived. In fact, narratives play a fundamental role already at the intersection between the personal and the social, whereby 'our everyday dealing with others already implies a narrative "pre-understanding" which may, but does not necessarily have to be, put into the words of an explicit story' (Fuchs 2007: 380). As such, narratives perform an explanatory

function by giving an account of the past, explaining and naturalising the present, and outlining what the future might hold (Holmstrom 2015: 120). This crucial role played by narratives is usually 'attributed to the assumption that human beings have a natural tendency to think in narratives' (Shenhav 2005: 76), or to '"story the world", thinking more in terms of narrative structures than logical arguments or legal formations' (Zellman 2015: 494). Thus, humans can aptly be called 'narrative beings' that construct their selves out of stories (Baldwin 2008: 223). As psychological research demonstrates, people tend to 'think, understand, imagine and make moral decisions according to narrative-based structures' (Shenhav 2005: 76). Narratives thus provide a clear form and structure to expectations, actions, motives, and meanings, acting as 'lenses through which groups and individuals view themselves and their opponents' (Ross 2007: 315–316). It is hardly surprising that out of the range of narratives that are now available for selection across media of all sorts individuals will chose that which appears to be the best at explicating their own situation (i.e. holds the greatest degree of verisimilitude to them). However, mere explanatory power is likely not to be sufficient: as already established in the first chapter, what makes falling for post-truth narratives particularly likely is the aspirational load that provides a certain teleology of affect: one affectively invests in a narrative that offers a redemption of the present condition and a future in which one is rendered 'great again'.

On a personal level, narratives never act as simple and neutral recollections of facts; instead, individuals 'turn episodes in time into subjective, meaningful experiences' that, in turn, 'shape self-identity, guide future behaviour, and connect individuals to others' while also facilitating the organisation and understanding of both events and the individuals themselves (Graci and Fivush 2017: 489). Through this 'integrated story of the self', the whole of life is invested with meaning, unity, and purpose (Pemberton and Aarten 2018: 544). The selection from the various narrative lenses and interpretations is not a dispassionate one. Rather, 'it is in the relationship between *affect* and *cognition* that the motivational basis of stories can be identified'; hence, emotions play a primary role when it comes to narrative engagement (Hammack and Pilecki 2012: 89). However, narratives, even personal ones and even those relating to personal memories, do not simply arise out of nothing, since 'narrativity is essentially an inter-personal activity' and, as such, it is also deeply implicated within existing power relations; hence, it is largely

unavoidable that 'some people find their stories marginalised, themselves as narrators dispossessed' (Baldwin 2008: 223). On the other hand, narratives can also easily serve a counter-hegemonic function—they 'can subvert the status quo and open the door to new ways of telling, and thus new ways of being' (Baldwin 2008: 223; see also Ewick and Silbey 1995). Hence, post-truth can be seen as a radical move towards emancipation whereby not only the status quo of knowledge but also the status quo of legitimate ways of knowing is subverted, putting emphasis primarily on emotional (affective) ways of knowing.

The collective aspect of narratives has served to produce myths that have led to solidification of the social world and provision of shared explanations of the environment (Nelson 2003: 127). In politics, myths are crucial in framing perceptions and worldviews as well as reactions to and feelings about the social and political (and, in many cases, physical as well) environment, thereby also determining our actions within that environment (Esch 2010: 363). Once again, myths perform a practical and teleological function because '[e]ven when it looks at the past, a political myth works as a means of acting on the present and therefore always aims to be a prophecy' (Bottici 2009: 378), at least in terms of a self-fulfilling prophecy. While the commonly attributed meaning of myth tends to imply 'fiction, deceit and error' (De Vriese 2017: 810), such a definition largely misses the point by ascribing to myth an ambition of telling, or at least pretending to tell, the whole truth—one that myth is not even supposed to have. The purpose of myth is not to provide a detailed and flawless account of the world but to allow orientation in it (Bottici 2007: 159–164); as such, '[m]yth is a product of the endless human attempt to minimise chaos and master the unknown' (Esch 2010: 362). Instead of merely describing the world, myth reduces the complexity of the world by ranking phenomena and artefacts according to their significance and, therefore, is an ever-evolving entity, always relating to the present and the needs of the current situation (Esch 2010: 362). Hence, myths 'are narratives that prompt people to action' for the reason that 'they answer a need for significance' (Bottici 2007: 183–184), thus manifesting a very practical, orientation-enabling, function of myth (De Vriese 2017: 815), discarding the fact-approximating aspect of verisimilitude and focusing instead on the latter's second attribute, i.e. explanation. Indeed, in both its practicality and lack of reality-representing ambition, myth can be see as an earlier, more traditional representation of post-truth.

Narratives are also of paramount importance on a personal level, particularly as individuals essentially seek to acquire control and mastery of meanings in order to affirm identities that are of crucial importance to them (Cast 2003: 185). Effectively, one here deals with 'a complex interaction between society, self, identity, remembrance, forgetting, and narrative' whereby we are simultaneously constructed and construct ourselves through stories and narratives (Gudmunsdottir 2017: 367). That only illustrates, once again, why a narrative, once it has been taken up, acquires personal veracity and significance, independent of factual veracity and significance, simply courtesy of having been taken up. Nevertheless, coherence remains key as we cannot seemingly randomly change our ways of existence or key perceptions of the environment (Naylor and Clare 2008: 591), since 'someone who is ruled only by his momentary impulses […] lacks an essential feature of what we call a person, namely autonomy' (Fuchs 2007: 380). Definitely, the loss of a coherent representation of the self would also be the loss of one's personality. Instead, stories—narratives—about one's environment are accommodated within an existing narrative of the self (and thus the self gives meanings to such changes) or, alternatively, if the environmental changes are overly radical, it is the narrative of the self that gets reconstructed but only in such a way that coherence is attributed retrospectively (Naylor and Clare 2008: 591). The former, of course, requires significantly less effort and determination, which is why post-truth usually tends to rely on pre-existing conceptions of the world, aiming to bring the world closer to the self and not vice versa, making post-truth a satisfaction-maximising choice of a narrative. For the most part, then, the self should be seen as 'not an entity but a state of feeling' (Eakin 2008: 75). Such human self is 'a complex, multi-dimensional construct, comprising beliefs, attitudes and information and providing a schematic framework for information processing' (Naylor and Clare 2008: 591). Moreover, the self easily acquires a representational character as well: after all, 'one must not only have a life, but also present it effectively to other people' (Nelson 2003: 134). And in today's mediatised environment, this (re)presentation, or self-mimesis, through affective exchange, primarily between digital effigies of the self, has become the main way of maintaining one's being in the (social) world.

