Combatting Fake News: a Patočkean Analysis
Promoting a Socratic Attitude and Active Citizenship.

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Abstract.

One of the most heated subjects which is currently being debated on an international scale is the problem of ‘fake news’. It is widely considered a significant challenge for contemporary societies, and has even been called a threat to liberal democracies. This paper will investigate how are we able to combat this problem and find a long-term solution, in order to protect our societies from the harmful consequences of fake news.

This will lead to an examination of the position of truth in the political sphere, its role in our epistemic lives, and the place truth has within news and media. It will be shown that fake news can be understood as essentially a problem concerning truth, our relationship to it, and its role in the political sphere. This issue will be explored using the case study of Jan Patočka, whose philosophical analysis can provide an illuminating way of understanding and finding a solution to fake news. Additionally, the example of Sweden will be examined in order to demonstrate how my conclusions can be implemented in practice. The latter empirical case study will demonstrate ways in which critical citizens can be fostered in a society.

Overall, it will be argued that the best long-term way in which we can combat fake news is through the constant search for truth and for justifications for our beliefs, as well as taking responsibility for our knowledge. This solution to fake news necessitates independent responsibility, a ‘Socratic’ attitude towards truth, and active citizenship, which together constitute a political mode of existence. In addition to personal responsibility, institutional responsibility is vital in order to engender this attitude amongst citizens. This can be done through education or promoting media literacy, as well as ensuring an open society in which debate is encouraged, and returning the authority of truth in the public sphere. The proposed conclusion therefore emphasises the significance of the individual, who must be epistemically responsible for their beliefs, and the importance of institutions, which play a crucial role in making critical citizens.

Fake news must be targeted at its fundamental level, namely as a problem of truth, and it is therefore vital that a Socratic attitude be encouraged in current liberal democracies, before there are further significant political events which are influenced by fake news.

Keywords:
Fake News; Patočka; Active Citizenship; Socrates; Disinformation; Social Media; Truth
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Introduction.

One of the most heated subjects which is currently being debated on an international scale is the problem of ‘fake news’. Fake news has been blamed for having affected political elections and for escalating social tensions,\(^3\) has made teenagers from Macedonia rich,\(^4\) and has resulted in incidents such as “pizzagate”, in which a man entered a restaurant in the US with a gun, because he thought that it was the centre of a “paedophilia ring involving people at the highest levels of the Democratic Party”.\(^5\) Fake news has been called a threat to liberal democracies by political leaders such as French President Macron,\(^6\) and certain countries are designing new laws in order to combat the problem. It is widely considered a significant challenge for contemporary societies, and moreover may even be considered part of modern information warfare.\(^7\)

The main focus of this paper will be the investigation of what can be done about the problem of fake news. In other words, how are we able to combat this problem and find a long-term solution, in order to protect our societies from the harmful consequences of fake news? This will lead to an examination of the position of truth in the political sphere, its role in our epistemic lives, and the place truth has within news and media. The issues of truth, objectivity, and the fabrication of news are some of the most significant problems we are currently faced with, and it will be shown that fake news can be understood as essentially a problem concerning truth, our relationship to it, and its role in the political sphere. Moreover, in order to answer the question of how to combat fake news, it will also be necessary to examine whether truth and objectivity has already lost its authority in the political sphere, and how their centrality might be restored. In order to explore this issue, I have decided to use the case study of Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, whose analysis can provide an illuminating way of understanding and finding a solution to fake news. Additionally, I will look at the example of Sweden in order to demonstrate how my

conclusions can be implemented in practice. The latter empirical case study will show ways in which critical citizens can be fostered.

Before presenting a detailed outline of this paper, it is first important to clarify exactly what I mean by ‘truth’. The term truth has been debated for centuries, and even Patočka differed in his opinion of what truth is compared to other philosophers of his time. For Patočka, metaphysics centres around the problem of truth, and for a deeper understanding of what truth is, he looks to the Pre-Socratic account of truth as ‘uncoveredness’. Yet he argues that truth also needs to “take into account the Socratic problem of human acting”, and needs to include the vital role of human freedom. This changes the character of truth, as “truth as freedom assures us that objectivity is never final or never achieves completion for us”. Man is a being of uncoveredness capable of truth, who has a sense of wholeness, of totality. “Our capacity for truth depends on our ability to distance ourselves, to free ourselves from the clutches of objects and objectivity. The call to truth is the call to freedom”.

However, when I will be discussing the role of truth in relation to fake news, it also has a more basic, foundational meaning, as something which forms part of objective reality, and which is meaningful. Truth is different to opinion, and is a broader understanding of the world which is needed in order for societies to be able to function at a basic level. Whilst many issues can be debated, there is a more rudimentary level which needs to be agreed upon by everybody in order for debate to even commence. This essential, foundational basis is what is meant by truth, and can be distinguished from falsehood, which is used by fake news. I will moreover show that truth is precisely what is being attacked by the contemporary manifestation of fake news.

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11 These issues are related to Patočka’s understanding of the care for the soul, which will be investigated in further detail in chapter 3.
Truth is a loaded term, and it is doubtful whether metaphysical truths are even attainable. Nonetheless, I will show that truth has an inextricable link to epistemology and to our knowledge, which is essential for our everyday lives. Furthermore, Patočka also argues that we cannot remain in a nihilistic, meaningless world, but that we must constantly strive towards finding the truth, even if is something which can be doubted, modified, or disregarded in the future. Thus, even if we reach a “firm shore”\(^\text{12}\) which is meaningful with regards to our knowledge, and which has an impact on our everyday lives, it can instantly be problematized again. For Patočka, we “live not on firm ground, but rather on something that moves”.\(^\text{13}\)

The concept of truth will therefore play a significant role throughout this paper. It will be shown that truth has an indispensable epistemological link to news, which is distorted by fake news. Moreover, through Patočka’s analysis of our relationship to truth a possible solution to fake news can be proposed. Nonetheless, to begin with, it is important to have a clear understanding of what fake news is, and why it is so problematic. Therefore, the initial step which will be taken in this study will aim at producing a clear understanding of what fake news actually is, as well as its consequences. Thus, in the first chapter, I will investigate how the contemporary manifestation of fake news can be understood, and how the term has developed in recent years. This will elucidate the exact type of fake news which will be analysed in this paper. Furthermore, the political effects of fake news will be examined, demonstrating how it is a significant problem facing societies today. I will also discuss how it is related to other terms which are frequently used in contemporary debates about this subject. Explained very briefly, these terms include post-truth, which can be understood as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”\(^\text{14}\); alternative facts, which refer to false claims which are presented in public debate as an alternative to a widely accepted theory\(^\text{15}\); and populism, which pits a morally pure people against a corrupt elite, claiming to be the true representatives of the people.\(^\text{16}\) These terms will be

\[^{13}\text{Ibid., 56.}\]
examined in further detail in chapter 1, and it will be suggested that the current manifestation of fake news is intricately linked with these other issues facing society, all of which have a problematic relationship with truth. The information presented in chapter 1 will be vital in order to understand exactly what a solution needs to be found for, and why this is such a problem for democratic societies.

Following this discussion, in which a clear definition of fake news will be proposed, I will then examine the epistemological character of fake news, and its relation to truth. In chapter 2, therefore, I will elucidate in further detail the role which traditional news sources have regarding truth and our epistemic lives, and how this relationship has been distorted and damaged by fake news. Although news sources can make mistakes, and human error is always a possibility, it will be argued that in traditional journalism there were nonetheless always certain standards which were upheld, standards which are lost in the current news ecosystem. Furthermore, the question of why fake news is actually so effective will be investigated. Psychological effects will be considered, as well as the crucial role of social media. Moreover, the relationship between trust and truth will be discussed, which has severe political consequences when it is broken. Most importantly, it will be argued that fake news is above all a problem of truth in the political sphere. Therefore, in order to find a way to resolve the problem of fake news, it is necessary to approach the problem at the most fundamental level, namely by looking closely at our epistemic relationship to truth, as well as the role of truth and in the political sphere.

I will then, in chapter 3, turn to the philosophy of Jan Patočka, who was born in 1907 and died in 1977 under the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, and who wrote extensively about the matter of truth, and its central importance within our lives. Moreover, towards the end of his life he became politically active, acting vocally against the authoritarian regime under which he lived. Patočka was persecuted intensely for 10 weeks, as a reaction to his outspoken criticism of the oppressive political system. He eventually died of a brain haemorrhage after over 11 hours of questioning by the Czech Secret Police.\(^\text{17}\) Patočka inspired other political activists, including Vaclav Havel, who argued that ‘living in truth’

was the ‘power of the powerless’ against the ideology of a post-totalitarian system, clearly
drawing from Patočka’s philosophy.\footnote{For further reading, see: Václav Havel and John Keane, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1985).}

Patočka attempted to confront the authoritarian communist regime in Czechoslovakia by
acting as a true philosopher, following the example of Socrates, and not giving up his
principles even when his life was threatened. I have chosen Patočka as a case study in
order to analyse the problem of fake news precisely because he analysed the problem of
truth in the political sphere, wrote about the severe consequences which can follow when
truth loses its authority and centrality in a society, and showed through his own actions
how it is possible to resist this outcome. Although in Patočka’s lifetime, he never saw the
manifestation of fake news as we see it today, which makes use of technology which did
not exist when he was alive, he nonetheless still understood the significance that truth
held within a society which wants to be just and democratic. His analysis will demonstrate
the importance of truth and our attitude towards it. It will be argued that the most
significant and long-term way in which we can combat fake news is through the constant
search for truth and for justifications for our beliefs, as well as taking responsibility for
our knowledge. The most significant solution to fake news will rely on independent
responsibility, a ‘Socratic’ attitude towards truth, and active citizenship, which together
constitute a political mode of existence.

Finally, chapter 4 will examine how fake news is currently being opposed by institutions,
and I will show that these approaches cannot provide any long-term solution to fake news.
Moreover, they do not target its essential problems: the fact that fake news distorts our
epistemic relationship with news, undermines trust in media outlets, and affects the
authority of truth in the political sphere. Additionally, all of the current ways in which
institutions are attempting to resolve the problem of fake news have very troubling issues
themselves, leading to worrying consequences such as censorship or limiting freedom of
expression. Nonetheless, it will be argued that institutions still have a crucial role in
addressing fake news. This is through developing critically thinking, responsible, active
citizens, which I have suggested will be the most significant long-term solution to fake
news. Effective methods could include education or promoting media literacy, as well as
ensuring an open society in which debate is encouraged. Moreover, institutions need to establish the central importance of truth and objectivity, thus returning the authority of truth in the public sphere. The case study of Sweden will be explored as an example of how institutions might go about accomplishing this in practice. Therefore, I hope to show that a significant way in which societies can combat the problem of fake news is both through personal responsibility and through institutional responsibility, encouraging citizens to be critical, and to take an active role in the political sphere. Most importantly, individuals must be epistemically responsible for their beliefs, and for deciding what is true or not. This conclusion emphasises the significance of the individual, however it is also clear that institutions play a crucial role in making critical citizens. Institutions are therefore indispensable as a means through which to engender citizens with a critical, Socratic attitude which I argue is the most significant, long-term solution to fake news.

**Methodology.**

The main methodology of this paper will be analysis, using two case studies: Jan Patočka, and the empirical example of Sweden. Patočka’s philosophy will allow for a philosophical analysis of the issue of truth, which will be more conceptual and theoretical in nature. This will then be applied to the empirical problem of fake news, which is the focus of this paper. The case study of Sweden will therefore be used to demonstrate how my conclusions can be put into practice, and how institutions can still play a significant role in combatting fake news.

I will not only research what fake news is, but also why it is effective, and the political consequences it can have. Moreover, after a detailed analysis I will propose my own argument on how to address this issue, namely that the only long-term solution to the problem of fake news must focus on fostering the critical faculties of individual citizens, who become active citizens, are epistemically responsible and are constantly searching for what can be considered as objectively true. It will be also be suggested that institutions have a critical role in creating such individuals, in ensuring an open environment for debate, and in returning the authority of truth to the political sphere.
Terminology.

Finally, it is important to include a note on the terminology which will be used in this paper. The focus will be on fake news, which will be properly defined in the first chapter, and distinguished from other similar terms. Nonetheless, phrases which are often used synonymously with fake news in academic literature and in the media include terms such as false news, false information, and disinformation (the latter term will be explained in more detail in chapter 1). Therefore, where these other terms are used, they are intended to have a synonymous meaning to fake news. This in particular because the word “false” highlights the fact that fake news is untruthful, i.e. false. Furthermore, sometimes other terms are used instead of “fake news” in order to avoid confusion with the way in which figures such as Donald Trump are using the term as an accusation, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 1. Due to the scope of this paper, I will not examine any further the differences in this terminology, and it suffices to note that these words will be used interchangeably.

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Chapter 1: An Investigation into Fake News.

