Truth, Communication, and Democracy

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This article argues that truth is vital to deliberative democracy and to communication as an academic discipline. Our definition of *truth* is critical realist in nature—that is, it refers to an ontologically objective reality. We briefly explore the history and concepts of deliberative democracy and its presuppositions of epistemic rationality, doxastic voluntarism, and ontological realism. The article then outlines the breakdown of the concept and practice of truth and deliberative democracy before and during the age of Trump and the treatment of truth by the profession of journalism as well as the academic discipline of journalism studies. Finally, we provide a critical-realist take on the resolution of truth debates and an affirmation of truth as a democratic value.

Keywords: alternative facts, critical realism, democracy, media bias, objectivity, post-truth, truth

With the administration of President Donald Trump, truth in U.S. political discourse seems to be in crisis. We mean the word *crisis* in its full sense: as a time of intense trouble; as a time for important decision; and, in its root meaning to which Habermas (1975) took us back, as a turning point in a disease. We are thinking particularly of the last meaning in that series, for Trump did not create the condition. Long before, Hannah Arendt (2005) had already lamented the loss of truth in politics. And even before Trump took office, two recent volumes by communication scholars (Cloud, 2018; Hannan, 2016) also examined the problem. Through, however, his particularly egregious affronts to truth, Trump has brought the problem to a head—and not just in the United States. Given the demonstration effect of the United States in general, the problem, also prevalent elsewhere, is now being compounded worldwide.

In this context, the thesis of this article is that truth is essential to deliberative democracy and that we need to recover it. Moreover, because deliberation is a major form of communication, if truth is essential to deliberation, then truth also ought to be central to communication as an academic discipline. As a discipline, however, communication has not given truth the conceptual attention it requires. Within the subfield of journalism particularly, there has even been some effort to evade entirely the question of truth in favor of objectivity, understood as "balance" or "fairness." That posture, we argue, leads to its own problems. Our aim is to deepen the discipline's emerging conversation on this important matter by looking more philosophically

at what truth means and why, in our opinion, its determination can only be a communicative accomplishment. We begin with the concepts of truth and deliberative democracy.

Truth

Like us, both Hannan (2016) and Cloud (1994, 2018) insist that objective truth—that is, truth independent of what we may think true—is a notion we need to defend. The difference coincides with a distinction Cloud (2018) makes between "what counts as true" (p. 17) publicly and what actually is true. Coming from a rhetorical tradition, Cloud alternates between calling her position rhetorical realism and critical realism (CR). Although there are differences between us, we come out of an independent tradition also called critical realism; ours, however, is rooted not in rhetoric but in the philosophy of science (see Smith, 2013). But like Cloud's CR, ours also is, although not particularly Althusserian, very much rooted in Marx. Thus, despite some differences, there are considerable convergences between us.

One convergence is a similar distinction in our CR tradition between what is called the transitive and intransitive dimensions of knowledge (see Bhaskar, 2008). The transitive dimension refers to what counts as knowledge of reality in particular times and places, which may vary, as opposed to the object of knowledge (the intransitive dimension), which may remain constant. According to this distinction, for example, transitive knowledge altered with the progression from a geocentric to a heliocentric view of the solar system, but, contrary to the impression that could be conveyed by postmodern constructionism, the underlying ontological reality (the intransitive dimension of knowledge) was not thereby caused to change along with it.

The distinction between transitive and intransitive dimensions of knowledge leads in our CR tradition to an ontological versus an epistemic account of truth (see Alston, 1997). The difference concerns what the truth maker is. In epistemic accounts, the truth maker is some foundational epistemic protocol or some epistemic condition such as certainty or consensus. For positivism, proof and certainty are combined as criteria of truth. In the classic pragmatist understanding of truth articulated by Peirce (1878), endorsed by Dewey (1938), and once followed by Habermas, the truth maker is equally epistemic: it is the consensus that would be reached in the long run by some idealized process of argumentation.

In our CR tradition, the truth maker is not epistemic but ontological. Truth is dependent, that is, not on the utilization of epistemically foundational methods nor on any epistemic condition such as certainty or consensus we manage to attain. Instead, if what we say or believe about reality matches the ontologically objective way reality is, then we have truth, no matter our level of certainty or consensus or how we arrived at it.

This account of truth, called the correspondence theory, is realist in its affirmation of an objective reality, ontologically independent of what anyone thinks about it. It is a realism that coincides with Marx's contention that material reality ontologically precedes consciousness of it (although see Cloud, 1994, for an alternate read of Marx's materialism).