Since coherence of the self's present and future as well as of one's emotions and strivings is of paramount importance (Harris et al. 2014: 559), the end result is a quasi-magical one: once we internalise a

narrative (about ourselves or about the environment), it will have always made sense. In this context, any 'evocation of our past selves is actually a reconstruction of our past identity so that it corresponds to our present self' (Duval et al. 2012: 263), i.e. to what was supposedly always meant to be; likewise, the present and the (reconstructed) past self lies at the heart of any imagination of the future self (Duval et al. 2012: 263), meaning that everything will, in the end, be as it has always supposedly been meant to be. Because maintenance of a coherent present self is key, it is the context, or the environment—or, rather, their perception—that are the most likely to change. Therefore, in order for the present to remain stable, the past is adjusted to have supposedly naturally led to the present situation and the present self; there is also a similar retroactive impact of the present expectations of the future as 'people who expect change (progress or decline) […] will revise the past upward or downward accordingly' (Wilson and Ross 2003: 138) or 'make highly accessible sets of memories and autobiographical knowledge that confirm and support important goals and self-images' (Conway 2005: 607). Hence, one can clearly observe confirmation bias at play not only in processing new information but also in processing the self, making post-truth easier to accept and, one accepted, reconcile with the pre-existing self. In fact, once we encounter an enticing narrative that we are desperate to be true, we will do everything in our power to revise even our innermost selves to make the narrative appeal verisimilar.

The self, meanwhile, is enabled and sustained by memory that provides '[k]nowledge of the self in the past, and as projected into the future', providing for the preservation, continuity, and enhancement of the self (Bluck 2003: 114) as well as being a source of direction and strength (Nelson 2003: 133–134). However, even when memories are personal and autobiographical, they are, nevertheless, multi-layered, and all those layers manifest themselves simultaneously; hence, when giving an account of something that has happened, personal experiences, news reports, the accounts told by others etc. will coalesce into one story, the summands of which are no longer distinguishable from one another (de Saint-Laurent 2018). Of course, not all autobiographical memories are equally vivid and, therefore, not all of them have an equally strong impact on the present: of particularly strong impact are those that are rich in details and episode-specific data, enabling 'mental time travel' of an individual's consciousness (Tanweer et al. 2010: 905). Such a reservation might, at first glance, seem to be a limitation to post-truth affects:

presumably, by bearing little, if any, relation to an underlying reality, they should only be able to affect individuals in a detail-poor way. However, that would only be the case in a traditional, non-mediatised, environment. Meanwhile, in a condition where affects are primarily caused by digital effigies of individuals, artefacts, and events, both truth and post-truth stand on an equal footing (or, in fact, post-truth has an advantage, since it can be manufactured to maximise its affective capacity while traditional truth is confined to itself).

However, the function of memory is far from being merely personal. In fact, when remembering, it is extremely difficult to separate the personal from the collective. And this collective memory is socially constructed and negotiated, representing a version of the collective past as it is invoked in the present and in the light of the present (de Saint-Laurent 2018). Due to its collective dimension, this kind of memory serves a clear border-drawing function by emphasising the differences between the ingroup and the outgroups (Tavani et al. 2017: 93). Hence, 'when people discover that they share similar cognitions (e.g. shared representations of the past), they tend to infer a common group membership' (Tavani et al. 2017: 93; see also Swaab et al. 2007), automatically perceiving and treating more favourably individuals with whom identical or very similar memories are shared than those with whom such a bond does not exist (Tavani et al. 2017: 104; see also Fiske et al. 2002). Since memories and cognitions are structured through narratives, it is, of course, of paramount importance to get one's own narrative taken up by the target audiences. Once this has happened, the very fact of having fallen for the same truth-claim will provide for both shared identity and a sense of credibility which, in the case of post-truth, is perhaps the strongest footing a claim can strive for.

Even at its best the allegedly objective and pre-given nature of collective memory can be strongly contested as social groups tend to 'construct the past(s) they need for their collective identity' (Birkner and Donk 2018: 6), thereby manifesting a clear goal-oriented functional-pragmatic aspect of collective memory. Presumably, whether the above need is best served by conventional truth or post-truth is of secondary importance. And while the dominance of a particular interpretation of the past, passing it off as an objective incarnation of the entire community (discussed in the subsequent section in terms of hegemony) could, of course, be achieved through forceful, economic, or some other means, in today's mediatised environment the most efficient way of doing so

would be through devising the most affective capacity-maximising narrative and disseminating it in the most efficient way possible (which is not to deny the importance of economic and other resources—after all, one needs significant investment in, e.g., big data analysis in order to devise an affective capacity-maximising narrative). However, discarded experiences (i.e. those which, for whatever reason, refuse to be subordinated to the dominant ways of remembering) still need to be vented. Such insurgent memory narratives would try to capitalise on the disparate and incongruent mnemonic fragments of those not represented in the mainstream discourse, i.e. of those who feel marginalised on a particular mnemonic issue, thus easily subsuming emancipation under the aspirational nature of post-truth.

Social media in particular act as 'a counter-public sphere' for groups that feel marginalised or ignored in the mainstream public sphere (Birkner and Donk 2018). In fact, as demonstrated in the first chapter, social media are perhaps the most emblematic mediatised environments for the spread of truth-claims regardless of their relation to verifiable facts—what matter there are, instead, the needs and wishes of the relevant audiences. An additional self-representation factor is at play, since on social media platforms, 'no longer encouraged to act out a role, we are forced to be "ourselves" (in a form that is no less theatrical or artificial)' (Lovink 2012: 13). Moreover, social media also help to compensate for the insurgent and, therefore, at least initially marginal nature of such narratives due to at least two commonplace fallacies: first, by assuming that 'that those forms of collectivity that become "readable" to us through the traces left on social media platforms […] are typical of *all* networks, groups, and individuals', thereby creating a (most likely) false impression of strength in numbers, and second, assuming that 'the special moments when those collectivities reach maximum intensity are typical of the *rest* of everyday life when activity may be quiet, or those collectivities no longer exist', thereby creating an impression (again, most likely a false one) of high salience of the issue and mnemonic narrative in question (Couldry 2015: 621). Therefore, as shown in the first chapter, post-truth narratives, despite at least initially being marginal and insurgent, are capable of locking their adherents within echo chambers that allow for much greater confidence in adherence than would otherwise be possible, sustaining and ultimately expanding the community of (post-truth) knowledge.

4.2   The Pleasure of Hegemony

Mediatised post-truth communities are paradoxical: on the one hand, they can be only loosely connected, necessitating very limited commonality while on the other hand enabling more and stronger relationships across distances than ever before. In a mediatised environment, even a relatively low level of interaction suffices—one that affirms at least some kind of relationship between digital affective effigies, even when limited to messaging each other or reacting to a status update or shared content to let the other know 'that you exist and affirm the other's existence' (Gitlin 2011: 211). Nevertheless, regularly interacting users 'can develop a sense of "remote intimacy", even when separated by great distances' (Berger 2015: 66), particularly when associated through a narrative that is 'simple, yet complete' (Holmstrom 2015: 120). However, this, final, section still has to delve even deeper into how such narratives are collectively enacted as well as how and why certain interpretations of the world achieve and retain their dominance while others do not. Certainly, sheer maximisation of pleasure plays a paramount role. However, structural factors must be looked into as well.