The term “fake news” is not a new term, and “is at least as old as the printing press”.\(^\text{20}\) For example, it was even used during the American Revolution, in the 1700s.\(^\text{21}\) It has recently come to prominence, and was named word of the year for 2017 by The American Dialect Society,\(^\text{22}\) as well as by Collins Dictionary, who claim that the usage of the word had increased unprecedentedly by “365% since 2016”.\(^\text{23}\) “Fake news” has had significant implications not only in the media, but also as a legal question, as a political factor, and as an accusation made by important figures such as President Trump. However, the meaning of fake news is not only unclear, but has evolved enormously. Even looking merely at the past decade, the term has changed immensely due to technological developments, such as the growing influence of social media. Before any deeper investigation into the implications of fake news can be conducted, it is important to delineate exactly what is meant by “fake news”, and how it will be used in this paper. The process of doing this will also be inherently useful, as it will illuminate some of the specific characteristics and conditions surrounding fake news which make it such a unique contemporary problem.

1.1: Defining Fake News.

To begin with, it is important to distinguish between accusations of fake news, and actual instances of what can be called fake news. Matthew Dentith provides an interesting analysis of the former, describing the allegation of fake news as “a rhetorical device, one designed to cast doubt on what would otherwise be some received story”, and which “focus on challenging mainstream media discourses” [emphasis in original].\(^\text{24}\) Dentith suggests that such allegations of something being a piece of fake news can “create the illusion of a controversy”,\(^\text{25}\) and when successfully employed, it can “change the nature


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 75.
and direction of public debate”.

They can marginalise or delegitimise the opponent’s position, especially when the accuser commands respect thanks to their position in society, such as the President of the United States. Whilst this issue is significant, I agree with Axel Gelfert when he claims that Dentith “puts the cart before the horse”, as “the emergence of fake news as a genre of purported factual assertions preceded the emergence of the epithet ‘fake news’ as a tactical way of slandering one’s opponents”.

I will thus be investigating the former, and leave the latter aside as a different discussion which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

What, then is fake news? There are many different ways in which the term can be used, which have been thoroughly explored in a recent article which provides a typology of scholarly definitions of fake news. The authors present the following ways in which the term has been used: as news satire, as news parody, as advertising, as propaganda, as photo manipulation, and as news fabrication. The meaning of ‘fake news’ therefore changes largely depending on each different usage. I will briefly outline the different uses and interpretations which are presented by Tandoc Jr. et al., and then clarify the exact meaning which I will be using for the purposes of this paper.

First of all, news satire and news parody are two ways in which fake news has become a popular term, but often without negative or hostile connotations. Both of these formats use humour in order to transmit a message, and both are formats which are not considered traditional news sources. In news satire, programmes such as The Daily Show often present current affairs as other news agencies do, however “a key difference is that they promote themselves as delivering entertainment first and foremost rather than information, with hosts calling themselves comedians or entertainers, instead of journalists or newscasters”. The humour which the hosts of the show create often manages to seriously critique political, economic, or social issues, and whilst they are labelled fake news, “their being fake only refers to their format”. News parody, on the other hand, presents information which is non-factual in order to provide a commentary

26 Ibid., 74.
27 Ibid., 77.
30 Ibid., 141.
31 Ibid., 142.
on contemporary affairs. “Parody plays on the ludicrousness of issues and highlights them by making up entirely fictitious news stories”, although these are occasionally mistaken as true.\textsuperscript{32} The Onion is one such example of news parody, providing a “sophisticated balance” between the possible and the absurd.\textsuperscript{33} One significant aspect which both news satire and parody share is “the assumption that both the author and the reader of the news share the gag”.\textsuperscript{34} This aspect is crucial, as both the reader and author must share this common premise, or else it results in a (sometimes amusing) misunderstanding.

Advertising and propaganda are also considered to be cases of fake news. Advertising can especially be understood as fake news when it is “in the guise of genuine news reports”, but in reality intends to promote or market products or messages, in particular for financial gain.\textsuperscript{35} However, often the intention of the author of advertising is not to maliciously deceive, and moreover it is rarely for any political motivation, thus it can be clearly differentiated from the form of fake news which will be examined in this paper. In the case of propaganda, there is a clear intention to influence the opinions of the audience. The goal is “to persuade rather than to inform”,\textsuperscript{36} often promoting a certain person or organisation, including political parties. The information used by propaganda is not necessarily inauthentic, and can be based on facts. However, it “includes bias that promotes a particular side or perspective”,\textsuperscript{37} meaning that it is not a neutral or objective source of information. One significant difference between propaganda and fake news which is highlighted by Gelfert is that propaganda assumes some sort of ideological agenda, whilst fake news does not necessarily.\textsuperscript{38} Nonetheless, fake news can sometimes be motivated by a certain agenda, and under these circumstances could also be understood as a form of propaganda.

Photo manipulation is quite a significant form of fake news which is widespread today. Traditionally, most credible news sources “are committed to truth and draw the line at altering images to create a misleading or inauthentic narrative” when publishing

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Gelfert, "Fake News", 110.
photographs.\textsuperscript{39} This means that whilst things like brightness, contrast, and tone might be manipulated without an issue, there can be no additions, subtractions, omissions, or any significant change which could manipulate the viewer and change the narrative of the image.\textsuperscript{40} However, today photos are often used to manipulate or aggravate viewers, in particular on social media. To take a recent example, in the US there was a very high-profile incident in which a manager of Starbucks, who is white, called the police because two black men were seated in the coffee shop and hadn’t ordered any coffee.\textsuperscript{41} Following this widely criticised event, Starbucks decided to close over 8,000 of its stores in order to train its employees on racial sensitivity. Shortly afterwards, this photograph appeared on social media:

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\end{center}

\textit{Image taken from: Dan Evon, "Did a Sign for Starbucks Racial Bias Training Single Out White People?", Snopes.}

This photograph has since been denounced as a fake, and was actually “a hoax created by trolls in order to sow racial discord”.\textsuperscript{42} It is clear therefore that the codes of conduct which

\textsuperscript{39} Tandoc Jr. et al., “Defining "Fake News"”, 144.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 144-145.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
traditional news outlets and journalists are held to are often not abided by particularly when it comes to social media accounts, and many people edit or share images which could misinform and manipulate the public.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, this is becoming a significant method of disseminating fake news, in particular since methods of modifying images are easier, and social media allows them to be spread to a mass audience at an incredibly fast rate. Additionally, even if photographs are not modified, their context and narrative can be manipulated, presenting an untruthful account of events and therefore spreading fake news.

Finally, the category of news fabrication is closest to the meaning of fake news which I will be using for this paper. In this case, we can find fake news articles with no factual basis, in which no understanding exists between reader and author about its inauthenticity. In fact, often the producer of fabricated news has the opposite intention, and uses “a veneer of authenticity by adhering to news styles and presentations”.\textsuperscript{44} The motivation of the author may vary, as whilst some may seek to manipulate the reader and influence their opinions, the news fabricator may also produce such stories purely for financial gain. However, this can be differentiated from advertising, because they are not promoting any particular product, brand or message, but rather are seeking above all to generate revenue through “clicks”. These “click baits” attempt to attract readers to click on the news article, and earn money per visitor to their site. Such authors may not care whether or not the article influences the clicker, but only that it encourages them to share and propagate the article further. One such example can be found in the run up to the US elections, when teenagers in the Republic of Macedonia set up websites which spread fake news about Hillary Clinton, aiming “to generate revenue from online ads shown next to fake news articles that served merely as clickbait”.\textsuperscript{45} This shows that even though fake news does have a “deliberate nature”, this “does not necessarily consist in the intention to manipulate others by instilling specific false (or malicious) beliefs in them”.\textsuperscript{46} Nonetheless, there are many cases where authors do intend to deceive their audience for malicious purposes, and when this is the case, it can be called disinformation.

\textsuperscript{43} Tandoc Jr. et al., “Defining "Fake News"”, 145.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{45} Gelfert, "Fake News", 107.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
It is therefore also important to demonstrate how fake news is related to the terms “misinformation” and “disinformation”, although these categories are not included in the analysis by Tandoc Jr. et al. First of all, misinformation can be understood as “information which is wrong or misleading but not deliberately so”,\textsuperscript{47} meaning that the author’s immediate intention to deceive is low. Disinformation, on the other hand, can be defined as “dissemination of deliberately false information, esp. when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it; false information so supplied”.\textsuperscript{48} It is clear that the way in which I will be using the term fake news is closely related to the latter definition, and this moreover begins to demonstrate the significant political implications which often accompany fake news.

Tandoc Jr. et al. suggest that the different categories of fake news can be displayed using the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of facticity</th>
<th>Author’s immediate intention to deceive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Native advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Propaganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fabrication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>News satire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>News Parody</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Table taken from Tandoc Jr. et al., “Defining "Fake News"”, 148.}

This table shows two continuums: the level of facticity, and the author’s immediate intention to deceive. The section of the table which is most relevant to understanding how the term “fake news” will be used in my paper is where (photo) manipulation and fabrication are found. This is because it has both a low level of facticity, and the author has a high immediate intention to deceive their audience. Whilst this is a not a perfect way of characterising fake news, it definitely is a good starting point when considering what fake news means today. A low level of facticity and a high intention to deceive can also help us understand why fake news is often considered to be a form of disinformation.


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
Whilst the nature, implications, and epistemological character of fake news will be investigated further in chapter 2, it is first necessary to have a satisfactory definition of the term which will be used in this paper. The previous examples are all ways in which “fake news” has been interpreted and used previously, yet none of them provide any comprehensive definition of the kind of fake news which will be investigated in this paper. I will therefore look at one of the most promising definitions of fake news, which comes from Axel Gelfert, who argues that “fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design”.\textsuperscript{49} Gelfert furthermore suggests that being misleading “by design” is the best way to characterise fake news, because it not only takes into consideration the “individual intentions on the part of its originators”, but also highlights its “systemic features inherent in the design of the sources and channels through which fake news proliferates that imbue it with its novel significance”.\textsuperscript{50} In other words, fake news has a structure and organisation which means that it is more than just an individual who invents stories and posts them online. It also demonstrates that a significant aspect of contemporary cases of fake news is the role played by social media.

1.2: Social Media and Fake News.

The concern with fake news has become especially important in the past decade, and an important reason for this is the rapid increase of social media users, which has impacted many different aspects of society. The prominence of social media platforms is indisputable, and is instantly visible when considering the number of users. For example, Facebook claims that it has “1.45 billion daily active users on average for March 2018”, and “2.20 billion monthly active users as of March 31, 2018”.\textsuperscript{51} Many other platforms, including Twitter and Instagram, also boast huge numbers of users, which range from individuals, to organisations, to well-known public figures, including celebrities and politicians. On social media platforms, people can read, react to, share, and discuss a range of topics, including current affairs. Some institutions even use social media as a way of getting across information to a larger audience. In fact, it was reported by the Pew

\textsuperscript{49} Gelfert, "Fake News", 108.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 109.
Research Centre that “just under half (45%) of U.S. adults use Facebook for news”.\textsuperscript{52} There are several psychological reasons why fake stories shared through social media may be convincing, and why they may have a significant impact on their readers, and these will be explored in more detail in chapter 2. What is essential for the moment is the fact that social media plays a critical role in the current form of fake news, from its distribution to a mass audience, to the engagement by users who share these articles, contribute to discussions, and may endorse news which is actually false. Whilst not all fake news is read or distributed via social media, it is definitely one of the most important ways in which fake stories can be quickly and cheaply disseminated to a mass audience, making it a substantial way in which political systems can be targeted, and can even be considered a form of information warfare.

Social media has proven capable of being a serious vulnerability to democratic societies. For example, in the US, an indictment looking at election meddling in 2016 has “revealed a highly organized and sophisticated effort to drive a wedge between Americans through social media”.\textsuperscript{53} Moreover, it has already been demonstrated that social media is able to inflame issues which are already divisive within a society, especially when it disseminates fake news in the form of text or images to a mass audience. As Tandoc Jr. et al. suggest, “fake news needs the nourishment of troubled times in order to take root. Social tumult and divisions facilitate our willingness to believe news that confirms our enmity toward another group”.\textsuperscript{54} If this is the context within which we can find fake news, then social media is one of the most significant channels through which fake news can be distributed.