The correspondence theory is the account of truth most in keeping with common sense (see Hannan, 2016, p. xxi) and actually most favored by professional philosophers (see survey by Bourget &

Chalmers, 2013). Habermas (2003) himself eventually came to embrace if not the theory by name—still calling his view "pragmatic epistemological realism" (p. 7)—then at least its substance. He now realistically takes a belief or claim to be true if "it accurately refers to existing objects, or accurately represents actual states of affairs" (Bohman & Rehg, 2017, para. 48).[2] As David (2016) notes, however, the correspondence theory encompasses an entire family of views that variously take objective reality as the truth maker for claims and beliefs. Some of these perspectives are more cogent than others, and there are also realist accounts such as Cloud's that eschew the concept of correspondence.

The main objection to the correspondence theory is that we have no access to objective reality independent of ourselves against which to match our claims and beliefs. It is a reservation that needs to be met at two levels. First, the objection overstates the case. As Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) have argued, in most routine cases, we determine truth by inspection. If, for example, we want to know whether a picture is hanging straight or crooked, we simply look at it. In such cases, we are in some sense matching objective reality against our subjective notions. Naturally, in more difficult cases, there may be no such thing as simple inspection, in which case, as Cloud argues, we need to rely on rhetorical argument. A second point, therefore, is more basic. In our CR tradition, the correspondence theory actually is not about the how of truth determination, which for us is a separate epistemological question. Instead, for us, the correspondence theory is about the meaning of truth. Effectively, for us, the correspondence theory is the metaphysical claim that what we argue about, even when no resolution is in sight, is ultimately objective reality, an ontological posit, we maintain, that we cannot do without.

"How," Hannan (2016) asks, "are we to make sense of the very idea of reality" (p. xxi). Although the question deserves a longer reply, for now a simple example must suffice. Regardless of what anyone may suspect, the reality presumably is that Nixon did or did not know something about Watergate at any particular point in time and likewise Trump about the meeting in Trump Tower. If what we suspect they knew at some time is what they really did know at that time, then that match with reality is the kind of correspondence of which we speak. Neither the reality posited here nor its correspondence or noncorrespondence with our thoughts seems particularly mysterious. On the contrary, it would be the denial of any objective reality here that would generate considerable mystery.

Cloud (2018) considers it "better to assess whether a belief is 'faithful' to someone's interests rather than whether it corresponds to a reality we can point to as objective" (p. 14). We agree on the importance of speaking to people's interests. We concede, furthermore, that interests are not a reality that can be observed or that depend exclusively on nonnormative facts. Nevertheless, assessments of people's interests are based on judgments about reality, normative or otherwise, and are in themselves overall reality claims, true only if people's interests really are as assessed. So, we argue, to the extent that we do assess people's interests correctly, they themselves also are a reality that is ontologically objective. Doubtless this issue can fruitfully be pursued further, and Cloud's CR remains an alternative realist account. In the

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[2] Truth, of course, is not the only validity claim of which Habermas speaks. Speech acts also invoke claims such as sincerity and rightness that might also become the subject of political debate. Space, however, prevents us from pursuing a discussion of these elements.

meantime, it is the correspondence account of truth we presume in this article, and the ontologically objective reality it presumes that we consider under siege in the age of Trump.

Deliberative Democracy and Its Presuppositions

Deliberative democracy is rooted in the civic Republicanism of the ancient Greeks and Romans. There are two opposing political traditions that go by names that seem odd to us today. Classical liberalism, associated today with right and left libertarianism, goes back to the social contract thinkers who see society and government as a necessary evil that should be minimized. As Henry David Thoreau (1849) put it, "That government governs best that governs least" (para. 1). In contrast, civic republicanism has a more maximalist vision of society. It is based on the Greek idea that humans are distinctly political animals who attain their telos and full being only when they come together in dialogue to determine their collective courses of action. Whatever Rousseau actually meant by the general will, his phrase captures the idea of civic Republicanism that by reasoning deliberatively together, we can unify ourselves collectively in consensus. That idea also underlies Habermas's notion of a public sphere, on which deliberative democracy is based.

Although Habermas's concept of the public sphere received much criticism, even critics such as Nancy Fraser have conceded that something like the public sphere is necessary to posit. Essentially, the idea of the public sphere is meant to convey that democracy is not supposed to entail voting our prereflective prejudices. Instead, prior to voting, the public sphere denotes a time and space of collective debate and deliberation through which we each engage in an intellectually honest and self-critical reflection on our own position vis-à-vis the common good. And that is essentially what is meant by deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is an understanding of democracy that emphasizes deliberation (see, e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 2009). It is also an understanding of democracy that calls us to a more responsible citizenship.