Some of the current authors writing on post-truth tend to emphasise the role played by a consciousness of the plurality of realities and recognition of the impossibility of truth—an 'infectious spread of pernicious relativism' (see, characteristically, d'Ancona 2017: 2, 98). It is thus not surprising that post-truth is rather commonly claimed to have been inspired by postmodernism, particularly by authors such as Lyotard or Baudrillard (see, characteristically, d'Ancona 2017: 105) or, even more broadly, that 'certain constructivists, postmodernists and postcolonial theorists, and even some feminists […] have contributed to the current climate in which truth, facts and rationality are treated with disdain' (Horsthemke 2017: 274). However, it would be difficult to explain the fidelity to and passion for particular truth-claims (the belief factor) if it was all about relativism and scepticism only. The error in such assertions would be in mistaking what is (the multiplicity of realities and relative impossibility of a universal Truth) for the consciousness of what is. If anything could be easily believed or seen as equally worthless, then there would be no political action in support for one's beliefs and for claims that require stepping out of the status quo and challenging prevailing ideas and patterns (because why bother doing something that requires effort). But that is manifestly not the case. Also, to claim that

ideas have been key driving factors in precipitating the fall from grace of Truth-with-a-capital-T would necessarily imply overlooking the technological developments (particularly pertaining to mediatisation) that have made such fall first possible and then unavoidable. In fact, post-truth is not inspired by postmodernism but is, instead, a testament to the insightfulness of at least some of the postmodernist thinkers who have been able to predict something akin to the post-truth condition decades ago. It is, therefore, only logical that, when discussing mediatisation, Hjarvard (2008: 110–111) refers to Baudrillard's idea of a simulacrum as something that has become more real than reality itself. Here, simulation 'is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality', with a representation effectively creating a reality that it claims to represent (Baudrillard 2001: 166): an image, in this situation, 'bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum' (Baudrillard 2001: 170). Likewise, post-truth narratives, due to their lack of anchoring in verifiable facts, primarily work by creating the reality that they claim to represent, i.e. offering an attractive and broadly sustainable escapist fiction that subsequently becomes true through its own effects.

In a similar—and highly important—fashion, Lyotard (1984: xxiv) describes the postmodern condition in terms of 'incredulity towards metanarratives'; even more ambitiously, knowledge, emancipated from such metanarratives, it is claimed, 'refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable' (Lyotard 1984: xxv). However, the actual practice of post-truth-claims and their affiliative nature, discussed in the first chapter, demonstrates that affective investment in particular assertions rather than openness is the most plausible result; one, therefore, encounters simultaneous disintegration of metanarratives and the rise in importance of smaller-scale niche narratives based on affiliative truth-claims that function *as if* they were metanarratives for the adherents. As a result, even though it might be true that the social bond 'is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality, an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules' (Lyotard 1984: 40), this might not be the case at the level of cognition. In fact, whereas postmodern thinkers may have done a good job in diagnosing the condition, this condition might well have in itself caused a defensive reaction, prompting stronger affiliation with whatever becomes affectively available and positively contributes to one's *conatus*. Hence, while an ethical stance suitable for the postmodern condition might be 'not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable

which cannot be presented' (Lyotard 1984: 81), it is precisely reality suppliers (and, in particular, pleasure-maximising reality suppliers) that have come to dominate public discourse. That might partly be explained by the caveat that openness to indeterminacy would necessitate us entertaining the consciousness of a deficit of existence.

Related to the above, for Spinoza, 'final causes are nothing but human inventions' (*E*Iapp.), and teleological action is a sign of inadequacy. But precisely for that reason, teleological orientation is a quintessentially human characteristic: not only humans have to endure a deficit at the heart of existence but also they are capable of devising strategies for covering such deficit (i.e. following their *conatus*), albeit not necessarily consciously. Nevertheless, it is unavoidable that prior to making a decision and, even prior to that, in cognising an attitude or an approach that would lead to the decision, 'one must have some mental representation of what that attitude object is' (Blinder 2015: 80), and narratives, regardless of their relation to verifiable facts, provide exactly that. The representations that serve as preconditions to decision-making are, therefore, often, if not usually, 'imagined', since they are derived not from direct experience but from mediated (and, it must be added, increasingly mediatised) encounters (Blinder 2015). Here one deals with 'fictional expectations', perhaps best defined as 'present imaginaries of future situations that provide orientation in decision making *despite* the incalculability of outcomes' (Beckert 2013: 325). These expectations are 'fictional' not because they are false or based on fantasies but due to the impossibility to foresee the future; as a result, one can at best rely on imagined future conditions, acting *as if* such imaginary was an accurate embodiment of the world to come (Beckert 2013: 325). As a result, action cannot be 'the realisation of an end that itself stands outside the action process'; instead, it is 'a progression in which ends and strategies are formed and revised based on contingent and changing interpretations of the situation' (Beckert 2013: 326). This constant shift can be only partly sutured by compelling order-creating narratives that prescribe goals and set limits as to what means are conceivable. And as already demonstrated in the first chapter, the most compelling narratives are of a post-truth kind, not least because they are specifically designed to be compelling and not shackled by the need to represent some underlying substance. Moreover, '[w]hen a situation cannot be evaluated based on previous patterns, or when opinion is not yet structured, there is a void that needs to be filled', opening up a space for a struggle over the

dominant narrative, since '[i]f one side fails to provide a meaningful narrative, others will fill the void' with stories that are simple enough for easy comprehension and yet meaningful enough to provide value judgement and confer the status of truth on a selection of claims (Holmstrom 2015: 121). The question, therefore, is merely whose narrative is going to prevail, whose selection of claims will gain the status of truth, and therefore whose interests will be served by the account of the world that has now captivated the target audience. After all, it must be reiterated, '[t]ruth, as in a fact or piece of information, has no intrinsic value' unless that value is created by means of a narrative (Holmstrom 2015: 124).

Crucially, once action-inducing narratives, post-truth ones included, are in place, they themselves become deeply embedded within broader causal networks, thereby becoming efficient causes of human action, operating in the same fashion and to the same effect as any other (more conventional) causes. Moreover, if the (post-)truth-claim in question successfully amplifies the causal factors upon which it has itself been predicated (stereotypes, preconceptions, hopes and fears etc.), then the target audience has no other option (it is causally determined) but to fall for the truth-claim in question. After all, referring back to Spinoza, if people are causally determined to do what they do, they are unavoidably affected by somebody or something else, receiving their affective imprint, and thereby suffering a reduction to their power (unless, Spinoza would say, they knowingly embrace such determination). But then, participation in further interactions allows to extend one's power, leaving one's own affective imprint on others. That is, once again, why the aspirational quality of post-truth narratives is so important: one might suffer a slight reduction of power by falling for such a narrative but then one's own affective capacity (and, therefore, power, perfection, and virtue) is greatly increased. Meanwhile, adhering with a more factually accurate narrative would very likely mean continuation of a limited affective capacity (and, therefore, power, perfection, and virtue), particularly for groups that are, or consider themselves to be, marginalised (at least on an issue that is of particular salience at the time in question). Hence, embracing a post-truth narrative can be a utility-maximising decision, at least within the ambit of a particular set of (generally fictional) expectations.