**1.3: Political Consequences of Fake News.**

These issues also illuminate why fake news has come to prominence as a significant threat facing many democratic societies, and why it is being taken so seriously by institutions such as NATO and the EU. There are substantial political implications which result from the propagation of fake news, many of which are still being uncovered. Fake news has

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{52} Elizabeth Grieco, "More Americans are Turning to Multiple Social Media Sites for News", \textit{Pew Research Center}, November 2, 2017, \url{http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/02/more-americans-are-turning-to-multiple-social-media-sites-for-news/}.
\item\textsuperscript{54} Tandoc Jr. et al., “Defining "Fake News””, 149.
\end{itemize}
been put under the category of “information warfare”, and “the Kremlin’s ‘chief propagandist’, Dmitry Kiselev, has asserted that information wars have become ‘the main type of warfare’.”\textsuperscript{55} Fake news has already shown what significant consequences it can have through noteworthy political events such as the 2016 US elections. HR McMaster, Trump’s national security adviser, stated that Russian election meddling in the U.S. is “beyond dispute”.\textsuperscript{56} As a consequence, the Justice Department in the US has raised charges in an investigation led by Special counsel Robert S. Mueller III. The indictment has “unveiled a sophisticated network designed to subvert the 2016 election”.\textsuperscript{57} One claim which has been put forward in the investigation is that certain Russian nationals and companies “stole the identities of American citizens, posed as political activists and used the flash points of immigration, religion and race to manipulate a campaign”, seeking to add fuel to divisive issues.\textsuperscript{58} In reaction, a bill dubbed the ‘Honest Ads Act’ has been proposed in Congress, which tries to apply the standards which we have for traditional news sources to the current, problematic manifestations of information, including fake news,\textsuperscript{59} although it has not yet been passed or put into effect. Republican John McCain has claimed that “US laws requiring transparency in political campaigns have not kept pace with rapid advances in technology, allowing our adversaries to take advantage of these loopholes”.\textsuperscript{60}

It has also been claimed that fake news played a role in Brexit, and in a UK parliamentary debate Tom Brake stated that according to research by City, University of London, there was “a ‘13,500-strong Twitter bot army’ present on the social media site around the time of the referendum, and in the four weeks before the vote, those accounts posted no less than 65,000 tweets about the referendum, showing a ‘clear slant’ towards the leave

\textsuperscript{55} Bentzen, "Understanding Propaganda and Disinformation".
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
campaign.” An official inquiry into fake news has since been launched in the UK by The Culture, Media and Sport Committee. There are fears of the influence fake news has played in many other cases, such as in different European elections, or in Russia’s neighbouring countries, such as Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States. There are also concerns of its future possible consequences, and preparations against fake news and disinformation campaigns are being made for example in Sweden, ahead of their 2018 elections, and in the EU, which is stepping up efforts to tackle fake news ahead of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections. It is not within the scope of this paper to research all of these cases and how they were affected by fake news. However, it is enough to note that fake news really is having significant political impact, and that it is recognised in many countries as a threat to the state and to democracy in general. As it was noted by Danish and Swedish politicians, when societies “cannot clearly distinguish false news and disinformation from what is true, we become increasingly unsafe”.

1.4: Post-Truth, Populism, and Alternative Facts.

Fake news so far has been defined as “the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design”. It is related to disinformation and propaganda, although it does not necessarily have an inherent ideological or political agenda (even if this is often the case). Social media plays a crucial role in contemporary forms of fake news, and it’s role in influencing politics has been substantially proven, and is still ongoing. It is a method which can be used in information warfare, and therefore combating this issue is of utmost significance. There is one more aspect of fake news which needs to be elucidated, and this is its relation to other

63 Naja Bentzen, “'Fake news' and the EU's Response”, European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2017, [link]
64 Bentzen, "Disinformation, 'Fake News' and the EU's Response".
significant terms which have come to prominence recently, including post-truth, alternative facts, and populism.

One very troubling consequence of fake news is that we may give up on the idea of objective reality all together. The consequences of this could be drastic, meaning that the public would lose confidence and not know which account of events to believe. Individuals might be more easily persuaded by fake news which, as will be demonstrated in chapter 2, can manipulate the reader using psychological methods. This may be a part of what many commentators are calling “post-truth”, which is another phrase being used more and more in recent years. It was even named word of the year in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries, who define post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.67 Arendt scholar Lyndsey Stonebridge remarked that Arendt was familiar with the problem of when truth and objectivity is ignored, writing about it in her work regarding totalitarianism. Stonebridge observed that:

“Arendt disagreed with Orwell that everyone knows two plus two doesn’t make five. We’re not idiots. We know a lie. But the problem is when people decide they don’t have to accept this reality. Then everyone begins to inhabit their own world, and that loss of a shared reality is what produces the loneliness, and that’s what makes the chaos of post-truth and willful lies so politically and existentially traumatic.”68

Some writers may not necessarily even want the public to believe the lies and fake news which they are spreading, but more importantly, they want to make us think that there is no objective truth whatsoever, breaking our trust with institutions, and having serious political consequences. To take a very recent example, Sergei and Yulia Skripal were poisoned in the UK on March 4th, 2018, after which both the UK and Russia started to share their explanations of the event. The accounts which originated from Russia were numerous, and blamed anybody but the Kremlin. In total, it was reported that “two dozen different narratives surrounding the Skripal case have appeared in the Russian media so far, prompting British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson to accuse Moscow of seeking to

67 “Word of the Year 2016 is…”, Oxford Dictionaries.
‘conceal the needle of truth in a haystack of lies’.”69 If the British public were to believe any or all of the Russian accounts, rather than the official British narrative, this could weaken the British position, detrimentally influencing their reaction to the hostile event.

More generally, post-truth can be taken as an umbrella term which encompasses phenomena like fake news, as well as alternative facts and populism. It is a broader, more conceptual understanding of society’s current orientation, or perhaps even disorientation. The attempt by political actors to surround objective reality with ambiguity may also play a significant role with the current rise of populism, a crisis which is currently faced by countries across Europe. Populism is very complex, and would be impossible to properly examine and define because of the scope of this paper.70 Very briefly, populism in its current form can be understood as a “thin ideology” whose framework pits “pure people versus a corrupt elite”.71 According to Muller, populists also claim that they alone are true and legitimate representatives of the people.72 Often, populist politicians are accused of manipulating the truth for their own purposes and of promoting fake news. Moreover, they have had a significant political effect globally, demonstrated by the successes of the likes of Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, or even Nigel Farage and Brexit in 2016.

Finally, “alternative facts” was voted as “un-word of the year” by a panel of German linguists, who claimed that it is a “disguised and misleading term for the attempt to make false claims acceptable as a legitimate means for public debate”.73 Many consider alternative facts merely to be falsehoods, untruths, or delusions,74 however it has also been defined as an alternative to a widely accepted theory, or as “a statement intended to contradict another more verifiable, but less palatable, statement”.75 It is therefore clear in all three examples that they have a problematic relationship with truth, which can be

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69 EUvsDisinfo, "Figure of the Week: 20", EU vs DISINFO, March 27, 2018, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/figure-of-the-week-20/.
72 Müller, What is Populism?, 20.
instrumentally used and abused for specific purposes, and is stripped of any objective authority.

1.5: Concluding Remarks.

These terms are significant in contemporary politics, and are also relevant to fake news, even if they will not be the focus of this paper. They first of all show how one of the most significant problems which they all share is the problem of truth and its role in the political sphere. Fake news definitely partakes in this current crisis, and in the following chapter, I will investigate more closely the epistemological issues relating to fake news. I will demonstrate that fake news is fundamentally a problem of truth, and I will furthermore examine the role of truth in the political sphere and its relation to fake news. I will moreover consider some of the psychological implications relating to fake news and to social media, and the relevance which this has to epistemological issues such as belief and knowledge. Thus in conclusion of this first chapter, I will present a pertinent question regarding the definition of fake news, which I will approach in detail in the next chapter. Namely, “can an article, which looks like news, but is without factual basis, with an immediate intention to mislead, be considered fake news if the audience does not buy into the lie?” [my emphasis]76

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“An important factor in defining fake news currently missing from the definitions reviewed in this study is the role of the audience. […] While news is constructed by journalists, it seems that fake news is co-constructed by the audience, for its fakeness depends a lot on whether the audience perceives the fake as real. Without this complete process of deception, fake news remains a work of fiction. It is when audiences mistake it as real news that fake news is able to play with journalism’s legitimacy. This is particularly important in the context of social media”.

This quotation, from Tandoc Jr. et al., highlights a crucial aspect of fake news which makes it have such a significant impact. Namely, that the audience must believe fake news for it to have any significant political or social consequences. Fake news which doesn’t deceive its audience can still exist, however these are just works of fiction. Fake news which is negatively impacting our societies can do so because it has a relation to the beliefs and knowledge of the audience, and is accepted as true. This is where the significance of epistemology, and in particular of the notion of truth and its role in the political sphere, becomes apparent.

2.1: The Epistemology of ‘Real’ News.

The roots of this issue come from the role news in general plays in forming our beliefs about the world, and the trust that we put into the media and journalism. In order to understand how fake news can influence our beliefs, it is therefore important to investigate the role that ‘real’ news plays, and how this relates to epistemology, namely how we know what we know. News is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as “recent information about people you know”, and “a printed or broadcast report of information about important events in the world, the country, or the local area”. In the context of this paper, the latter definition is the most relevant, although the former does show how “news” is taken to mean important information about people who you feel a connection with, which can broadly be extended to the news which informs about the world we live in and feel a connection to, from a local to a global scale.

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77 Ibid.
Gelfert compares news to the testimony of others, which highlights some significant characteristics of how news is meaningful in our lives, and also how we should engage with it. First of all, as with the testimony of those we trust, news also has “a central role in our epistemic lives: serving as the source of much of what we take ourselves to know”.\(^79\) In fact, according to Gelfert, the most significant epistemic function of news is “to furnish us with reliable factual information”.\(^80\) This means not only that it should provide us with new and truthful information, but it should keep our knowledge up to date, by informing us of important changes in the world.\(^81\) Moreover, understanding news as similar to testimony shows how the weight of news objectivity should not be placed solely upon news producers. As Gelfert writes, “consumers of news also incur epistemological obligations”.\(^82\) This means that people who engage with the news should evaluate the information using the “same basic screening methods […] they would be using when evaluating the testimony of a trusted and competent interlocutor”.\(^83\) It also means that the reader should be able to “distinguish between factual reports and opinion pieces”.\(^84\) No matter how putatively reliable the source, our critical faculties should always be engaged “concerning the credibility of the source, its reliability, motives, interests, consistency and track record”.\(^85\)

News is often seen as essentially related to journalism, which we expect to provide “independent, reliable, accurate and comprehensive information”.\(^86\) News, as information about the world we live in, must be researched, processed, and produced by journalists, who traditionally would submit it to be published or broadcast. Stories, therefore, need to be approved by editors when they are written by genuine journalists for genuine news outlets. And most importantly, “journalism is expected to report, above all things, the truth”.\(^87\) Even if this is not always the case in reality, and it should not be forgotten that people are fallible and mistakes can be made, the overall standards which journalists and media outlets are subjected to include truth as one of the most important criterion. In the UK, for example, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) regulates most

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\(^{79}\) Gelfert, "Fake News", 87.  
\(^{80}\) Ibid.  
\(^{81}\) Ibid., 88.  
\(^{82}\) Ibid., 87.  
\(^{83}\) Ibid.  
\(^{84}\) Ibid.  
\(^{85}\) Ibid.  
\(^{87}\) Ibid.
of the UK’s newspapers and magazines, claiming to “protect people’s rights, uphold high standards of journalism and help to maintain freedom of expression”. In their “Editors’ Code of Practice”, the very first rule is “Accuracy”, in which they state amongst other things that “The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information”, that significant inaccuracies require a published apology, and that “comment, conjecture and fact” must be clearly distinguished. This strict division between fact and opinion is absolutely vital, and is absent in fake news articles which do not uphold these essential standards of journalism.

It is clear then that news is epistemically significant because it gives us factual information that we use to form beliefs about our environment, the world, and our everyday lives. Traditional media channels can make mistakes, but nonetheless they are held up to certain standards, and aim to report the truth. Fabricated articles would not be able to pass the editorial stage, and would not be approved to be published. Previously, there was no platform for outrageous conspiracy theories or fictitious stories because of the editorial and moderation process before publication. This can be described as the ‘traditional’ news ecosystem, which had a significant link to our epistemological lives, and which was a system which could overall be trusted. It used to be considered an epistemically virtuous practise to read and believe the news, to follow current affairs and form beliefs based on the information given by the media.

2.2: The Manipulation of Traditional News Formats.

It is fair to say that today, the methods for reporting news in order to reach a mass audience are changing drastically, as are the standards, especially when it is not necessary to go through the editing process in order to reach such a large public. A recent study by Stanford History Education Group noted how “ordinary people once relied on publishers, editors, and subject matter experts to vet the information they consumed. But on the unregulated Internet, all bets are off.” Moreover, on the internet it is possible to create and disseminate articles which appear to be the same as ‘genuine’ news articles, but which

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report completely fabricated stories. This is where the format of news plays a significant role. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate all the norms of traditional news outlets, it can be said that normally, they have trademark criteria which help us to recognise what information we are being given. This creates a relationship of trust between the reader and the news producer. Factual news is written in an impartial manner, presents what is known rather than conjecture, and sharply distinguishes news from opinion. However, several fake news outlets have started to mimic the traditional news format, making it difficult for readers to know whether or not it is factual, opinion, trustworthy, or fabricated. This format can be purposefully used to encourage trust, in order to successfully manipulate the reader. Paul Horner, for example, is famous for having made fake news articles, and he criticises those who believe his fictitious stories by saying that “people are definitely dumber […] nobody fact-checks things anymore.”