Like the public sphere, deliberative democracy is more an ideal than a reality. It depends on several presuppositions. The first presupposition is epistemic rationality. Basically, if we are supposed to be able to come together through reason, then reason must be presumed to have the causal power to bring us to truth— or the power that Habermas (1996) called "the unforced force of a better argument" (p. 103). If we are in turn to trust reason to bring us to truth, then it must also be possible for us to discern better or worse arguments and to align our beliefs, whatever our interests, with those arguments that are better.

The next presupposition of democracy is what philosophers call doxastic voluntarism. Doxastic voluntarism actually means something quite simple: the ethics of belief. The ethics of belief, though, is a surprising phrase. Normally we think of ethics as pertaining to actions, over which we have some deliberate choice. In contrast, we tend not to think of ourselves as controlling our beliefs. Our beliefs seem to be more caused than chosen. We are, for example, caused to believe that a cup is in front of us by the cup's being in front of us. If we see a cup in front of us, most of us cannot choose to believe otherwise.

Doxastic voluntarism, however, argues that we do have some control over what we believe and that we must take ethical responsibility for it. Failure to perform due diligence, for example, compromises our beliefs in irresponsible ways. Similarly, it is irresponsible to hide from unpleasant truths via psychological

defense mechanisms. Doxastic voluntarism holds that we have the moral responsibility to believe reasonably as opposed to preferentially. We have to do here with intellectual honesty and the responsible citizenship mentioned before. It should be part of our due diligence as responsible citizens that on publicly important matters, we situate ourselves in a critical space of rival arguments and perspectives with a willingness to change our own views when they are no longer reasonable. So if one presupposition of deliberative democracy is epistemic rationality, then a second is epistemic morality.

A third premise of deliberative democracy is what critical realists call ontological realism—the idea that there is an ontologically objective world with features that are independent of how we view them (Porpora, 2015). However, the further premise is that this world or reality is singular rather than plural. We cannot have a fruitful debate or discussion if we are not talking about the same thing. If we actually are living in ontologically plural worlds, then Kellyanne Conway might be quite right to speak of alternative facts.

If what makes for deliberative democracy is democratic deliberation, then that deliberation is also presumed to be free and fair and equally open to everyone. What is supposed to prevail in democratic deliberation is the power of epistemically relevant argument (i.e., argument that actually bears on the truth of a matter) and not nonepistemic factors like unequal discursive power. So another premise of deliberative democracy is a level playing field. Finally, in a mass society such as ours, we cannot observe everything ourselves. So another premise of deliberative democracy is access to true rather than fake news.

The Age of Trump

The postmodernity label is no longer in vogue, and few now admit to ever having been postmodernist. But if postmodernity referred to an era no longer sure of objective reality, then we are still in it. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries named *post-truth* the word of the year.

As the online publication *The Conversation* puts it, "[post-truth] is widely associated with US president-elect Donald Trump's extravagantly untruthful assertions and the working-class people who voted for him nonetheless" (Calcutt, 2016, para. 1). As comedian Trevor Noah (*The Daily Show* with Tevor Noah, 2016) suggested, Trump himself has less relation to facts than with his estranged daughter, Tiffany. But as per Calcutt's (2016) observation, the problem is not just the disregard of facts by Trump himself. It is also his base's evident disregard for that disregard. So the age of Trump involves both a new, felt difficulty in determining what truth is or what the facts are but also, together with that difficulty and perhaps even prompted by it, a lack of concern for what in any case is a fact or what is true.

As the Oxford Dictionaries (2019) go on to say, *post-truth* refers to "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (para. 1). That is one way to put it. But before post-truth became well known, there was the word *truthiness* coined by Stephen Colbert. Truthiness refers to something that feels true—whether or not it is—with those things serving our interests or confirming our prejudices feeling more truthful than those things that do not. In those terms, it is the contentment with truthiness rather than truth itself that characterizes our current era of the public sphere. A contentment with what is pleasing to believe rather than what actually obtains means the collapse of critical thought. But if objective truth is hard to determine, why should we not each settle for our own truthiness?