One might still wonder what the relevant level is at which post-truth is being performed. However, focusing on one level exclusively would end up in a fallacy whereby emphasis on the micro level would highlight the practices of specific agents while simultaneously 'tendentially

obscuring the context that strengthens and constrains such practices' and emphasis on the macro-level would help reveal the power of discursive practices while at the same time obscuring everyday practices behind such discourses (Wullweber 2016: 310). A way out of this fallacy would be to emphasise continuous reproduction, whereby the constitutive and the constituted are locked in a permanent cycle of mutual causation and affective modification (see Kalpokas 2018) or, in terms outlined in the first chapter of this book, treating post-truth as a collusion whereby truth-claims are created and uttered by the communicators but they are first informed and must subsequently be acclaimed by the audiences in order to become true through their own effects (or affects), with those effects feeding back into the information loop thus affecting future messaging, that feedback, however, being non-identical to the input information but bearing simultaneously the image of itself and the affective imprint of the target audience left on the messaging process (since otherwise the target audience's power of existence would have been nullified). To make matters even more complicated, the audience itself is notoriously tricky to capture, not least because it is not an objective entity but something that is co-constituted in the collusive act of communication. The audience should, therefore, be seen as a body composed of those who have been selected as targets of communication *and* have responded to it, thus setting up an affective exchange, as well as those who had not been intended as targets but have responded anyway. Again, a collusive relationship is paramount as the audience is characterised not only by an utterance addressed to it but also by its own response. In fact, the audience might not have much internal commonality (i.e. might not be a body otherwise) except for a shared response, shared engagement in an affective exchange.

Here it is important to dwell on the process under which post-truth narratives generally tend to be created and maintained, ultimately coalescing under dominant trends rather than leading to disintegration under highly personalised individual mix-and-match. The starting point here is, once again, Spinoza's *conatus*, read as a deficit. To reiterate, the fact that humans (and all other particular and aggregate artefacts of nature) have to strive to persevere in existence demonstrates in itself that there is an inadequacy in human existence, a gap between any actual state and the ideal state that can never be reached (because then *conatus*, as the essence of the thing, will cease, and the power of existence, having become absolute—perfect—would immediately be nullified).

As a result, any fulfilment and pleasure achieved is never enough, does not go all the way towards eliminating the deficit (instead, the deficit is only temporarily covered): any satisfaction achieved is not the full satisfaction that had been expected. A clear implication is, of course, that the desire for pleasure must constantly be placed and replaced on ever new objects, bodies, artefacts, or symbolic articulations that, in the end, are going to disappoint. Nevertheless, while investment is in a particular object, that investment, and the expectation attached to it, must be real, authentic, and absolute, producing affiliative truths along the way. Those expectations, as shown below, are rarely contingent but, instead, formed and framed deliberately by those possessing the power to do so (Beckert 2013: 326). In this context, affiliative truths would then refer to shared affective investment in particular objects that have come to represent more than they actually are—the impossible fulfilment of the deficit of existence. Crucially, affiliation here means not mere siding: it means active and strong affective investment in expectation of a great—but ultimately impossible—return.

In the light of the above, one needs to turn to Laclau for further explication. For him, '[t]he subject is originary lack of being' (Laclau and Zac 1994: 15), that lack (or deficit, as referred to in this book) being impossible to overcome—whatever follows from the need to eradicate it, including a political form, is not enough, leading to antagonism and dislocation as a consequence of the (false) promise of fulness and the (unavoidable) delivery of yet more deficit. Hence, the subject is incapable of achieving a state of being identical with itself due to always being 'the subject of lack' and merely emerging 'out of the asymmetry between the (impossible) fullness of the community and the particularism of a place of enunciation'. In other words, 'fullness […] is unachievable; it is only a retrospective illusion that is substituted by partial objects embodying that impossible totality' (Laclau 2006: 651). In this context, in order to overcome—or at least hide—the deficit of existence, subjects will affectively invest a surplus of meaning in something that has come to represent the sought-after fullness, ultimately splitting the object of investment 'between the particularity which still is and the more universal signification of which it is a bearer' (Laclau 2005: 281). Crucially, then, 'the object of investment can be contingent, but it is most certainly not indifferent' as, through the act of investment, it is made 'the embodiment of a mythical fullness', thereby inferring that '[a]ffect (that is, enjoyment) is the very essence of investment' (Laclau

2005: 115). Such affective investment is of particular importance when attempting to understand the prevalence and the success of post-truth-claims: what really matters is not some high-brow idea of a more adequately verifiable relationship with measurable facts but a much more visceral enjoyment of a fantasy of fullness, the impossibility of which is hidden by the pleasure. Hence, 'there is no question of true or false consciousness' (Laclau 2006: 653), only that of competing possibilities for affective investment and the ensuing satisfaction in consuming an alternative of one's choice.

Of paramount importance here is the political function of empty signifiers that exist because 'any system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, none the less, is required by the systematicity of the system' (Laclau 2007: 40), enabling political actors to compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of the lack or deficit (Laclau 2001: 9, 2007: 44). Such filling takes place through 'a radical investment of universal value in a certain particularity' (Laclau 2006: 655) and thereby creating a centre that arrests and fixates an otherwise present flow of meanings (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112), standing in for the absent (and impossible) unity of the community (see e.g. Norval 2000: 330). In other words, the matter is in taking an essentially empty signifier, such as 'liberation', 'greatness', 'freedom', 'security', 'order' etc. and filling it with particular content, since 'people need *an* order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration' (Laclau 2007: 44), the same applying to any other empty signifier. Even more so, the very condition of politics as a struggle for and over articulations of the common (such articulations always being impossible in their full form due to the lack/deficit) is only made possible by the presence of such empty signifiers (Laclau 2007: 44).

The 'partial fixations' that provide discourse with meaning and at least temporarily preclude a free flow of signification are crucial not only for order to exist but also for contestation to take place because '[e]ven in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112). Ultimately, some privileged dominant meanings that comprehensively stand in for the absent communitarian fullness end up emerging through a hegemonic relationship, whereby 'the particularity of a group' is presented 'as the incarnation of that empty signifier which refers to the communitarian order as an absence, an unfulfilled reality' (Laclau 2007: 44). Hegemony, however, does not stand for blunt

enforcement through power—it is a solution to a lack of societal foot-ing. Hence, 'when society is confronted with a generalised disorder', it simply necessitates '*some kind* of order, and the particular content of the force which brings it about becomes a secondary matter' (Laclau 2001: 9). Likewise, in case of a perception of oppression, 'if a regime is seen as incarnating evil or oppression *in general*', any concrete reference is lost, and the regime 'becomes the name of the obstacle which prevents society from coinciding with itself' (Laclau 2001: 9). Also, applying the preced-ing scheme to post-truth, a truth-claim passes as worthy of being taken up not because there is something inherently and essentially truthful in it but by being opposed to either there being no coherent explanation (hence, a generalised lack of order) or to a status quo that is perceived as unfair or worse.