Yet as James Ball points out when describing one of Horner’s articles, it is “written in news rather than satirical style, present screenshots of ‘evidence’” and nothing gives “any indication that the site was intended as satire or a joke”. It could therefore be difficult for readers to determine whether or not it is a piece of real or fake news. It has furthermore been claimed that in the future, with the help of artificial intelligence, fake news will be so realistic that “even the best-resourced and most professional news organisation will be hard pressed to tell the difference between the real and the made-up sort”.

In a study (mentioned above) by Stanford History Education Group, it was noted how even though the younger generation is generally considered to be more technologically savvy, in fact the opposite is true, and they can often be deceived by false information online. The authors consider this a particularly significant political issue, stating that “at present, we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish”. In their executive summary, they make a striking claim about the media literacy abilities of their research group, which targeted 7,804 students of different ages. They claim that “overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak”. In

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93 “Waging War with Disinformation”, *The Economist*.
94 “Evaluating Information”, *Stanford History Education Group*.
95 *Ibid*.
96 *Ibid*.
particular, when the information comes “through social media channels”, they can be “easily duped”. This is especially worrying, considering that worldwide, young people spend a significant amount of time on social media, and thus could be vulnerable to exposure of fake news on these platforms. Moreover, more and more people receive the news via social media, and a recent report showed that in America at least two-thirds of adults get news from social media sites. Overall, the conclusions of the study by the Stanford History Education Group are alarming, with the authors stating that “in every case and at every level, we were taken aback by students’ lack of preparation”.

2.3: Fake News as a Problem of Truth.

The fact that the audience can often unwittingly believe fake news as fact is significant for its epistemological impact, as well as for the consequences it has. As the quote at the beginning of the chapter noted, “it is when audiences mistake it as real news that fake news is able to play with journalism’s legitimacy”, and thus “fake news is co-constructed by the audience”. If the audience does not buy into the lie, fake news would remain merely fictional. But since it is often taken as true, and we have seen the significant influence “real” news has on our lives and our beliefs about the world around us, it can therefore have these significant consequences, such as influencing political beliefs, or creating tension and division in a society by exploiting vulnerable subject matters.

It is therefore evident that fake news is fundamentally a problem of truth, and our epistemological relationship to it. Under normal circumstances, it would be epistemically virtuous to believe traditional news sources, due to high standards of journalism and editorial practices. However, these standards have been abused and manipulated by fake news producers, meaning that this relationship between the news and our beliefs is now problematic. Nonetheless, the epistemic practices of many people have not changed, resulting in some of the disastrous consequences which fake news can have. Fake news

97 Ibid.
100 “Evaluating Information”, Stanford History Education Group.
has been successful in exploiting the reliability of traditional news sources through mimicking its format and style, amongst other means. Moreover, it has been given a significant platform through which it can reach a mass audience, namely social media.

Today, with social media, the way in which news is being written, broadcast, and received by the audience is changing drastically. We have a new “news ecosystem”, which is proving to be a crisis in contemporary journalism. Emily Bell describes how “the ‘fake news’ issue is real but the disproportionate outrage over it speaks to a profound anxiety over what sort of news ecosystem and public sphere we want”. Crucially, our epistemic mode of forming beliefs has not followed this change, leading to false beliefs and thus to troubling political consequences.

2.4: Psychological Aspects of Fake News.

The way news is being distributed is not the only thing which is changing, but a central issue is what Reid describes as a “misinformation ecosystem”. This is because:

“[…] people who encounter fake news don’t come across it in a vacuum. It comes in searches and social feeds alongside partisan news, juxtaposed with direct appeals from campaigns, news from mainstream outlets, and comments, photos and memes made by friends and families. To look at fake news in isolation is to miss the real problem entirely.”

Thus a new aspect of fake news is revealed through this issue, namely that there is a psychological aspect of our relation to truth and to fake news, especially when we are confronted with it on social media. Some of the most remarkable conclusions regarding fake news, and the psychological issues related to it, have been raised by a recent article which examined stories which were posted on Twitter from 2006 to 2017. The research looked at “~126,000 stories tweeted by ~3 million people more than 4.5 million times”, making it “the largest ever study of fake news”. In their research, they distinguish

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102 Ball, Post-Truth, 141.
103 Emily Bell, in Ball, Post-Truth, 141.
104 Reid in Ball, Post-Truth, 140.
105 Ball, Post-Truth, 140-141.
between news which is true or false, which they classified “using information from six independent fact-checking organizations that exhibited 95 to 98% agreement on the classifications”. They proposed to look at the dissemination of fake news on twitter, taking into consideration whether the “sharers” of the information were humans or bots, as well as what the nature of the fake news was (e.g. political, urban legends, etc.). Their results are quite noteworthy:

“Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. […] Whereas false stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise in replies, true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust. Contrary to conventional wisdom, robots accelerated the spread of true and false news at the same rate, implying that false news spreads more than the truth because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it.” [my emphasis]

First of all, it is noteworthy that falsehoods (including fake news) were always diffused more than truth, showing how significant this problem is, and what serious consequences it could have. Moreover, their conclusion, that humans are the reason that false news spreads online, not ‘bots’, is very important. It means that there must be something psychological which often motivates us to share false information more readily than news which is factual. Whilst an investigation into the psychology behind this is well beyond the scope of this paper, there is one important aspect which I would like to highlight, which is confirmation bias. As philosopher Michael P. Lynch stated, “the internet is the greatest fact checker, but also the greatest bias-confirming ever invented”, leading to what he calls “epistemic overconfidence”.

Gelfert define confirmation bias as “the near-universal tendency to favour new evidence that confirms our existing beliefs or theories”. He argues that exploiting such biases is “part and parcel” of fake news, and that “the systemic features inherent in the design of the sources and channels through which fake news proliferates create additional obstacles to critical reasoning and active inquiry”. Confirmation bias is not the only tool social

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109 Ibid.
111 Gelfert, "Fake News", 111.
112 Ibid., 112-113.
media can use to psychologically influence its readers, but for example “repetition effects” also have a significant influence. As Daniel Kahneman notes, “a reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth”.113 Thus when exposed to the same information on social media, even if it is from the same source and thus should be “redundant”, the information is “more persuasive” to the reader.114 Fake news can also blend opinion with news, with the intention of arousing a biased emotive reaction which is influenced by the author’s affective descriptions. Therefore, the way in which fake news on social media can utilise “confirmation bias, repetition effects, affective arousal”, and other relevant psychological tools leads to the inhibition of critical reasoning.115

Kahneman suggests that one of the reasons we are susceptible to such psychological effects is related to what he calls “cognitive ease”, suggesting that pieces of information which conform to one’s prior beliefs are less straining than pieces of information which disagree with our pre-set opinions.116 “Contrary to the rules of philosophers of science, who advise testing hypotheses by trying to refute them, people (and scientists, quite often) seek data that are likely to be compatible with the beliefs they currently hold”.117 In the past, news from reputable news sources would not provide such a significant amount of information which would feed into our confirmation bias, as traditional media outlets are usually required to have standards of objectivity, showing more than one side of an argument. However, this is now possible because of the current way in which news is disseminated and accessed, such as through social media, which does not maintain the same standards. Moreover, psychological effects are inherent in the design of social media and can also have a significant influence on the reader, through processes such as algorithms, filter bubbles, sharing, commenting, and partisan groups.

2.5: Algorithms, Filter Bubbles, and “Bent Testimony”118

Algorithms, used not only by social media platforms but also other platforms including search engines such as Google, “are incredibly powerful tools that allow all of us […] to

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114 Gelfert, "Fake News", 112.
115 Ibid., 112-113.
117 Ibid., 81.
locate information in the blink of an eye”.\textsuperscript{119} Computer algorithms can measure “relevance”, but problematically, “the standards used often do not correspond to the criteria that reputable journalists or researchers would use”.\textsuperscript{120} Based on what users have clicked on in the past, algorithms can adjust what content is considered relevant for that user, or can use other data, such as the amount of time a user spends on a specific page.\textsuperscript{121} We also see more frequently the posts shared by our friends or groups we are affiliated with. What is troubling is that “content that rouses emotion is commented on and shared most often – and above all when negative emotions are involved”, which can influence or be influenced by existing societal polarisation.\textsuperscript{122} Stöcker and Lischka argue that this could “result in the creation of so-called echo chambers among people with extremist views”.\textsuperscript{123}

Chamath Palihapitiya, Facebook’s former vice-president for user growth, reportedly stated that “the short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth”.\textsuperscript{124} The ‘bubbles’ created by algorithms definitely have a much larger effect on society than was initially thought, when their main use was for advertisements. The Guardian reports that “many observers attributed the unexpected outcomes of the 2016 US presidential election and Brexit referendum at least in part to the ideological echo chambers created by Facebook’s algorithms”, showing the political influence that such algorithms can have.\textsuperscript{125} Moreover, businesses and media outlets now react to changes in algorithms, and editorial strategies will be adjusted according to the Facebook News Feed algorithm and the content it promotes.\textsuperscript{126} In early 2018, in reaction to criticism Facebook faced regarding the spread of disinformation and for “cloistering users in filter bubbles”, Zuckerberg announced that the ‘News Feed’ algorithm would change, and instead would

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
prioritise posts by the user’s friends and family. However, it is far from clear whether this change will resolve the problems which algorithms pose, especially if our friends and family are unreliable sources of information. As has been demonstrated earlier in this chapter, we can be psychologically influenced by the posts our family and friends share because of the trust we put into testimony. Therefore, the psychological effects of algorithms can clearly have severe consequences, influencing both political and social issues in a society, and yet currently there is no satisfactory solution to ensure that users will not be negatively influenced.

As well as algorithms or filter bubbles, it has been suggested that we are influenced by what groups or our friends have commented or reacted to online, what they have ‘liked’ and shared, and this can hugely influence our perception of what to believe. Part of the reason for this is, as argued by Gelfert, is the trust we put in the testimony of those we know. Believing in the testimony of others is, according to Regina Rini, normally an epistemically virtuous practice. She writes that “we rely upon others for our knowledge of many things distant from us […] A community of people with a practice of accepting one another’s testimony will be able to learn far more than individuals who insist upon believing only what they discover on their own”. Yet, news which is transmitted through social media is not a traditional form of testimony. Rini describes it as a “a bent form of testimony”. This is because we cannot be sure that a comment, a share, a retweet, etc, is an actual endorsement of the claims being made. “The epistemic relationship between testifier and testimony is ambiguous, as we haven’t yet settled on a norm whereby sharing entails assertion”.

These psychological processes can help us understand why certain people may be persuaded of the truth of a piece of fake news which, in another context, may have been doubted, or at least read more critically. Exploring such issues provides a clearer understanding as to why this phenomenon has become such a significant problem today.

127 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid., E-48.
2.6: Fake News and Trust.

Another noteworthy aspect to look at concerning fake news is the matter of trust. This is important not only when discussing news which you can or cannot trust, but it is crucial when it comes to politics, to the media, to the formation of our beliefs, and to the consequences of fake news. Trust is very often, if not almost always, linked with truth. An Ipsos MORI survey in the UK investigated into the most and least trusted professions in Britain in 2017, and found that “Politicians remain the least trusted profession in Britain”.

When inspecting this claim in further detail, the question which they asked participants was: “Would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth, or not?”, with the categories being: “Politicians generally” (17% answered “yes” in 2017), and “Government Ministers” (19% answered “yes” in 2017).

Trust has often been linked to truth, and this brings forth the broader question of the role of truth in the political sphere, as well as the epistemological question which has been thoroughly discussed, namely the role of truth regarding our knowledge and beliefs.

2.7: Concluding Remarks.

In this chapter, I have shown that fake news has significant political consequences because of its influence on our beliefs and our knowledge. This is because of the epistemic significance which news itself has, and the fact that fake news attempts to manipulate the reader by reproducing the same format so that it will be believed as true. When fake news is believed to be true, this has significant political consequences, affects journalism, and can even put objectivity into question. Most fundamentally, I have argued that fake news is above all a problem concerning truth. Truth plays a critical role in our daily lives, and is deformed by fake news. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter notes, without the “complete process of deception” of fake news, in which it is believed and taken to be real, i.e. taken to be true, it remains a mere “work of fiction”, with minimal impact. Thus it is both pertinent and necessary to further investigate the significance of truth, and its role

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133 Ibid.

in the political sphere. Truth is the key which can help us to understand fake news, its importance, its consequences, and what can be done about it.