The contentment with truthiness gives rise to the encounter perhaps most iconic of the Trumpian age: that between Kellyanne Conway and Chuck Todd on *Meet the Press*. The exchange was about the size of Trump's inaugural crowd. Todd asks Conway why the White House had instructed Press Secretary Sean Spicer to spout a "provable falsehood." Conway rejoins, "You're saying it's a falsehood. . . . Sean Spicer, our [press] secretary, gave alternative facts" (Bradner, 2017, para. 3). To which Todd responds, "Alternative facts aren't facts. They are falsehoods." But Conway responds again: "I don't think you can prove those numbers one way or another. There is no way to really quantify crowds. We all know that."

To be sure, Kellyanne Conway is a master sophist who would make Protagoras proud while simultaneously exemplifying why Socrates and Plato distrusted rhetoric. But we have to ask what is meant by a fact or when it is we possess truth. Todd cites provability. Technically, however, proof and its epistemic companion—certainty—are in most cases inappropriate standards for truth. And, as we will argue, it is precisely the inappropriate invocation of those standards that fostered the doubts about truth that led to the age of Trump.

Thus, whereas Todd invokes the standard of proof, it is as if Conway knows her Aristotle—and her Lakatos (1980). Aristotle observed that outside of mathematics or logic, nothing can actually be proven in a technical sense. Outside of those domains, truth is discerned rhetorically—by the best argument. Accordingly, as Lakatos argued while speaking of Galileo's alleged proof of mountains on the moon, Galileo's proof depended on accepting the new science of optics, which was then in doubt. Being outside of mathematics, Galileo's "proof" was actually not one.

Before leaving this discussion of the age of Trump, we note that in the headline of *The Conversation* piece previously mentioned, Calcutt, (2016) suggests that it was liberal left—thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—and not right-wing climate-change deniers or Kellyanne Conway who first destabilized our sense of truth. That may be, but the ultimate culprit is not those who destabilized our sense of truth but rather the foundationalist criteria of truth as proof and certainty that the destabilizers destabilized.

How Did We Get Here?

Multiple factors have led us to the age of Trump. We begin with some of the political-economic factors and move on to the cultural-philosophical. First of all, in a capitalist system, news becomes a commodity (Bennett, 2016). It essentially sells audiences to advertisers or cable companies. The ultimate goal is sales, not edification—unless edification leads to sales. The key consideration here is that audiences are attracted less by having their prejudices punctured than flattered. Responsive to that demand, even before the Trump era, news corporations as honest brokers of information were already compromised. Because the press is compromised, we are already departing from one of the premises of deliberative democracy as an ideal type.

The next departure is the manifest failure of a level playing field. At the moment, economic inequality in the United States is at one of its highest levels, where the richest 1% of the population has more wealth than the bottom 90%, and where even within that top 1%, wealth is highly concentrated (see, e.g., Piketty,

2014). When that inequality is combined with the open access of money in politics provided by the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United*, there is no longer a level playing field for deliberation.

In fact, in her book *Dark Money*, journalist Jane Mayer (2016) describes how the Koch brothers and their network of wealthy allies have managed to shift national discourse to the right. Their wealth allows them to finance primary contenders to any Republican office holder who does not toe their line. This power has made many Republican members of Congress fearful of acknowledging that there is such a thing as climate change or that if there is, that humans are doing anything to cause it. This power of money to distort the discursive field is, incidentally, one reason why it is inadequate to focus on discourse alone and why, instead, discourse analysis properly should always include more materialist, extradiscursive political economic considerations.

The next factor to distort our collective deliberation is national polarization. As observed by Bill Bishop (2008) in his book *The Big Sort*, we all live in bubbles of like-minded people, so those who think differently from us seem positively alien, almost unintelligible. This big sort has multiple dimensions, one of which is education—specifically, the divide between those with four-year college degrees and those without them. This divide in educational status coincides with a geographical divide between town and country, not just in the United States but in countries such as the United Kingdom as well. These various aligned forms of polarization mean that if we all are not living in different worlds, then the common world in which we live is so differentiated socioculturally that phenomenally at least, we all need to become anthropologists to understand each other.

Several factors reinforce this at least phenomenal sense of living in different worlds. The first of these factors was the advent of cable news and the various new technologies that allow us to watch whatever we want whenever we want. At one point, the television had become the new, electronic hearth around which gathered not only the family but the nation at large. We shared what David Bianculli calls a common experience of simultaneity. With the new download technologies, however, we can tape a presidential speech and watch it at our own convenience. There is no longer a common sense of time. And with cable news, there is no longer only a narrow spectrum of exclusively cool-style news to watch but rather news fragmentation (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Further, with what is called the "Fox News effect," there is also a departure from value-neutral to explicitly value-laden news (Della Vigna & Kaplan, 2007).