Still, any decision on dominant content rests on a shaky ground as its prime reference is '[a]n always-already dislocated and undecidable identity' (Hudson 2006: 304). The sustenance of the dominant content as the hegemonic interpretation of fullness thereby relies on the success of the group that had established it while the success of that group is simultaneously dependent upon the prevalence of its hegemonic con-tent. Regardless, that prevalence is not due to last forever as hopes and expectations invested in the specific content that one has affiliated with are never going to be enough, thereby necessitating future affective investments. Essentially, hegemony itself is always in future state to come as it 'is only possible insofar as it never fully succeeds in achieving what it attempts', namely, in bringing about 'total fusion of the universality (fullness) of the communitarian space and the force incarnating such a universal moment' (Laclau 2001: 9–10). But for that moment at least, a dominant investment 'effaces its own undecidability and contingency and restores transparency and obviousness to the meaning of the subject's identity' (Hudson 2006: 306), even though it is always only a matter of time before that function is displaced onto something else as the antag-onism arising from the impossibility of full identity (the non-cessation of *conatus*) disallows full satisfaction and complete pleasure. The social is, to further underscore the point, 'an effort to construct [an] impossi-ble object'—an effort which is power-laden, but the power itself is inter-nal to the social (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112). And that internality of power again points to collusion: even if we simply and uncritically fall for a hegemonic construct, we do so because we get something that we

need ourselves in return and enthusiastically take it. That something is the (impossible) pleasure of the fantasy of fullness.

Nevertheless, returning to Hauser's (2018) conceptualisation of metapopulism, discussed earlier in this book, one has to radicalise the function of empty signifiers, the structure of which 'has to reflect and keep paralogies among communities', which therefore demands that a metapopulist leader displays 'persistent incoherence', leading to them becoming 'a transcendent singularity that addresses society as the totality of heterogenous communities and singularities' (Hauser 2018: 77). Such leadership truly involves the art of being all things to all people—in effect, 'an empty set' that, for public purposes at least, 'has no elements such as beliefs, ideas, values, or feelings' (Hauser 2018: 78). Instead, as in the case of affective investment, discussed in the preceding chapter, the leadership figure becomes a screen onto which the audience projects itself. Also, affective engagement with the environment is unavoidably social. Shared affective investment creates collective identities that, in turn, work to reaffirm the existence and identity of individuals to one another and to themselves. Hence leaders that manage to inspire audience investment (which is, nevertheless, an investment of various audience subsets in a reflection of themselves) are capable of creating their own communities that can be united by very little apart from a shared pleasure of affective investment in a common mirror that only beams back pleasure-maximising reflections to each. Hence, it becomes possible to enact the postmodern creed of the fall of metanarratives while simultaneously uniting a multiplicity of individuals as if there was such a metanarrative.

While association through pleasure seems relatively straightforward, the more negative side of the emotional spectrum deserves attention as well. Jenkins (2018) makes an important contribution by drawing attention to 'ugly and negative feelings' as worthy of serious consideration when analysing political processes. In particular, emotions such as alienation, disgust, hatred, and anger could be seen as carrying strong valency, particularly in terms of internalising one's own victimisation and directing negativity towards something external that is seen as responsible for, or somehow related to, that victimisation (Jenkins 2018: 201–203). If a particular otherness is seen as having stolen actual or potential pleasure (victimisation) and therefore deserving hatred, disgust, and/or anger (deflection of perceived responsibility for the existential deficit from the self to the other), then it is only reasonable to engage in a struggle

against them. This struggle should not automatically be conceived as a physical one. Instead, the aim is to regain the supposedly stolen pleasure by establishing one's own narrative as the ordering principle. In other words, the struggle that one engages in under such circumstances is a hegemonic struggle. As a result, mobilisation both for a shared cause and against a particular group, especially if the experienced affect is supplemented by a pleasure-maximising narrative, is relatively unproblematic.

Meanwhile, internally, the effects of affective encounters tend to be shared ever more efficiently the more attributes in common members of the we-group consider themselves to share (James 2016: 118). Hence, the more affective investments have already taken place within the group and the more affective imprints members the group have left on one another (or, in a mediatised environment, on the digital affective effigies of one another), the easier it becomes for ever new affective layers to be added, to the extent that even in cases when the original affective bonds had little, of anything, in common with verifiable facts, the robustness of the different and varied affective layers (that can be only partly overlapping) will *cause* that commonality to become true regardless. In this way, collective striving for pleasure as well as the apparent pleasure of sharing and partaking in an aspirational endeavour that promotes both individual and collective *conatus* are made seemingly objective.

It is futile to expect that '[j]ust as the Victorian science revolution played havoc with religious superstition, so the information revolution can now play havoc with political falsehood' (Jenkins 2017). After all, the fact that everything *can* potentially be fact-checked does not by any measure imply that everything is likely to *be* fact-checked; audiences need to *want* to do that but why would they if the definitive answer appears to already be at hand. It is not a coincidence that pleasure maximisation and consumer choice in what effectively is a marketplace dominated by maximisation of pleasure derived from the act of opting for one competing offering over another has clear affinities with (if not roots in) the consumer culture that has become mainstream over the course of the twentieth century, being particularly manifest in 'the way automobiles, clothing, the built environment, comics, advertisements, and movies enabled people to gain emotional enrichment form commercial goods and experiences' as well as 'a positive, life-enhancing connection between consumer culture and pleasure, one in which playfulness and sexual passion were central' (Horowitz 2012: 2). In the face of the growing importance of consumer culture, one has been progressively inclined

to 'cast a sceptical eye on moral condemnation', emphasising pleasure instead, ultimately leading to the emergence of '[a] new politics of consumption' that advocates 'the agency of consumers in the public sphere' (Horowitz 2012: 262–263) in maximising their utility-qua-pleasure in consuming anything from new gadgets to new truth-claims.

Pleasure in itself seems to be a function that is strongly biologically conditioned and conceived as 'positive hedonic valence, which can occur as either an objective "liking" reaction or a subjective reaction to the hedonic impact of a stimulus' regardless of whether there is a consciousness of pleasure or not (Kringelbach and Berridge 2017: 192). The latter observation is notable in explaining the stealth of some of the ideas and narratives that we fall for: they can be pleasurable (and, therefore, cause in us a desire for them to be true) even without us consciously knowing (or admitting) the fact. That would, perhaps, particularly apply to narratives that, implicitly or explicitly, challenge some aspect of the present order, meaning that we can still experience the pleasure of liking the unacceptable even without consciously admitting that it is the unacceptable which attracts us to the narrative in question. Moreover, it is crucial to keep in mind that 'pleasure is never merely a sensation nor a thought, but an additional hedonic gloss', generated by the brain in reaction to a particular object (Kringelbach and Berridge 2017: 193). This clearly links with the idea of an object (either a physical or a discursive one, such as a narrative) being more than the object itself but, rather, an embodiment of the ever-absent fulness, a cover for the deficit of existence (it is this hedonic gloss that distracts attention form the deficit). It is also this hedonic gloss that refers to our affective investment in an empty signifier in Laclau's sense.