We have an essential epistemic relationship to news, which in its traditional form is based on trust that the news is objective and truthful. This relation to news has been distorted with the changing ‘news ecosystem’ in recent years. Social media has been shown to have a crucial role in the deformation of news and our relation to it, through methods such as algorithms, or through propagating a ‘bent’ form of testimony. Fake news can manipulate readers, through psychological methods which are often unearthed on social media. This can also be seen through the way that fake news attempts to create trust by copying and adapting the format of real news, and playing with the legitimacy of journalism. It is clear, therefore, that fake news destroys the trust that the audience has that that news sources will tell the truth, putting objectivity itself into question, and perhaps leading to other severe consequences such as a ‘post-truth’ society.

Therefore, I have shown that the fundamental problem of fake news is a problem of truth, and our relationship to it, which has significant political consequences. As Hananh Arendt wrote, “conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us”. In order to investigate the issue of truth, our relationship to it, and its role in the political sphere, I have decided to take a philosophical approach, which I will now turn to in Chapter 3. A full philosophical investigation into current academic thought regarding the relationship between truth, belief and knowledge within epistemology is far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I have decided to take Jan Patočka as a case study, a philosopher who lived in Czechoslovakia in the 20th century, and was a student of Edmund Husserl. In his philosophical writings, he discusses extensively the crucial importance of truth, and particularly in seeking it. I will show how his ideas, written before the era of social media, fake news or post-truth, are still relevant and can provide us with a significant interpretation of the current dilemma. These will be essential for the initial part of my argument, concerning personal, Socratic responsibility. This argument will be extended

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in Chapter 4, in which I will demonstrate how fake news can and should be opposed in practice, as well as the important role of institutions.
Chapter 3: A Philosophical Analysis Using the Case Study of Jan Patočka.

3.1: Patočka’s Life and Philosophy.

Jan Patočka was born in 1907, and witnessed as a child the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, followed by the creation of the state of Czechoslovakia. He lived not only through two World Wars, but also experienced both the Nazi and Communist occupation of his country. The philosopher endured unforgiving authoritarian regimes, and in 1977, he died “of a massive brain haemorrhage suffered under police interrogation”.

Patočka was, then, nearly 70 years old, and “had been interrogated repeatedly, the last interrogation lasting over eleven hours”, which proved to be too much. In his last years, he became politically active against the Communist regime, and amongst other things, was one of the three main spokespersons for Charter 77.

Patočka was interested in Ancient Greek philosophy, and when after World War II he was briefly allowed to teach at Charles University in Prague, he taught courses on Ancient Greek philosophy, including the Pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In his philosophical writings, too, the influence of these philosophers, in particular Socrates and Plato, is regularly apparent. Patočka was also a phenomenologist, and was a student of Husserl and Heidegger, following them in the phenomenological tradition. In brief terms, phenomenology may be understood as “the study of structures of experience, or consciousness”, i.e. the study of phenomena. Phenomenology “studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view”, looking at how things appear in our experience, how we experience them, and “the meanings things have in our experience”.

Patočka is not usually considered to be a ‘political’ philosopher, especially since he was not a political theoretician, and “did not labour to produce theories of the state, political

136 Kohák, Jan Patočka, 3.
137 Ibid.
138 Jan Vit, Jan Patočka (Prague: Center of Administration and Operation CAS, 2017), 12-15.
140 Ibid.
rights, or sovereignty”. Patočka himself only became overtly politically active towards the end of his life, most notably through his involvement with Charter 77. Nonetheless, his philosophy influenced many political thinkers of his time, such as Vaclav Havel, and moreover can still help us significantly analyse political issues we are faced with today, including the problem which is the focus of this paper, namely fake news. His discussions regarding the importance of truth, as well as the critical, ‘Socratic’ attitude we must take towards it, can provide us with notable conclusions regarding the problem at hand, as well as providing a broader analysis for associated issues, such as that of post-truth.

3.2: The Socratic Relation to Truth

After discussing in the previous chapter how significant truth is concerning our knowledge, and its impact on our epistemic lives, as well as the significant harm which fake news can cause when disseminating false information, it may seem like a backwards step to retreat to the question: what do we know? Yet, as Kohák writes, once “the self-evidence of the self-evident has been called into question, philosophy has begun”. This basic epistemological question is the starting point we must take in order to understand the fundamental importance truth has for Patočka. Furthermore, in order to understand what Patočka thinks that we ultimately ‘know’ (or more accurately, don’t know), it is also important to look at the famous philosopher who lived over 2,000 years before Patočka himself, namely Socrates. Patočka was significantly influenced by Socrates not only in his philosophy, but also in his personal life, and has been described as the “heir to Socrates”. His well-considered step into the political sphere towards the end of his life was consciously made by taking Socrates’ example of “not hesitating to enter into conflict with its shameful state”. For Patočka, this was the behaviour of a real philosopher and human, and these actions have been described as Patočka’s “political Socratism”. Socrates himself was said to be wiser than all other people, because whilst

142 Kohák, Jan Patočka, 5
143 Vit, Jan Patočka, 2.
144 Ibid., 1.
145 Ibid.
they “thought they knew something and did not”, Socrates “was aware of his own ignorance”.  

Many parallels have been drawn between Patočka and Socrates, as philosophers who questioned the foundations of the societies they lived in, and in the end faced a tragic fate because of their refusal to give up their values. Following in Socrates’ footsteps, Patočka develops what can be described as a ‘negative’ philosophy, which has its roots in what he sees as the fundamental doctrine of Socrates, namely the paradoxical ‘knowledge of not knowing’. He states that

“Socrates, in contrast with the ordinary mode and direction of life, reaches a new level on which it is no longer possible to formulate objective, factual, positive assertions but in which, for all his mastery of life, he moves entirely in a vacuum. He formulates his new truth – since the problem of truth is what is at stake – only indirectly, in the form of a question, in the form of a sceptical analysis, of a negation of all finite assertions.” [my emphasis]  

For Patočka, as a phenomenological philosopher, the objective existence, reality and meaning of things cannot be taken for granted, and instead must be questioned and doubted. This does not mean that there isn’t any objective truth, but just that all of our preconceptions must be examined and interrogated. Therefore, the question of truth itself is an ongoing and challenging process. The philosopher engaged in this quest “differs from others in that the world, for him, is not self-evident”. This person must therefore accept what Patočka describes as the “problematicity” of life. Nothing is self-evident, nothing can be relied upon, nothing is finished and given, and “everything we know is prejudice”. Patočka describes how this is “to live not on firm ground, but rather on something that moves; to live in unanchoredness” [emphasis in original]. Therefore, Patočka’s relation to truth is fundamentally Socratic. One must constantly live in a state

150 Ibid., 56.  
151 Ibid.  
152 Ibid.
of unanchoredness, of problematicity. When one engages in philosophy, one must always question what is given as fact, as truth.

For Patočka, the “learned ignorance” of Socrates is fundamentally a question, and “Socrates is the great questioner”.\textsuperscript{153} Patočka furthermore claims that his mastery is “based on absolute freedom”.\textsuperscript{154} Socrates “is constantly freeing himself of all the bonds of nature, of tradition, of others’ schemata as well as of his own, of all physical and spiritual possessions.”\textsuperscript{155} The question of human freedom is thus, for Patočka, associated with what he calls the “audacious”\textsuperscript{156} philosophy of learned ignorance, of questioning, of not accepting any given truth. Those who have accepted this, who have experienced the loss of meaning, the loss of knowledge, are known in Patočka’s terminology as the “shaken”. Daniel Leufer takes a phrase Patočka uses, namely ‘ontological wounding’, as a way of describing this condition. “The central idea here is that Socrates inflicts a sort of trauma upon his followers, that he opens a wound which refuses to be closed.”\textsuperscript{157} This “Socratic negativity”, the ontological wound, “demands that we strive continually to transcend what is merely given”.\textsuperscript{158}

So far, this Socratic attitude may seem to be at odds with what was stated in the previous chapter. In chapter 2, the significance, necessity, and influence of truth on our daily lives and epistemic beliefs was highlighted. Why, therefore, is this questioning attitude towards truth, in which many former beliefs may be rejected, so important? The reason is that this attitude is primarily a way of critically thinking, and thus of critically considering the information which is being asserted. Patočka extends this act of questioning one truth, to questioning all truths, until we are in a true state of ‘unanchoredness’, with no firm ground. According to Kohák, the crucial point “is that the question has been asked, not about any one aspect of what is but about the whole of being”.\textsuperscript{159} This does not necessarily mean that the answer to the question will be any different to what was initially thought. But, “though the answer may be the same, it is no longer something that can be taken for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{153} Patočka, "Negative Platonism", 180.
\item \textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Kohák, \textit{Jan Patočka}, 5.
\end{itemize}
granted”, and thus “has become something that needs justification, something for which arguments must be advanced and a grounding found”. Therefore our beliefs, which inspire and initiate our actions, “must always be further examined, controlled, tested against reality and corrected in the light of experience”.

This is not an easy process, which is why the phrase ‘ontological wounding’ is so fitting. It is a challenge, and can even be distressing, which is why one is therefore ‘shaken’. It can even be considered a threatening task, as “it also opens us to the persistent threat of nihilism”. Patočka himself acknowledges that it is not possible to remain in this challenging situation, which could lead to a nihilistic outlook on life, in which many things seem meaningless. Leufer suggests that according to Patočka, “it is not possible to simply resign oneself to nihilism without being destroyed”, and that there must be some response which can be taken by those who are in a state of unanchoredness.

3.3: The Socratic Attitude.

There are three ways which could be taken as a possible way out of this state. The first, and the most undesirable of choices, is that of relativism and sophistry. As Leufer writes, “one option is that we can give into relativism, thereby becoming Sophists who do nothing but play with the ambiguity of the Socratic realisation and pursue our self-interest”. When one takes this position, truth itself is not important, unless it can be used instrumentally to achieve a certain egoistic goal. A parallel may be drawn between this choice, and what is currently taking place with fake news, as well as other phenomena such as populism, alternative truths, and post-truth. Populist politicians manipulate and deform ‘truth’ until it can be used as a tool in their favour, and alternative facts clearly disregard any authority truth has. It may not surprising therefore that trust in politicians is low. This account of sophistry, which uses the uncertainty of truth in order to further one’s self-interest, may also help us understand what ‘post-truth’ means in contemporary

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160 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
politics, in which objective truth has minor importance unless it can be used instrumentally.

The second option, which “Patočka sees as the one favoured by most of the Socratics”, is the “attempt to respond to the Socratism of Socrates with an ontology, we attempt to find firm ground once again”. In this case, a positive ontology is proposed, which was the preferred route of many great philosophers, including Socrates’ own student, Plato. At first glance, this might seem like a good solution. We need to find what is true objectively using the Socratic method, and then use it as “firm ground”. But this cannot be accepted as the ideal solution, because things always change, truths are unstable. What is true today may not be true in a decade. If we accept a certain ontology, we give up the quest for truth, which is the most important aspect of all.

We are therefore left with “the final option […] which Patočka sees as the response chosen by Socrates himself; what we could call the genuinely Socratic response to the Socratism of Socrates”. For Patočka, the response which we must choose is this Socratic attitude, this continual, conflictual, predominantly negative quest for truth. “Indeed, precisely this impossible struggle is what Patočka considers to be the condition of being truly human”. This activity is what Patočka calls ‘care for the soul’, a well-known phrase in Ancient Greek philosophy. For Patočka, “care for the soul means that truth is something not given once and for all, nor merely a matter of observing and acknowledging the observed, but rather a lifelong inquiry, a self-controlling, self-unifying intellectual and vital practice”. This is furthermore what Patočka sees as essential to Socratic philosophy, and he claims that “this discovering of meaning in the seeking which flows from its absence, as a new project of life, is the meaning of Socrates’s existence”. The experience of loss of one’s knowledge and understanding of the world is a vital process which must be experienced in order to develop a new relationship to meaning. This new relationship is one Patočka moreover suggests we must take responsibility for:

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165 Ibid.
166 Ibid., 39.
167 Ibid.
169 Ibid., 61.
“Passing through the experience of the loss of meaning means that the meaning to which we might perhaps return will no longer be for us simply a fact given directly in its integrity; rather, it will be a meaning we have thought through, seeking reasons and accepting responsibility for it. As a result, meaning will never be simply given or won once and for all. It means that there emerges a new relation, a new mode of relating to what is meaningful; that meaning can arise only in an activity which stems from a searching lack of meaning, as the vanishing point of being problematic, as an indirect epiphany.” [my emphasis] 170

In this proposal, Patočka advocates a philosophy which is restless, as “anything which is put forward as a response will ultimately be problematized in its turn and rejected”. 171 This final choice is, for Patočka, the relationship which we must have with objective reality, in order for it to have a proper foundation and justification. Thus, “the only valid philosophical answer to the Socratic question is a ‘negative’ one which does not seek to eliminate the question with a definitive answer but which continues to grapple with it”. 172 This constant seeking of truth, as a relentless endeavour, is the only way in which to find solid ground again, even if the ground we find might be again put into question in the future. We must “quest for meaning while at the same time knowing it to be questionable, realizing that any super-temporal, absolute meaning once and for all is sheer nonsense”, as Socrates himself did, when he engaged in dialogues with his fellow citizens, “dispelling their illusions as to the value of their naïve and dogmatic beliefs.” 173

It is therefore necessary to “struggle to extract out of this problematicity something that emerges from it; to find a firm shore, but then again problematize that which emerges as a shore”. 174 This way of approaching truth, as a continual struggle, is unquestionably difficult. But for Patočka, “it is possible to find unity precisely without firm ground, and it is possible to overcome this absolute negativity […] without being dogmatic” [emphasis in original]. 175 The engagement in the care for the soul “requires constant activity. It can never be abandoned, or taken for granted”. 176 This fundamental task is

170 Ibid., 60-62.
172 Kohák, Jan Patočka, 8.
175 Ibid., 61.
indisputable, as “in no historical situation is man allowed to resign his elementary task, to think, to examine constantly his doxai and to keep transforming them into epistêmé”.  