Cool-style reporting was never really value neutral and was critiqued from both the right and the left. So in principle, it is a good thing to find explicit acknowledgement of value ladenness in all our news. When one switches, however, from, say, MSNBC to Fox News, it is like entering a different world. And the so-called hostile media effect (Gunther & Schmidt, 2004), which functions like ethnocentrism, tends to make us hostile to any reporting that challenges the prejudices of our home world.

We have saved for last what is currently the more philosophical threat to deliberative democracy. Even if we inhabit what feels like different worlds and even if our instinct is to be immediately hostile to contrary arguments, as long as we hold in common the ideal of truth, all is not lost. We can still sit down and reason together and come together. We can still talk.

But holding truth in common means three things: First, that we believe in truth; second, that we know how to determine the truth; and third, that we care about the truth. All of these things are now in doubt. We are not going to address the possibility that there is no truth. Problematic enough is the disabling understanding of truth determination that is culturally hegemonic. The culturally hegemonic understanding of truth determination is foundationalist: absolute proof yielding complete certainty. It is disabling because, as we suggested before, outside of mathematics and logic, it is utterly impossible.

And because absolute proof is utterly impossible, that standard leaves even the most reasonable of claims open to radical skepticism. Do the photos prove that the crowd at Trump's inauguration was smaller than that at Obama's? No. As compelling as that photographic evidence is, it does not prove the case beyond an unreasonable doubt, and it is an unreasonable doubt on which Kellyanne Conway bases her alternative facts.

We stated earlier that the confrontation between Conway and Chuck Todd was the most iconic exchange of the age of Trump, but the most theoretically significant was the cause célèbre that first catapulted Trump to the front of the Republican political pack: the question of Obama's citizenship. Trump kept asking for Obama's birth certificate, and when Obama finally produced it, Trump went on to doubt its authenticity.

What more could be done? The reigning criterion of truth as proof authorizes a stance of radical skepticism, of refusal to be convinced of anything short of proof. It is the same with climate change. Scientists cannot in a technical sense prove it is happening or that it is of human origin. Such a standard is simply impossible, and holding that standard permits cognitive intransigence. The same problem applies to conspiracy theories regarding the FBI, Hillary Clinton, and the deep state. Once one adopts the posture of radical skepticism, one need not be persuaded by anything one would prefer not to believe. Truthiness, then, instead of truth becomes the natural way to choose what to believe.

And once even one side adopts radical skepticism as its posture toward opposing views, all conversation breaks down. Nothing can be said to each other by way of rational persuasion. We lose deliberative democracy and enter a world where power is all there is. We do not try to convince the other side but only to outmobilize it. Alas, that world is where we are now.

Truth and Objectivity in Journalism Scholarship

In mass society, it is impossible for anyone to learn directly all that is going on. We thus listed it as among the presuppositions of deliberative democracy, at least for mass society, that there must be access to reliable news. It is understandable therefore, as Broersma (2010) observes, that journalism scholars have paid more attention than their colleagues in communication as a whole to issues surrounding truth.

What has been the nature of this attention? Among journalism scholars, we identify four basic orientations toward truth: (1) an approach we will call the modernist "cool style"; (2) a postmodernist rejection

of objective truth; (3) a fallback emphasis on objectivity in place of truth; and (4) a post-positivist realist position that we join Cloud (2018), Hannan (2016), and Muñoz-Torres (2012) in defending.

Modernist Journalism

Modernist journalism is in some sense the default or received view of journalism—or at least the commonsense view. It is the view of journalism as the truthful reporting of current events or facts. Although Schudson (2001) argues that the objectivity norm among journalists surfaced more for commercial than epistemological reasons, Broersma (2010) cites the first guidebook on journalism, from 1695, as distinguishing newspapers from gossip, pamphlets, and newsletters by the truthfulness of their reporting. When Zelizer (2004) speaks of "facts, truth, and reality" as "God terms" for journalism, it is to modernist journalism that she is referring.

Reflecting a generally positivist epistemology, modernist journalism regards facts, truth, and reality as relatively unproblematic. As Hermida (2012) observes, the self-professed authority of modernist journalism derives from its protocols of verification through which it putatively reports facts truthfully.