As such, pleasure can be either natural and, therefore, passive, or learned, such as an acquired taste for something or a learned way to savour and enjoy something (Matthen 2017: 10). While the natural aspect of falling for something (including a narrative) is relatively straightforward (one automatically derives satisfaction from something that covers the deficit of existence—that could equally be a sexual encounter and a passionate following of an escapist fiction depicting an alternative world around us), the process of learning pleasure requires slightly more elaboration. Essentially, it is, once again, about maximising pleasure: as Matthen (2017: 10) puts it, one learns doing something in a new way because that new way is more pleasurable than others; having tried once and received a higher degree of satisfaction, one is then

conditioned to repeat the new way because the acquiring of the skill was rewarded with pleasure and every repeat of that procedure is reinforced with continuously experiencing that enhanced pleasure (Matthen 2017: 10). Hence, we are in a constant process of learning, through instruction or mere experimentation, of the most effective ways of achieving enjoyment (Matthen 2017: 24). And if we come to learn that it is possible to just effortlessly skip the cognising of a truth-claim's relation to verifiable facts in order to maximise pleasure, then there is little to stop us from repeatedly engaging us in the same act.

In a culture characterised by the striving for pleasure, the temporal element of attaining gratification is no less important. Here the main distinction is between immediate and delayed gratification, particularly if that delay would likely lead to greater pleasure. However, in the post-truth condition of the Experience Age, long-term thinking appears to give way to immediate gratification. In other words, one encounters a phenomenon, known as delay discounting, i.e. impulsive 'devaluing of future outcomes', whereby 'the individual shows preference for smaller and sooner rewards in lieu of the prospect of obtaining larger but later rewards' (Negash et al. 2016: 690). From a detached vantage point of conventional economic rationality, it is unwise to sacrifice a larger reward for a smaller one, particularly if the former is guaranteed; nevertheless, we may have been taught by evolutionary conditioning that 'waiting for delayed rewards is risky', with such risks including 'energy expenditure from waiting, the possibility of the reward becoming unavailable, predator threat, and other possible threats or opportunity costs' (Negash et al. 2016: 692). Predator threat notwithstanding, particularly if we accept the characterisation of today's societies as 'risk societies' in which indeterminacy dominates (see e.g. Beck 1992, 2009), one can be reasonably tempted to opt for gratification that is immediately available, perhaps as the only certainty there is. Moving on to post-truth, the preceding would translate into a reasoning that it is better to adhere to post-truth today and receive its immediate gratification than wait for tangible rewards for being faithful to verifiable facts at some point in the future. Indeed, it might be the case that in the long run, the utility derived from opting for a more fact-based interpretation of reality would exceed that offered by any competition; however, what really matters is the maximisation of immediate utility (i.e. pleasure, i.e. gratification derived from covering the deficit of existence here and now). In a mediatised environment, there either is an immediate 'click' of an affective encounter

or there is not, and that applies equally to encounters between people as well as encounters between people and information—if one waits, the desired outcome might simply be lost in a deluge of data. The Experience Age was born out of an overload in which the long term had shrunk to the point of perhaps even ceasing to exist, and therefore seeking immediate gratification can only be seen as natural, particularly as constant and immediate presence of satisfaction and pleasurable rewards tends to become addictive (see, generally, Negash et al. 2016).

There is no necessity to engage in the snobbery of lamenting the current cultural condition that, allegedly, creates 'pleasure junkies' dependent on gaming, online shopping, or social media, all seen as tools for low-grade immediate gratification (see, characteristically, Christensen 2017). In fact, there seems to be an equality of pleasures on a biological scale as high-brow pleasure, caused by e.g. fine arts is evidentially 'not different in genesis and function to the pleasure induced by food, drugs and sex' (Nadal and Skov 2018: 2). Thus, there also seems to be no room for difference between the pleasure excited by truth and one caused by post-truth. The only difference there is seems to be that of meaning, created within the broader cultural and societal context, and the meaning of truth seems to be changing from one based on strict correspondence with facts to a more verisimilitudinal one, in which the most important thing is that a proposition makes sense in the environment within which it is uttered. Or, to put it in a different way, the meaning of truth is that the statement has *meaning* for the audience, the meaning being collusively co-constructed by both the communicators and the audiences. Likewise, 'what matters to win a referendum or an election is not evidence (i.e. facts) but *meaning*, and especially which meanings carry greater currency' (Baron 2018: 73). But then, as Nadal and Skov (2018: 2) stress, '[w]e can endow virtually any aspect of reality with meaning', thereby making the potential supply of pleasure (i.e. of objects that can be endowed with a hedonic gloss) effectively limitless, thereby again driving us towards immediate gratification that has to be experienced before the hedonic gloss is displaced elsewhere.

It is of crucial importance to admit that an outside observer's vantage point might be counterproductive when trying to understand political life. Even though many would still hold that the methods and assumptions of natural sciences offer a benchmark for objective and generalisable results, in actual practice, 'the tools of the natural sciences and its ontological assumptions about the existence of a real, objective,

independent world' are extremely difficult to sustain in a world created through constant social interactions of human beings (Baron 2018: 78). And for humans, as 'self-interpreting beings', the key question does not concern facts but, instead, thinking and interpretation (Baron 2018: 84). In other words, even if we can objectively establish the facts, they will not be effective on their own merit. What matters is how people think about and interpret them. Here it is also useful to refer to Geertz's (2000) treatment of 'deep play', a term he had borrowed from Bentham, referring to a game of such high stakes that it becomes irrational for individuals to engage in it at all (Geertz 2000: 432). The troubling issue, however, is that humans still take risks that are at odds with rational calculation of potential risks and gains. The lame explanation would be that 'such men are irrational – addicts, fetishists, children, fools, savages, who need only to be protected against themselves' (Geertz 2000: 433)—similar to the patronising discourse sometimes directed towards the adherents of post-truth. However, such derogation would be grossly misplaced. Instead, in deep play 'much more is at stake than material gain: namely, esteem, honour, dignity, respect – in a word, […] status' (Geertz 2000: 433). Identical claims are also in place in case of the aspirational nature of post-truth. Hence, even when exposed to rational cost-benefit calculations, expert opinions, clear verifiable facts, or threats of future harm, adherents of post-truth deep plays remain staunchly committed to their already held beliefs. That is because more than just dispassionate calculations are taking place: adherence has become part of one's pride and aspiration, allowing one to cover their deficit of existence.

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Conclusion: For Unto Us Post-truth Is Born

Abstract This section provides a summary of key findings and points towards some future directions. It identifies post-truth as co-created fiction, directed towards provision of customer satisfaction and user experience within a competitive truth market, occurring within the broader context of mediatisation. A theoretical framework is also provided. That is followed by a discussion of the relationship between reality and representation (through mimesis and verisimilitude), the personal and social importance of narratives, and an account of the competition between different social imaginaries. The section concludes with a suggestion of a future growth in importance of post-truth in the context of automation and virtualisation.