When facing this “relentless and probably thankless task”, Leufer highlights how we are tempted to “indulge in the distraction of ‘the everyday’.” This is something which is probably recognisable to most people. Constantly critically analysing information we are presented with is tiring and “thankless”, and it is much easier to switch off our critical faculties, and be happily distracted with trivial, everyday tasks. Yet for Patočka, our relationship to truth is vital and must not be abandoned. This is described eloquently by Leufer when he states that:

“By accepting the almost hopeless terms of philosophical life, one enters into what Patočka claims is an entirely new movement of existence, a life lived in and for truth. Although that truth is never something of which we have a definitive grasp, the very activity of pursuing it is what ‘unifies’ our soul, placing our life under the unitary and ultimate goal of pursuing truth.”

Perhaps it is now becoming clearer how Patočka can provide us with a significant way in which to deal with the contemporary problem of fake news. Patočka’s philosophy leads to political action “in this philosophical sense”, as “the pursuit of the possibilities opened up by this problematicity”. By not succumbing to sophistry, nor committing to a particular ontology however justified it might seem, but instead constantly pursuing truth and thus living in truth, we are able to unify our soul, and not only this, but the society we live in. Patočka writes that “the destiny of the truthful and the just, of those who opt for a life in truth, renders the idea of such a new human community indispensable: only in such a community of truth will they be capable of living without perishing in a conflict with reality”. The person who engages in such activity may not be “political in the usual sense of this word”, but instead, “is political in yet a different way, obviously, and he cannot be apolitical because this non-self-evident nature of reality is precisely what he throws into the face of this society and of everything that he finds around himself”.

177 Palouš, “A Philosopher and His History”, 87.
179 Ibid.
180 Dodd, "Polemos in Jan Patočka's Political Thought”, 84.
181 Patočka, Heretical Essays, 82.
My argument is that we should therefore take this fundamental relationship towards truth, as well as the necessity of the continual engagement of one’s critical faculties, and apply it to the problem of fake news. Foundations and justification for beliefs would be necessary, encouraging people to critically assess sources of information, and be epistemically responsible for what they consider objectively true. Such a position can moreover be understood as a political mode of being. By taking this attitude towards objective truth, we might avoid fallacies such as cognitive biases or appeals to testimony, which could otherwise encourage us to believe false information. More importantly, it would render truth itself indispensable, as it would be the focal point of all enquiry and critical reflection. As it has been shown, fake news questions objectivity itself, with disastrous political consequences. When trust is lost, and truth becomes relativized, then sophistry can start to prevail. ‘Truth’ instead becomes an instrumental tool, to be used and abused by those in power.

3.4: Active Citizenship.

Patočka is aware that not everybody will choose a philosophical life in contemplation, yet nonetheless, he thinks that everybody should be engaged in some philosophical activities. Unlike Plato, Patočka was not elitist when it came to engaging one’s higher critical faculties. On the contrary, it has been shown that Patočka sees this attitude as something which everybody must take responsibility for, and can be considered to be a political mode of being. This leads to a final part of Patočka’s philosophy which can help understand why this position is necessary in order to combat the problem of fake news, namely the question of active citizenship.

Patočka makes a clear link between the care for the soul of the individual, and the care for the soul of the state. We have already seen that care for the soul means that truth is not given, but is “a lifelong inquiry, a self-controlling, self-unifying intellectual and vital practice”.183 Patočka extends this from the individual to society at large, and in the same way that care for the soul is vital for the individual, it can also be understood politically, and society cannot flourish unless it has the same unifying goal.184 Therefore, active

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183 Patočka, Heretical Essays, 82.
citizenship is the process of going beyond the sphere of the individual, and having the same engagement in society itself. Active citizenship, and the civic dignity which we can have, is the peak of what is human for Patočka,\textsuperscript{185} and equally revolves around the fundamental search for truth. Active citizens should moreover be well-renowned, and should be recognised as having an active life in their community, which for Patočka is the maximal value.\textsuperscript{186} The care for the soul of society gives the humanity to human existence, both its value and its duration. According to Patočka, the question of being a citizen is as fundamental as the question of living itself.\textsuperscript{187} Being an active citizen and taking part in the political sphere was, for Patočka, an absolutely necessary part of life within a society. This responsibility may be a burden, yet its weight lets you know that you are really living, and we are committed to this continual effort on both an individual and a societal level.

The philosophical way of life is revealed in Socrates, who was famous for his use of the dialectic method, never writing anything down himself, but instead engaging in critical discussions with his fellow citizens, questioning their previously held beliefs to see if they had any solid foundations. Socrates therefore thought that ‘polemos’, was necessary in the ‘polis’, the state. Polemos is often translated as war, conflict, or fight, but Kohák suggests that it can be more accurately understood as “strife”.\textsuperscript{188} According to Patočka, Socrates showed people that the world is something which we do not possess, it is “dark” and “problematic”.\textsuperscript{189} Therefore, for a state to be healthy, its community needs to be active, critical, and engaged in debate. In the same way, life is poor for the individual who does not care for their soul in this active way. If critical thinking stops, the results are disastrous. “It is strife that makes passive acceptance of the common matter-of-course impossible and so, in creating distance, opens up the possibility of truth”.\textsuperscript{190} Yet fake news is encouraging the abandonment of the search for any objective truth, and discourages open debate which can critically assess conflicting claims. It deters any

\textsuperscript{185} Here I am using information from the Czech edition, kindly translated for me by Jan Stejskal: Jan Patočka, \\textit{Platónova péče o duši a spravedlivý stát: [přednášky k antické filosofii IV]} (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2012), 19-24.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{188} Kohák, \textit{Jan Patočka}, 122.
\textsuperscript{190} Kohák, \textit{Jan Patočka}, 122.
active, conflictual search for truth, therefore impeding the care for the soul of both the state and the individual.

The analysis above can help to understand what sort of actions Patočka would consider necessary in the political sphere in order to go beyond the passive reception of disinformation. As well as constantly engaging one’s critical faculties, a person must go beyond their own ‘sphere’, whether this be online (for example, beyond one’s own ‘Facebook bubble’), as well as in reality. Participating in discussion and debates would help extend the engagement with different points of view, for example. Furthermore, demonstrating or taking political actions could also be an important way of being an active citizen. For example, Patočka’s public endorsement of Charter 77 called on the government to respect the “ideals of human dignity and civic freedom” which “were being routinely violated”, thus confronting them with their hypocrisy and misuse of power.191 Yet, since the Communist regime at the time declared that “whatever was actual was also by definition socialist, good, true, and just”, Patočka confronted the regime by throwing truth into the face of their “vision of a higher ideal”.192 By breaking this “unspoken social contract”,193 his actions eventually led to his tragic fate. Yet he remained faithful to his philosophy, and continued to critically question a society which did not consider objectivity or truth important, and which punished anyone who questioned their dogmatic assertions.

3.5: Concluding Remarks.

Fortunately, in many societies today critical enquiry would not result in the same terrible consequences which Patočka faced. Whilst the subject of truth remains a large problem in politics today, I have shown that it is also the solution. The active search for truth, as well as the philosophical process of critical analysis, can be considered in itself to be an act of citizenship. We have a responsibility with regards to our knowledge, to what we accept as true, and must take a ‘Socratic’ attitude. In other words, this position promotes “the awareness that through the idea itself one can in the deepest way influence one’s

191 Ibid., 3.
192 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
relationship to the world and to oneself, one can transform it in a consciously responsible relationship”.

In the next chapter, I will begin by looking at ways in which institutions are currently trying to deal with the problem of fake news, and I will show that so far, none of them have been successful, and most of them are inherently problematic too. I will then demonstrate how institutions still play a vital role in fostering a Socratic attitude in their citizens, and in creating an open society in which debate and discussion is possible. From Patočka’s analysis, I have argued a theoretical position that the most significant way to combat fake news is by taking a critical, Socratic attitude, and by being epistemically orientated towards truth. I will show in the next chapter the more practical ways that such a position can be taken, and in particular how it can be encouraged and engendered within a society. Therefore not only the individual, but also society itself, is responsible for creating active citizens which can successfully confront the problem of fake news.

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194 Jan Patočka, in: Vit, Jan Patočka, 12.
Chapter 4: The Role of Institutions Concerning Fake News.

It has been shown in the previous chapter how significant the individual is regarding fake news, and how a Socratic attitude, which critically analyses information, is epistemologically oriented towards the truth, and produces an active citizen in the political sphere, can provide a possible long-term solution to this problem. However, one might now ask whether institutions have any role in combatting fake news, or whether the responsibility should lie entirely with the individual. It should be noted that when speaking about institutions, I understand this term very broadly, as any established group or organisation. Examples of institutions could be on a state level, such as a national government, they could be found on a supranational level, such as the EU or NATO, or could include other organisations such as NGOs, media companies, social media platforms, or grassroots organisations, amongst many more.

In this chapter, I will look at some of the main ways in which institutions are already attempting to combat fake news, and I will show why these solutions are very problematic, and are unable to provide any long-term solutions to this issue. Whilst some of the methods used by institutions in order to combat fake news can occasionally be effective as short-term solutions, they do not tackle the fundamental problem, namely the individual’s epistemic relationship with truth. It will be demonstrated that in order to find a solution to fake news, we must not emphasise the role of institutions as intermediaries between citizens and information which is classified as ‘true’. Instead, institutions should encourage the development of the individual, as a critical, active citizen, who holds objective truth as the ultimate goal of their epistemic life. Therefore, the role of institutions is not negligible. On the contrary, institutions are vital in their role as educators which produce such critically-minded citizens. Here, the case study of Sweden will be examined, as a society which is currently trying to combat fake news through initiatives which develop the critical faculties of their citizens. This will be shown as a possible example of the way in which my proposal can be practically implemented in a society as a solution to the problem of fake news.
4.1: Rini’s Proposal of a ‘Reputation Score’. 195

I will begin by turning to an author who emphasises the need for institutions, namely Regina Rini. Rini presents an argument very different to my own, stating that in order to solve the problem of fake news, changes are needed in institutions, such as social media platforms, rather than “individual epistemic practices”. 196 Rini argues that “our normative focus should be on identifying realistic structural changes, rather than specifying idealized individual practice”. 197 To support this claim, she states that “certain forms of epistemic partisanship are individually reasonable”, 198 in reference to how readers on social media believe stories based on the testimony of people or groups they trust, rather than the source’s reliability itself. Yet, she does indicate that our critical faculties can be deformed in this process, as social media sharing “seems to deaden people’s normal application of consistency-with-the-world filtering on testimony”. 199 She moreover suggests that whilst in an ideal world people would become “savvier” users of social media, in reality, this is improbable. 200 Therefore, she argues that the best way to counter fake news is to rely on institutions which can “reduce the bentness of social media testimony”. 201 In particular, she proposes that social media platforms, such as Facebook, could target individual users and track their “testimonial reputation”. 202 This would mean that the “Reputation Score” of users which shared disputed stories would reflect their actions, and other users who see their Reputation Score could judge them accordingly, which would hopefully “encourage a norm of accountability for social media sharing”. 203

There are three main reasons why I disagree with her proposal, and do not consider it to be a suitable solution to the problem of fake news. To begin with, her account appears to be somewhat contradictory. This is because on the one hand, she defends the practice of partisanship and trusting the testimony of others, saying that “it is individually reasonable to accept the bent testimony of social media sharing”. 204 However, in her proposal, people

196 Ibid., E-43.
197 Ibid., E-50.
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid., E-49
200 Ibid., E-54
201 Ibid., E-55
202 Ibid., E-57
203 Ibid.
204 Ibid., E-53
who do this, and perhaps accidentally share an article which was actually false, seem to be targeted and punished with an undesirable Reputation Score. They are singled out as not to be trusted, even if they behaved in a way which Rini otherwise considers “consistent with epistemic virtue”.205

This leads to the second reason for which I disagree with her proposal, namely the significant consequences that such a system might have in social and ethical terms. Such naming and shaming could lead to disastrous results, individually, socially, and even professionally. It is quite feasible that employers would not wish to employ somebody with an undesirable Reputation Score. For the individual, who might have been deceived, and believed that they were sharing an article which was true, these consequences could be unfair and discouraging. Rini argues that her proposal “does not involve censorship”,206 yet if such negative consequences were the result of Reputation Scores, perhaps people would not wish to engage in debates about a certain subject, in case they are wrong, and are punished accordingly. Taking a Patočkean point of view, this could be a disastrous consequence, as it discourages people from critically engaging, and moreover relies on a mediator (in this case, Facebook) to determine what it true or not. Rini herself admits that her proposal may seem “dystopic” to some, and that it might not be a perfect solution.207

As a final criticism, I also think that this idea would face potential practical problems if implemented, for example, new accounts could be created in order to have a Reputation Score of zero. Therefore, even though Rini raises some important issues regarding fake news, I believe that her argument cannot provide a concrete solution to the issue, and is overall too problematic.