The modernist regime of verification, reflected in the major newspapers and broadcast news stations, is distinguished by several related features: objectivity (Ryan, 2001); value neutrality (Hackett, 1984); and a "cool style" (Peters, 2010). Ryan introduces these features in his account of those he calls objective journalists.

> Objective journalists believe an ontologically real world exists and that one can produce a reasonably accurate description of that world. They do not guarantee their descriptions are accurate in every respect, only that they have followed a process that allows them to produce a description that is more accurate than any other process allows, and that allows society to move closer to an understanding of the real world (Ryan, 2001, p. 5).

Ryan refers to both ontological and epistemic objectivity. In this context, what is presumed ontologically objective is a reality, whether natural or social, that is what it is independent of those who would report on it. True reports are those that accurately match that reality as per the correspondence theory. A true correspondence or match with reality is achieved, according to the cool style, by an epistemic objectivity that separates facts from values. As Hackett notes (below), that epistemic separation requires reporters to put aside their personal prejudices.

> The most important potential obstacle to the presentation of such a balanced and accurate account of the world are the political prejudices or social attitudes of communicators who allow their values or selective perceptions to bias their reporting (Hackett, 1984, p. 233).

As Hackett describes it, the modernist paradigm upholds a foundationalist protocol of verification that rests on a rigid fact/value distinction. As Schudson (1978) puts it, there is a "faith in 'facts,' a distrust of 'values' and a commitment to their segregation" (pp. 4–5; see also Muñoz-Torres 2012, p. 571). Already, however, by the end of the 20th century, as Zelizer (2004) reports, postmodern currents were offering

serious challenges to modernist journalism. Zelizer cites the efforts in cultural studies, but, as we will see next, the challenge was broader.

The Postmodern Position

If truth is correspondence with reality, how do we know what corresponds with reality? As explained above, the modernist answer relies on foundational procedures of verification of reportable facts devoid of values. If, however, the distinction between facts and values cannot be sustained, then a collapse of epistemic objectivity seems to threaten access to ontologically objective reality.

And the fact/value distinction cannot be sustained. Some facts, such as murder, rape, and genocide, are thick descriptors that already have values built into them, which cannot be excised without injury to what is being reported (Appiah, 2008). More fundamentally, in their very role as gatekeepers, journalists must judge which facts to report—that is, which are "fit to print" (Singer 2007, p. 82)—a determination that itself is evaluative and hence contestable. Muñoz-Torres (2012) makes the same point, saying that facts are chosen "in accordance with their alleged importance" (p. 573)—again, a value judgment.

It is not just the fact/value distinction that cannot be sustained. As Singer (2007) reports, "postmodernists have gone a step further, claiming that the concept of truth itself is devoid of meaning apart from a highly subjective contextual understanding" (p. 82). As Joris Luyendijk puts it, "news in general is constructed, coloured, filtered and distorted and there is not much news workers can do about it" (as cited in Broersma, 2010, p. 21).

We thus arrive at Broersma's (2010) take on journalism as "a performative discourse deriving its authority from its power to persuade people that it is telling the truth about the social world" (p. 31). What Broersma advocates accordingly is a more honest journalism that delivers its own partisan truth to its own partisan audience (p. 31). That suggestion amounts to the postmodern relativism decried by Cloud (2018), Hannan (2016), and Muñoz-Torres (2012). It leaves us with the multiple, polarized realities we now confront, inhabited by facts and "alternative facts," each equally valid relative to the rival communities that believe them. With the breakdown of mutual commitment to shared facts about a shared world, democratic communication collapses along with it.

The Objectivity Fallback

One popular alternative to the modernist and postmodernist positions is what we call the objectivity fallback. As Muñoz-Torres (2012, p. 568) also observes, this maneuver jettisons truth in favor of objectivity. And this objectivity is interpreted along Schudson's (2001) lines as balance—that is, the equal treatment of opposing viewpoints.

With over a thousand citations, the most recent defense of this position is Entman's (2007) "Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power." Entman begins by observing that there are multiple

understandings of bias, the first being a representation that "distorts or falsifies reality." Entman suggests we abandon this realist understanding.