Keywords Personalisation · Satisfaction · Striving · Narrative Spinoza · Laclau · Post-work

It is not a coincidence that the title for the concluding section of this book paraphrases Isaiah 9:6–7, also known as perhaps the most famous section from Handel's *Messiah*: post-truth certainly has a Messianic quality as a promise of redemption, at least within the world of escapist fiction that post-truth creates. In general, post-truth refers to the blurring of distinction between truth and falsehood, which takes place within a collusive relationship between the communicators and the audience. The audience colludes with the communicators in order to maximise

satisfaction derived from consuming a particular truth-claim. And the key to that maximisation is in the broader trend towards personalisation: just as personalised services from today's digital giants allow for a more bespoke, unchallenging, and effortless use, just as users are tempted to allow their virtual assistants to learn as much about them as possible to deliver tailor-made answers, so personalisation of truth allows for living in a world of—seemingly—one's own making. However, even that world is ultimately determined by algorithms that decide what it is that you want and expect based on the information available.

The personalisation of information supply is to be seen against the backdrop of the disintegration of information hierarchies and the empowerment of individuals to choose their lifeworlds. Such liberalisation of truth and emancipation of individuals has had the effect of creating a truth market in which one can shop around for items that offer the greatest expected utility, particularly in terms of pleasure in consumption. Here one encounters a strongly emotionally loaded investment in claims that exceeds their content. In other words, the claims become taken to represent something highly attractive and desirable, something that is expected to significantly ameliorate one's own position without due regard to the substance of the assertions being made. It is, therefore, possible—and, indeed, beneficial—for communicators to engage in attention-grabbing signalling: even if their claims are simply too outrageous to make sense, they will still be taken up, if not verbatim, then at least for what they represent. Hence, it is possible to claim that an assertion becomes true because we want it to be true. The adage that something is too good to be true does not apply—post-truth narratives are too good *not* to be true. As a result, post-truth enables communities of knowledge that gather around affiliative truths—sets of truth-claims that have the capacity of mobilising individuals against one another as either supporters or opponents of such assertions.

In a post-truth environment, effectiveness in asserting one's truth-claim becomes key. That is done through maximising audience satisfaction and weaving such satisfaction-maximising claims within a narrative that provides a quick and easy explanation of the world, often by constructing its own, alternative, version of reality, thereby demonstrating the nature of post-truth as escapist fiction. If such an alternative version of the world exceeds any competing explanation in the amount of generated pleasure and is more efficient in making sense, i.e. explaining the world as it is intuitively and experientially (as opposed to factually)

known, it then becomes largely immune to denial and debunking (simply because it is much more comfortable and pleasurable to remain in one's own position and deeply uncomfortable to admit having been wrong), and even if some change of position does happen, the effects of previous beliefs are likely to linger. Meanwhile, audience characteristics necessary for maximisation of pleasure are now known in advance courtesy of big data analysis and the cornucopia of data traces left behind by every single individual who uses online services. Information thus retrieved allows communicators to construct the most effective narrative possible, precision-targeted to a particular segment of the population, particularly by embracing their hopes, fears, preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices, dominant interpretations of their own status etc. and then follow the performance of narratives in real-time, allowing for immediate tweaks and changes. Hence, it is almost impossible for audiences *not* to fall for post-truth-claims. As such, post-truth is clearly part of the advent of the Experience Age, characterised by the dominance of emotional connection and the necessity of an instantaneous 'click' with content, mostly as a response to the information overload and time pressures brought about by today's technology. Since the audiences simply lack both the time and the aptitude to carefully consider the truth-claims they encounter, one can easily notice the increasing prevalence of a consumerist (i.e. utility-qua-satisfaction-maximising) audience behaviour. In such an environment, truth is going to lose because it is constrained by its own limits whereas post-truth has no limits and cannot be constrained, thereby allowing itself to be moulded in accordance with everybody's liking.

As argued in the Chapter 3 of this book, mediatisation is the broad context enabling the dominance of experience and, therefore, post-truth. Mediatisation refers to the centrality of media in everyday life, i.e. submission of social, economic, political etc. domains to media logic, thereby enabling media to shape and articulate such domains. Notably, this process refers not only to media in the everyday sense but also to the storage, searching, and ranking performed by databases, search engines, and algorithms. Mediatisation has also had the effect of largely removing physicality from human interactions: instead of face-to-face encounters, we now interact as customisable digital effigies, rendering even one's own self relatively post-truth. Hence, one must note the dominance of experience in everyday interactions: if one does not affect anybody, it is likely that one does not exist at all (at least as far as the lifeworlds of others are concerned). It is not surprising that leadership as well has turned affective,

particularly through affective investment in the leader by the audience, i.e. striving to maximise satisfaction derived from following the leader.

Additional insight is obtained through applying some of Spinoza's ideas to the analysis of post-truth. That particularly refers to Spinoza's assertion that *conatus* (endeavour, or striving, to persevere in existence) is the essence of every thing. However, the permanent presence of such striving also signals a deficit of existence and the heart of our essence. *Conatus*, therefore, refers to a relentless effort to cover that deficit, albeit an effort that is never fully successful. In following one's *conatus*, affective capacity becomes key: in fact, perseverance in existence is all about affective exchange with the surrounding world. However, whereas for Spinoza physical interaction (or, at least, direct contact) came first, today's mediatised world is dominated by mental affects, arising from interactions of the digital effigies of our selves. In this context, a functional-pragmatic truth criterion has to be developed: something can only be held to become true through its own affects, i.e. we can only imagine something to be true (and imagination is as good as it gets without the possibility of hands-on verification) if we are affected by it while we cannot imagine something as true and present if we fail to get affected. That equally applies to relationships, other individuals, or the social-political world as such, clearly showing that under the conditions of mediatisation, post-truth is by no means inferior to Truth-with-a-capital-T, as long as it possesses a stronger affective valence.

The indirectness of interactions forces to reconsider representation. Here, mimesis, understood as imitation or representation of reality, albeit an imperfect one, comes to the fore. More appropriately, perhaps, mimesis is to be understood as arising in the exchange between the affector and the affectee, thus precluding the dominance of either and pointing towards collusion, even if that collusion is more in terms of a standoff that has become accepted. This struggle between the affector and the affectee also accounts for the immersive quality of mimesis, allowing for deep affective engagement with post-truth. But the unavoidable mimetic inadequacy of truth-claims also necessitates attention to the truthlikeness—verisimilitude—of claims. Verisimilitude is taken to refer to the closeness of postulated claims to an underlying reality and their effectiveness in providing orientation within that reality. Hence, even something that is imprecise but *works* in a given context can be taken to fulfil the verisimilitudinal criteria. Also, a verisimilitudinal approach implies that one does not have to uncover the whole truth in order to

change the dominant interpretation—it suffices that one's proposition works better. However, the definition of 'better' bust be rendered problematic, particularly under the conditions of mediatisation that is already characterised by the prevalence of the functional-pragmatic test in determining truthfulness—one that is highly verisimilitudinal in nature. Also, the personalised (or, at the very least, group concern-dominated) nature of post-truth also infers that criteria for verisimilitude will not be universal as what *works* and what shortcomings can be discarded as irrelevant depends on the concerns of the target audience.