4.2: Facebook’s Attempt to Combat Fake News.

Following much criticism, especially after the 2016 US elections, Facebook itself has attempted to respond to the problem of fake news. One such case is when in late 2016, Facebook announced that it would introduce a “disputed” tag on shared articles which

205 *Ibid.*, E-50
206 *Ibid.*, E-57
207 *Ibid.*, E-58
were proved to be inaccurate. The basic idea was that users could signal articles which they considered inaccurate, and these articles would then be “accessible to a handful of fact-checking organizations” who would “choose which stories they would like to assess”.\textsuperscript{208} If the organisation considered the information to be false, the article would be marked as ‘disputed’ when it appeared on Facebook. However, it has since been shown that this attempt by Facebook to tackle fake news has on the whole been unsuccessful. For example, the Guardian reported that out of 12 articles which were debunked by ABC News, “with more than half of those stories, versions can still be shared on Facebook without the disputed tag, even though they were proven false”.\textsuperscript{209} This problem has been reported on multiple occasions, which is a significant problem, especially if readers are supposed to trust and rely on such ‘disputed’ tags.

Moreover, it takes time to debunk an article, and therefore a piece of fake news could have been widely read and distributed for a few days (or more) before it is proven inaccurate, thus putting into question the effect that a disputed flag might have after an article has already been widely shared.\textsuperscript{210} One reason why social media is so effective is its ability to spread information to a mass audience in a minimal amount of time, meaning that the disputed tags would probably not be able to keep up and debunk fake news fast enough. Additionally, Jestin Coler even suggests that the disputed tag may entrench readers in their beliefs due to their distrust in fact-checkers, and Melissa Zimdars argues that the initiative was merely a cheap and easy PR move by Facebook, rather than any significant attempt to combat fake news.\textsuperscript{211} It is also important again to note that this purported solution does not encourage critical thinking or engagement, but rather allows Facebook to act as a very influential and powerful intermediary, as it can label news as trustworthy or unreliable, inevitably influencing a mass audience.

\textsuperscript{208} Olivia Solon and Julia Carrie Wong, "Facebook's Plan to Tackle Fake News Raises Questions Over Limitations", \textit{The Guardian}, December 16, 2016, \url{https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/16/facebook-fake-news-system-problems-fact-checking}.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
4.3: State Attempts to Combat Fake News.

There are also currently attempts to take action on a state level. For example, in France, President Macron, who considers fake news to be a threat to our democracy,\(^\text{212}\) has proposed a draft law intended to fight the problem, which will take effect during electoral periods.\(^\text{213}\) The new law would give judges 48 hours to decide whether an article or piece of information should be blocked.\(^\text{214}\) Furthermore, social media platforms would have to be transparent about who is sponsoring content, and the law “would also give the French media regulator new powers to remove broadcasters’ rights to air content in France if it is deemed to be deliberately fake or implausible”.\(^\text{215}\)

However, the law has been severely criticised for many different reasons. First of all, it has been claimed that “48 hours is too short to make such judgments”, and that it could put journalists’ sources at risk.\(^\text{216}\) It has also been claimed that this is a power grab by Macron, and that such a law is unnecessary “because France has had a law since 1881 aimed at false news stories”.\(^\text{217}\) Journalists have furthermore argued that this would hinder freedom of expression, and would be “an attack on press freedom”.\(^\text{218}\) It also has potential to be used for censorship in the future if France should have an authoritarian government.\(^\text{219}\) Such laws, whilst they do attempt to combat the problem of fake news, can be very dangerous, due to their potential to be abused by those in power, and become a means of limiting and censuring the press. Moreover, it has been argued that judges might not be the best “arbitrators of truth”, especially since currently the French government is having difficulty in defining what exactly constitutes fake news.\(^\text{220}\)


\(^\text{215}\) Chrisafis, "French MPs Criticise 'Hasty and Ineffective' Fake News Law".

\(^\text{216}\) Nossiter, "Macron Pushes Bill Aimed at 'Fake News' as Critics Warn of Dangers.”

\(^\text{217}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{218}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{219}\) Chrisafis, "French MPs Criticise 'Hasty and Ineffective' Fake News Law".

Similarly, Germany passed a Net Enforcement Law (NetzDG) in 2017 (which came into effect in 2018), in which social media platforms can face fines of up to 50 million euros if they do not remove “obviously illegal” hate speech.\textsuperscript{221} The law is applicable to social media networks with over 2 million members, who must remove the undesirable material within 24 hours, or a week for more complex cases.\textsuperscript{222} It has been claimed that the law was also put in place in order to help combat the problem of fake news.\textsuperscript{223} Yet the bill has been widely condemned, and many political parties have called for it to be repealed.\textsuperscript{224} First of all, it has been criticised as curbing free speech, in particular since “the threat of hefty fines is prompting internet firms to err on the side of caution and block more content than is necessary”.\textsuperscript{225} Moreover, even though platforms such as Facebook have hired moderators, their task of determining the line between free speech and hate speech is not an easy one at all.\textsuperscript{226}

An interesting question that the cases of Germany and France present is that of who is to be held liable. This, which can furthermore be construed as a legal question, raises the issue of responsibility, and whether the state or the individual must bear this weight. As these two cases have shown, when the burden of truth rests on the shoulders of institutions, such as the state or social media platforms, the worst result could be censorship and the limitation of free speech. The ability to control what information is distributed and considered true or false is a massive responsibility which could be potentially threatening when in the hands of institutions which have the capacity to influence a mass audience. Hypothetically, if we asked social media platforms to be responsible for the reliability of news which is presented to their users, this would give them gigantic potential for political influence, which would be worrying for many

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{226} “Germany is Silencing “Hate Speech”, But Cannot Define It”, \textit{The Economist}. 
reasons. This is also not a power which we would wish to see in the hands of the government, as if an authoritarian party came into power it could be exploited as a way to manipulate what they would prefer to be accepted as the ‘truth’, and would make censorship much easier. Therefore, it is important that we emphasise the individual’s responsibility regarding the information that they read, even if we may not want to penalise them with fines in the same way that Germany is doing with social media platforms.

4.4: The EU’s Attempt to Combat Fake News.

On a supranational level, the EU has also attempted to address the problem of fake news. In 2015, the EU created the European External Action Service (EEAS) East Stratcom Task Force, which “was set up to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns”.

One of their most significant actions is their “EU vs Disinformation” campaign, which brought about the creation of the website “https://euvsdisinfo.eu/” which debunks fake news. It provides a list of articles which it considers to be fake, including the outlet of the fake news article, and the countries involved. When the reader clicks on a particular article, information is given about the fake content, as well as an explanation about why this is considered to be disproved.

However, whilst this might seem like a possible solution to fake news, there are several problems which I would like to highlight. First of all, its effectiveness can be questioned, because it is not clear whether the general public often use this website, to check if what they are reading has been debunked. Its countering influence might not be strong enough against disinformation, especially if the damage has already been done, and a piece of fake news has already been seen by a mass audience. There is also the problem that with new articles being written so quickly, the website may have some difficulty to keep up with such a large amount of fake news, especially since it can take a lot of time and effort for them to be disproved. If readers trust this website to disprove fake news, and don’t

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228 EUvsDisinfo, "Disinformation Cases", EU vs DISINFO, 2018, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?offset=0.
find a certain article in their database of debunked cases, it may appear to be further ‘proof’ of its truth, even if the article is in fact fake.

Moreover, the website has already faced several accusations, and was even shut down momentarily because of criticisms from the Dutch government. It was claimed that EUvsDisinfo “had wrongly listed articles published by Dutch media in its collection of cases”, much to the anger of the Dutch media companies who felt that they had been wrongly accused and attacked. The website was also criticised in an official complaint which was filed with the EU Ombudsman in 2018 “alleging that the Disinformation Review violates the freedom of expression”, however the complaint was deemed inadmissible. In the complaint which was lodged, Alemanno et al. not only claimed that Article 11.1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union was breached (regarding freedom of expression), but they also asserted that when certain publishers are labelled as disinformation outlets, it has a “chilling” effect on “the work of journalists that is central to democracy”. Moreover, the writers argued that the methodology used by the EEAS is not clearly explained, in particular concerning how the organisation fact-checked and allowed individuals to respond. This, they argue, constitutes “maladministration”. Their complaint, even though it was rejected, demonstrates that the power and influence held by those who decide which articles are real or fake is very significant, and can be problematic when their methods are not clearly explained. Additionally, there is always a threat that such a website, which names and shames articles and journalists, could also hinder freedom of expression, which could have especially dire consequences when mistakes are made.

Looking at more hypothetical problems with such websites, we could consider that new ‘fake’ debunking websites could be created, which claim to debunk fake news, but actually cast doubt on real news. This would make the existence of objective truth even more obscure. Websites which ‘prove’ fake news could be created, citing many sources

230 Ibid.
232 Ibid., 3.
which may also be sources of fake news, and so on. It may even become difficult to tell the difference between real and fake debunking websites, making the situation more and more complicated. These possibilities illustrate a more foundational problem, namely the fact that technology constantly changes, adapts, and is vulnerable to manipulation. Moreover, such websites are always susceptible to cyber-attacks, which could lead to disastrous results, in particular if these websites are meant to be trusted by the public. Thus, such debunking websites are not a feasible way to overcome the problem of fake news. It would therefore not be a long-term solution for people to put trust into these websites as reliable mediators of what is true or not.  

An issue which has been demonstrated in several of the examples above is the fact that fake news, as a problem which is intimately related to technology, continues to develop and react, finding ways to overcome new obstacles. New ways to spread disinformation can be created, and often are relatively easy and cheap compared to traditional disinformation methods, since disseminating such information to a mass audience is possible via social media. This is an everchanging and dynamic problem, which institutions have significant difficulties in addressing. I have shown that at most, some short-term solutions have been proposed or even put into effect, but these often have vital flaws and cannot present any significant long-term solution to the issue. Drastic measures such as censorship or even banning social media would moreover be undesirable measures for combatting fake news.

4.5: The Positive Role of Institutions: The Case Study of Sweden.

Following my analysis so far, it may appear that institutions cannot have a significant role in combating the problem of fake news, because their actions are often very problematic. However, this is not at all the case, as institutions are absolutely vital in resolving this problem. This is because they are fundamentally responsible for fostering active citizens who can think critically, which can be achieved through education, as well as providing an open atmosphere in a society and allowing for debate and discussion. It was recently argued in an article co-authored by sixteen prominent academics that a “longer-run

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233 There are many other fact-checking websites which exist, however I feel that all of them can face the same or similar criticisms as the ones outlined above in the case of the “EUvsDisinfo” website.
approach” to combat fake news “seeks to improve individual evaluation of the quality of information sources through education”. Thus, whilst personal responsibility is essential in order to achieve the political mode of being I have argued for, it is very important not to ignore the role different institutions also have to play in helping citizens develop the skills required to have such a ‘Socratic’ attitude. There is thus both a personal responsibility, and an institutional responsibility, which is needed. Therefore, from the theoretical and analytical conclusions of the third chapter regarding the need to have critically thinking citizens who are epistemologically oriented towards the truth, we are now able to uncover more practical ways in which such an attitude can be fostered, and thus how this solution to fake news can be put into practice.

One such example of a way in which institutions can have this role is found in Sweden, which has already developed what it describes as a “psychological approach” towards certain threats to its society, which include “disinformation” and “false news”. According to Rossbach, “without a cohesive psychological defence, […] it will be very difficult to both resist attempts to spread disinformation and strengthen the will to defend”. Psychological defence is not new in Sweden, and was also used in World War II against Nazi propaganda. However, it is developing in response to “new threats”, and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), established in 2009, “has also been tasked with spotting disinformation”. Amongst other things, MSB provides material to help people take a critical approach towards information they read online. This promotion of media literacy is an excellent example of how institutions can encourage the public to engage in critical thinking.