> Sometimes, it [bias] is applied to news that purportedly distorts or falsifies reality (distortion bias), sometimes to news that favors one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a political conflict (content bias), and sometimes to the motivations and mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce the biased content (decision-making bias). This essay argues that we can make bias a robust, rigorous, theory-driven, and productive research concept by abandoning the first use while deploying new, more precisely delineated variants of the second and third. (p. 163)

On a realist understanding, epistemic objectivity means a representation true to the ontologically real object or event being represented. From that perspective, we have bias when some ontologically objective reality is in whole or in part misrepresented. Entman's suggestion is thus antirealist in its express abandonment of any such understanding of bias. In its place, we are left only with bias as a departure from balanced treatment and value neutrality. The putative advantage of this proposal, Entman (2007) continues, is that it "avoids irresolvable questions about truth and reality" that leave charges of distortion bias just "an epithet against news that some actors dislike" (p. 166).

Entman's suggestion, in other words, is that, as a practical matter, we can get on with objectivity interpreted as balance and value neutrality without worrying about truth and reality. Given the number of citations to it, Entman's suggestion has evidently been well received.

The principal cases Entman has in mind involve rival electoral campaigns, where it certainly is important that coverage be balanced. But even in those contexts, truth and reality ineluctably intrude. There is still, for example, the vexing problem of what balance is and its relation to false equivalence that calls into question any stance of value neutrality. It may be, for example, that all political campaigns engage in some deceit, but, as John Oliver (2016) demonstrated satirically but decisively, it is not always the case that rival campaigns do so equivalently in either frequency or significance. Oliver suggests that if we compare lies with raisins, then Hillary might well be a cookie with more than its share of raisins, but, then he says, as raisins rain down on him, Trump is a raisin monsoon.

In such cases, to foster an apparent equivalence in the name of balance actually distorts the reality and ends up being objectively unbalanced and therefore, from a realist perspective, biased. Especially outside campaign contexts—in cases relating to such matters as tax plans, climate change (see Oliver, 2014), and sexual harassment allegations—problems of false equivalence have become too pressing to allow abandonment of a realist understanding of bias. It is a conclusion that some practicing journalists appear now to have reached (Wemple, 2016).

The fundamental theoretical question to raise against Entman's proposal is whether questions about truth and reality actually are irresolvable—or at least whether they always or often are in the news. How, from a realist perspective, we can and do manage to arrive at truth is the subject of the next section. Here, it must suffice to address an ambiguity in Entman's reference to resolvability.

Calling irresolvable the determination of ontologically objective reality suggests a consensus theory of truth—the idea, that is, that we attain the truth about some reality only when all parties agree on what the reality is. From that perspective, absent universal agreement, truth and reality remain unresolved. To take a contemporary example, we have on one side a highly documented *Washington Post* news story and nine women publicly alleging that some decades earlier, Alabama politician Roy Moore engaged—to put it mildly—in sexually harassing behavior. On the other side, we have Roy Moore's flat denial. Consistent with the consensus theory of truth—and one standard application of objectivity interpreted as balance—U.S. president Donald Trump throws up his hands to declare the truth irresolvable.

The problem with the consensus theory is apparent. In line with the consensus theory, stubborn holdouts mean that no one is in possession of the truth about a matter. But only on the consensus theory does that conclusion follow. In the realist view, consensus can be irresolvable without truth itself necessarily being so. This alternate possibility is occluded when talk of resolvability is left ambiguous.

The Realist View

Against the alternatives so far is the realist view championed by Cloud (2018), Hannan (2016), Muñoz-Torres (2012), and us. Because Hannan and Muñoz-Torres do not elaborate on the view, the next section outlines our CR version of it (see Cloud, 2018, for an allied but alternate perspective).

A Realist Take on Truth Discernment

The critical realism tradition we represent begins with the premise that we are not locked inside our brains but rather are material creatures broadly in touch with the world we inhabit. As material creatures, we must daily negotiate our way through doorways, which are usually where we think they are, and through conversations with interlocutors, who are usually there saying what we think they are saying. Thus, as Davidson (1986) observed, we could not survive if our beliefs were not generally true—that is, in correspondence with reality.

Notwithstanding the general correspondence of our beliefs with reality, there are plenty of cases in which the truth of things is doubtful or contested. Such is the case with many of the social and political matters that concern us. Has free trade produced job loss? Did Brett Kavanaugh sexually assault Christine Blasey Ford? Truthful answers to such questions do not reveal themselves just by looking, especially because we clearly all do not look in the same way or from the same vantage point.

How do we determine truth in such cases? Our CR tradition rests on three premises: (1) ontological realism, (2) epistemic relativism, and (3) judgmental rationality. As noted previously, ontological realism is the assumption that we all inhabit one common world that exists ontologically independent of our claims about it. Regardless, for example, of what we are able to assess with any certainty, our CR tradition assumes a reality in which Kavanaugh either did or did not assault Ford in the way she alleged.