As has already been stressed, narratives are of paramount importance in structuring human understanding. Moreover, what characterises post-truth is a marketplace of narratives, each promoting its own set of a-factual truth claims. In fact, the present environment can be seen as having a (kind of) emancipatory potential: instead of dominance of single narratives and exclusive ways of knowing, the monopoly of which used to be held by particular groups, the current truth market is a liberal one, guided by supply and demand. Furthermore, the power of narratives manifests itself under both collective and personal attributes. On a collective level, such power shows as a legitimating myth, aimed at mastering or at least taming the chaos of meaning by ascribing significance to things and concepts, and collective memory that determines what is to be known and what is to remain unknown. On an individual level, meanwhile, narratives allow maintaining the illusion of self-mastery and coherence. Hence, by destroying monopolies of narrative-making and problematising the attribution of factuality (the ultimate weapon of such monopolies), post-truth opens new avenues for competition over the social world itself, which becomes also a competition for the induction of the greatest pleasure possible.

Some of the first accounts of post-truth have blamed postmodernism as having had a corrupting influence on today's world by casting doubt on metanarratives and supposedly objective representations of reality. However, such attributions of guilt amount to blaming a diagnosis for having caused the diagnosed condition. In fact, post-truth is a way of living in a world already largely devoid of uniting metanarratives (due to the liberalisation of the information environment) but filled instead with easily available capacities of engaging with simulacra that become more real than reality itself. In this world, we nevertheless have to provide ourselves with final causes and meaningful expectations of the future, fictional as they may be, in order for our lives to make sense. And here

again, the only viable option seems to be falling for attractive narrativised explanations of the world, those providing the highest degree of pleasure above everything else, and providing a favourable account of the relevant individuals (including their life stories and the ideas they hold), thus rendering such explanations aspirational. Nevertheless, since the endeavour to persevere in existence never ceases (and, therefore, the underlying deficit is never fully eliminated), we are bound to seek ever greater pleasure, since the one achieved is never enough.

Here it makes sense to refer to Ernesto Laclau who (inspired by Lacan who was himself an avid reader of Spinoza) also proceeds from the premise of an individual being characterised by lack. Due to the impossibility of ever achieving fullness, individuals are bound to invest in something that is supposedly great and universal. In a political context, such an object of investment tends to be an empty signifier, such as 'greatness', which is to be (re)achieved, 'control', which is to be taken back, or 'order', 'progress', 'emancipation' etc. Hence, what characterises political struggle in this context is the competition between political actors to set their signifier as the most important one and then fill it with the meaning of their choice, thereby hegemonizing the political sphere. However, the fragmentation of the truth market into tailor-made niche offerings, characteristic of post-truth, precludes any hegemony of a clearly defined meaning. Here, the concept of metapopulism provides a useful insight: what prevails is an essentially empty object of affective investment that is filled with only very vague meaning but serves instead as an empty screen onto which everyone can project their desires and pleasures. What unites members of communities, then, is a network of interrelated affective investments, largely a-factual, in a striving for immediate gratification.

It is also crucial to note that the post-truth condition is more than likely extend even further and deeper in the foreseeable future due to a combination of a progressive loss of materiality of both work through automation (or forthcoming absence of work, if post-work theorists are to be believed) and leisure through progressive mediatisation. In a condition of progressive loss of materiality, any relationship to verifiable fact beyond affective interactions will become largely irrelevant. Moreover, whereas we are still used to treating work and leisure as antithetical to one another, automation, in combination with increasing life span (and, therefore, longer time period spent in retirement) will cause us to reconsider such thinking (Snape et al. 2017: 184–187). As humans are likely

to turn into passive recipients, rather than active creators, of the benefits, luxury, and comfort created in the technologically augmented world (at the very least ensuring that humans are fed and content, either through a version of universal basic income or some other means of ensuring survival and a degree of comfort), the question of what people are going to do all day in order to make their lives meaningful will become pertinent (Danaher 2017; Harari 2017). In this context, the predominant source of engagement in meaningful activities will most probably arise from engaging in virtual reality worlds, either through gaming or social activities, producing 'far more excitement and emotional engagement than the "real world" outside' (Harari 2017) and signalling an even deeper form of mediatisation and turning political competition into a competition over the provision of the greatest possible pleasure, the most satisfactory escapism, a struggle between different realities of enjoyment.

Gaming theory can provide some useful insights into the forthcoming advent of a virtual reality-dominated world. There, video games are referred to as '*liminoids*' so as to 'capture their bounded yet porous nature and their ability to engender a *real enough* attitude', namely, one of knowing that something one engages in is not real but perceiving it to be good enough to be partaken in as if it was real (Hong 2015: 50). This verisimilitudinal condition also sets bare a minimal level of post-truth narrative appeal: they may not be fully believable but have to at least provide an alternative version of reality that is of sufficient quality to allow further pleasure-inducing aspects to kick in. Moreover, it is crucial to observe that this appeal and engagement cannot happen in an absolutely direct manner—instead, it operates through interfaces, i.e. 'a composite assemblage of content, form, and technological features that communicate and negotiate a multileveled relationship to this "real"' (Hong 2015: 50). To bring this argument more squarely in line with the argument of the book, it is crucial to observe that the mediatised communication environment acts as an interface for post-truth, enabling audiences to cross the threshold and immerse themselves in their chosen version of the world.

In lieu of a conclusion, one must agree, in part at least, with the prevalent critique that contemporary politics is reduced to entertainment and that ideas are replaced with spectacularised attempts to attract the audiences (see e.g. Muller 2016). However, there is more to that change than just simple irruption of entertainment into the domain of politics. If such an irruption happens, it is, above all, a tool rather than the

substance—a means of achieving and retaining competitive advantage in a marketplace populated by consumers eager to maximise their pleasure of consumption and satisfaction with their custom (in terms of siding with, and becoming routinely exposed to, a particular narrative). This narrative, then, becomes a key ordering and guiding tool, instructing actions and assigning functions in an otherwise largely amorphous and meaningless world. The value of such a narrative, then, derives from it being opposed not to falsehood but to meaninglessness. Here a parallel can again be drawn from gaming theory whereby 'the satisfaction derived from inhabiting a game world and fulfilling various tasks functions like an antidote for our loss of personal autonomy and meaning in an increasingly fragmented, mediated, and globalised world' (Nicoll 2016: 29; see also Kirkpatrick 2013). The same meaning-giving pleasure-inducing function is also carried out by post-truth narratives: instead of being, as the popular snobbery has it, nonsense, they are, instead, bearers of sense. It is just not sense as we (used to) know it.

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