Fake news has been recognised as a threat in Sweden by many people, including the head of Sweden's security service Anders Thornberg. A study has also found that Sweden has already been a victim of information attacks by Russia, which used “fake news, false documents and disinformation as part of a coordinated campaign to influence public

236 Ibid.
238 Ibid.
opinion and decision-making”.

Sweden is taking decisive action against fake news ahead of their elections in 2018, which they see as vulnerable to being targeted and influenced. Their particularly active approach in the last few years has also been due to Russian “incursions into Swedish airspace and territorial waters by Russian planes and submarines”, as well as the annexation of Crimea in 2014, behaviour which Sweden finds worrying and hostile. A “whole-of-society” approach in response to this threat has been taken, not only focusing on military strength but also in improving the resilience of their citizens. In May 2018, a brochure was sent to all households in Sweden by the MSB, giving information on how to prepare for war and react to a crisis. It is claimed in the leaflet that “attacks are taking place against our IT systems and attempts are being made to influence us using false information”. Included in the brochure is a section entitled “be on the lookout for false information”, in which it states that “the best protection against false information and hostile propaganda is to critically appraise the source”. Advice is given on how to critically examine information, such as by looking at more than one source, searching for more information, and not spreading information which appears untrustworthy.

It moreover presents a list of questions to be asked about any source:

- “Is this factual information or opinion?
- What is the aim of this information?
- Who has put this out?
- Is the source trustworthy?
- Is this information available somewhere else?
- Is this information new or old and why is it out there at this precise moment?”

243 Ibid.
244 Ibid.
245 Ibid.
246 Ibid.
This is exactly the kind of engendering of critical thinking which is necessary when citizens are confronted with information, and therefore the Swedish approach is a perfect example of how an institution can encourage citizens to take on the epistemic responsibility of trying to find out what is true and what news is untrustworthy. This develops the Socratic attitude which I have argued for, which is clearly a political mode of being, as by taking this approach to information Sweden is suggesting that citizens are contributing to the defence of Sweden’s democracy against foreign aggressors.

The EU has made a comparable effort, by creating an information sheet with ways to help spotting fake news. These include checking the media outlet, the author, and its references, as well as thinking before sharing news, and being active by reporting fake stories and joining “myth-busters”. Whilst this is definitely a step in the right direction, it is unfortunately not as effective as the Swedish campaign, in which brochures were sent to every national household. The EU’s information sheet is available online, although it is unclear how many people have actually read and been influenced by it. On a national or local level it is easier to connect with citizens and educate them, whilst supranational institutions such as the EU find it difficult to have the same impact. Nonetheless, this initiative is also a strong example of how the critical outlook which I am arguing for can be encouraged by institutions at any level.

In addition to the brochure examined above, there are several other measures currently being taken in Sweden to combat fake news, for example, “media organisations are supporting independent fact-checking”, and furthermore, “the government wants primary school children to be taught how to spot fake news.” Researchers in Sweden are currently looking into how younger students come into contact with fake news, and additionally, in 2018, the Swedish school curriculum was “revised to reinforce and clarify digital competences”, in which students “should also be able to use and understand digital systems and services and relate to media and information in a critical and responsible


248 Corera, "Swedish Security Chief Warning on Fake News".

Educating students is an important way in which to provide a long-term solution to fake news. Moreover, these kinds of actions can be seen as a way of engendering the critical approach which I have argued for above, and thus highlights the important role institutions play in helping to foster this attitude in their citizens.

4.6: Other Significant Actions Institutions Can Take.

As well as helping to create critically minded and active citizens, another significant role which institutions can have is regarding the state of reliable news which is accessible to the public. After all, it has been noted that “an emphasis on fake news might also have the unintended consequence of reducing the perceived credibility of real-news outlets”.251 It is therefore also very important that outlets which provide information to the public are trustworthy, and should promote above all the goal of truth and objectivity. First of all, this means strengthening the public media, ensuring that it is independent, well-funded, and accessible to all. Such news channels must be as reliable as possible, presenting news which aims to report factual and balanced information, in an objective manner. This would promote the value of searching for truth, and re-establish the epistemic link between news and knowledge. Public media could moreover inform the public how objective journalism can be conducted, educating them on how objective news is able to be produced.

Regarding the private media sector, a current problem with certain private media platforms which do provide high quality journalism is that they have started putting up paywall barriers. Whilst financial necessity is understandable, it should be noted that this restricts the audience for such higher-quality journalism to those who can afford it, and those who cannot might be more vulnerable to reading pieces of untrustworthy information which are accessible easily and for free via social media. Therefore, either the free public media needs to be strengthened, as mentioned above, or reliable private media needs to be more readily accessible to the public.


The actions outlined above can be seen as working towards the wider objective of emphasising the importance of truth and objectivity as the fundamental goal of news and information. There are also other ways in which institutions can try to promote this aim, such as some NGOs which have put pressure on companies to reconsider their practises, by not funding or advertising on sources which spread disinformation. Legal punishment for those who attempt to influence vulnerable political events (such as elections) by spreading fake news and disinformation could also be significant, even if in terms of combatting fake news, it comes after the harm has taken place. Nonetheless, this would demonstrate the society’s foundational commitment to truth as a pillar of democracy, and that its purposeful manipulation will not be overlooked. As mentioned in chapter 1, this action is currently being taken in the U.S. in the Mueller investigation, where the Justice Department has brought charges against former Trump advisers, Russian nationals, Russian companies, and two other individuals. Amongst many different accusations, one of them is the charge that fake news was spread in order to aggravate divisive issues during the US election period. Thus, whilst this action is coming after the events have transpired, and moreover cannot target all the people responsible for these actions, it nonetheless sends a clear message about the values of the society, and the absence of any toleration of such a purposeful manipulation of the truth and of the information which is distributed to citizens in a society.

4.7: Concluding Remarks.

Therefore, institutions do have a significant role in answering the “fundamental question” of how to “create a news ecosystem and culture that values and promotes truth”. I have shown that they are vitally important in at two ways: first of all, they help to educate citizens to adopt a critical attitude towards information they are confronted with. Secondly, they play a central role in ensuring that the value of truth is promoted as the ultimate goal of news and information in general, as well as allowing societies to have an atmosphere of openness which encourages debate and discussion. Whilst one might wonder whether psychologically it is possible for people to overcome some of the biases

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252 Barney Jopson, “Trump’s top lawyer in Mueller probe resigns”, The Financial Times, March 22, 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/af1d8a9e-2df4-11e8-a34a-7e7563b0b0f4.
253 Matt Apuzzo and Sharon LaFraniere, “13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign”.
outlined in Chapter 2 when it comes to fake news, I agree with Kahneman who suggests that “people can overcome some of the superficial factors that produce illusions of truth when strongly motivated to do so”. This motivation, I believe, should not only come from the individual, but should also be encouraged by the society within which one lives, meaning that institutions within this society do play a vital role.

I have demonstrated in this chapter that even if in the short-term, some current action towards fake news can help tackle the problem, on a more fundamental level, they cannot provide any feasible long-term solution to the issue of fake news, and moreover often are inherently problematic themselves, such as through limiting the freedom of expression, or leading to censorship. For societies which wish to keep essential democratic freedoms, this is a price which is too high. Institutions should not play the role of intermediaries between citizens and information which is classified as true or false. Therefore, the only feasible long-term solution to fake news must focus on the critical faculties of individual citizens, encouraging them to be active citizens, engaging with societal issues, and constantly searching for what can be considered to be objectively true. This will be the most effective way to work against the significant harmful political consequences which fake news can have on our societies.

Therefore, institutions play a vital role in supporting this ultimate aim, by encouraging the development of a critical outlook towards information, the persistent focus on truth and objectivity, and the ‘Socratic’ attitude as a political mode of being, which the individual takes responsibility for. Unless we address the new “news ecosystem”, and the relationship that citizens have regarding news and information, then people will continue to be influenced by fake news, leading to serious political consequences, and even the “post-truth era”. Therefore, encouraging the individual to be critical and epistemically responsible is more appropriate and significant than any other ways in which institutions can try to prevent fake news, and constitutes an institutional responsibility in itself.

255 Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 64.
Conclusion.

The contemporary problem of fake news is urgent for liberal democracies on a global scale. This paper has investigated the problem of fake news, and has constructed an argument which can answer the question of how this problem might be resolved. To begin with, the term fake news, how it is employed, its meaning, and its development was investigated in depth. Overall, it was characterised as “the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design”. Moreover, it was demonstrated that fake news is particularly significant because of its political consequences, and its ability to amplify social tensions.

Following this, chapter 2 looked at the epistemological character of fake news as well as traditional news sources, and how this relates to our knowledge and everyday lives. The current news ecosystem was shown as having fundamental problems, in particular because it is now possible to come across information online which does not uphold standards of journalism which were expected with traditional forms of news. This has also had a severe effect on the trust which is put into news sources as providing objective information. Social media, therefore, was highlighted as a factor which has significantly changed our relationship with news, in particular since there is a form of ‘bent’ testimony which encourages users to trust unreliable news sources. Moreover, social media platforms act as a vital channel for fake news to be distributed to a mass audience, and can create filter bubbles or echo chambers through the use of algorithms. These contributed to some of the psychological reasons why fake news can be so convincing, along with other effects such as confirmation bias, repetition or affective arousal. Finally, it was asserted that fake news is fundamentally a problem of truth, and that one of the most dangerous consequences of fake news is that we give up on the idea of the existence of any objective reality altogether. Therefore, in order to resolve the problem of fake news, it must be addressed at this most basic level, by looking closely at our epistemic relationship to truth, as well as the role of truth and in the political sphere.

In order to investigate this issue, I used the case study of Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. Patočka, similarly to Plato, held that the fate of the individual and the fate of society are inseparable. Perhaps this is most relevant now, in current liberal democracies, when so

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much influence belongs to individual citizens, and even depends on them. Although Patočka wrote in a completely different historical setting, under an authoritarian regime, his ideas and his analysis are still significant, and can provide us with a way of tackling fake news without resorting to objectionable methods such as censorship or giving huge political influence to social media platforms. Instead, the key power and responsibility remain within the individual. And this independent responsibility becomes in itself a political mode of existence which is profoundly needed.

Patočka’s analysis of our relation to truth was discussed, and the philosopher was shown to argue for the need to have an inherently ‘Socratic’ attitude. Namely, we must constantly keep searching for the truth, having a critical attitude towards our beliefs, and taking responsibility for them. This ‘care for the soul’ of the individual leads to the ‘care for the soul’ of society, through active citizenship. This analysis, which advocates critical thinking, epistemic responsibility, a Socratic attitude towards information, and active citizenship in our societies, was therefore applied to the problem of fake news. It was argued that these actions, which form a political mode of existence, constitute the most significant long-term solution to the problem of fake news.

Finally, in the last chapter, I examined the role of institutions concerning fake news. It was suggested that all of the current methods which are being employed to combat this problem are ineffective in the long-term, and moreover, are often inherently problematic themselves. For societies which intend to preserve their democratic values and freedoms, this is too high a price to pay. Moreover, these methods do not underline the significance of the individual, who must be epistemically responsible regarding their relationship to truth, but instead rely on institutions as mediators which decide what is true or not. Nonetheless, it was argued that institutions still have a crucial role in fighting fake news, through developing critically thinking, responsible, active citizens. This is the most significant long-term solution to fake news, which can be achieved through education, media literacy, ensuring a safe and open environment for debate, and through emphasising the centrality and significance of truth and objectivity, thus returning the authority of truth in the public sphere. It was moreover suggested that Sweden has taken several steps towards accomplishing this goal, and can be seen as an example of how this argument could be implemented in practice.
Overall, I have shown that the most significant way in which societies can combat the problem of fake news is through fostering epistemic responsibility, critical thinking, and encouraging citizens to take an active role in the political sphere. As well as the personal responsibility which must be taken with regards to knowledge, there is an institutional responsibility which is equally indispensable, and which engenders such critically minded citizens, who are epistemically oriented towards the truth. In this way, Patočka’s care for the soul of the individual can be extended to the care for the soul of the state, as the well-being of both are intimately connected and co-dependent.

Therefore, I have argued that the solution to fake news must tackle it at its most foundational level, namely its problematic relationship with truth. Since fake news distorts the epistemic relationship between citizens and news, a new relationship is needed in order to for us to form well-founded beliefs, which we must take responsibility for. This new relationship, I have suggested, is characterised by the Socratic attitude which is proposed by Patočka. This fundamentally critical stance towards knowledge, which is constantly evolving, adapting, and putting into question former beliefs, is the most significant way of combatting fake news in the long-term. Moreover, in order for citizens to develop such critical faculties, institutions play an indispensable role, and are essential in fostering such citizens through educative methods. Personal as well as institutional responsibility are the most important and enduring ways that fake news can be combatted without giving up fundamental democratic freedoms, or resulting in censorship. It is therefore vital that such a Socratic attitude be encouraged in current liberal democracies, before there are further significant political events which are negatively influenced by fake news.
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