Epistemic relativism means that we all make our claims about the world from different vantage points using different criteria of judgment. Part of those different criteria are different values. For the reasons previously discussed, however, CR rejects the stance of value neutrality. When, as for CR, the criterion of

truth is not epistemic but ontological—that is, matches with the world—it can easily be that value-laden claims are nonetheless true. It can even be, as Stephen Colbert humorously suggested, that reality itself has a liberal bias—if by that we mean that objective reality happens to correspond more to a liberal point of view.

Epistemic relativism likewise encompasses the standpoint epistemology that Cloud (2018) upholds. Standpoint epistemology emphasizes how certain facts are better recognized from social peripheries than from social centers. It is not, at least from our perspective, that whatever is said from the periphery necessarily trumps whatever is said from the center but that voices from the periphery will often raise pertinent considerations that otherwise go unacknowledged. It is a basic presupposition of the #MeToo movement.

Our third premise, judgmental rationality, means that despite epistemic relativism, we can still listen to one another, evaluate our different epistemic criteria, and realize that some arguments are better than others. Our various methodological protocols will come into play. See, for example, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2010) for a sound basis of a political epistemology. Still, our CR view denies that any such protocols lead to truth axiomatically, that they can provide proof. Instead, as Cloud (2018) likewise suggests, our CR view sees truth discernment as always rhetorical. Yet, again consistent with Cloud (2018, p. 21), our understanding of rhetoric is that of Aristotle rather than the Sophists: that rhetorical arguments do not make the truth or create reality but are, in the absence of absolute proof, our best way to discern what corresponds to an observer-independent reality (Porpora 2015, p. 90).

Because for our CR understanding, the truth maker is ontological rather than epistemic, this understanding also declines to equate truth with absolute certainty. It suffices that a claim match reality, whatever the level of certainty. Thus, as in a criminal trial, a judgment can match reality even if it is certain only beyond a reasonable doubt, which would presumably also exclude disbelieving the authenticity of President Obama's birth certificate. Or as in a tort case, we can accept a mere preponderance of evidence, which would presumably lead us likewise to accept the reality of climate change.

Of course, even the appropriate standard can be open to reasoned debate, as in the case of the Senate hearing about Kavanaugh's appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court. Was the appropriate standard regarding allegations of his sexual misconduct more that of a criminal trial or of a job interview? Senator Susan Collins voted to confirm based on a standard in between—more likely than not, by which standard, we think, there were strong epistemic reasons (i.e., reasons related to the truth of the matter, not political interests) to have voted otherwise.

Relying on the best argument rather than absolute proof, the realist approach is less vulnerable than foundationalism to absolute skepticism, because the realist can turn skepticism back onto the skeptic. What is the skeptic's counterevidence that Obama's birth certificate is inauthentic or that climate change is not humanly produced? When the challenge is reversed to see how strong the challenger's argument is, we find that many counterarguments are little more than protestations that the opposing view has not been absolutely proven.

Are we likely sometimes to be wrong about truth and reality? Yes. Our CR view is basically fallibilist, which means that, where our beliefs matter, where they are socially consequential, we must remain alert to the appearance of new arguments and new evidence. Thus, according to our CR view, if we are to discern the truth on important matters, we must hold ourselves within a critical space of counterclaims, counterarguments, and counterevidence. If so, then truth discernment is an intrinsically social and communicative act. To determine it, we must hear from others how they see things and the evidence they have for it. Truth, then, is often not something we can discern in isolation by privately following certain foundational protocols. Instead, many truths can be arrived at together only by listening to and weighing one another's arguments, treating epistemic relativism not as a liability but an asset. If truth discernment is a communicative act, then it follows that we should expand our understanding of communication ethics to encompass truth as a democratic value.

Truth as a Democratic Value

Because we have some control over what we believe, there is, as noted, such a thing as an ethics of belief (James, 2012)—or what contemporary philosophers call doxastic voluntarism. As formulated by Chisholm (1986), doxastic voluntarism implies that "one ought to believe reasonably and avoid believing unreasonably" (pp. 90–91). Putting the point differently, Feldman (1988) argued that one is obligated "to believe in accordance with one's evidence" (p. 255). Both of these formulations come down to a norm of intellectual honesty, which members of a democracy arguably have a right to expect of one another—and of their elected officials. As a moral norm, intellectual honesty is simultaneously a value.

Why should members of a democracy expect fellow citizens to observe this norm of intellectual honesty, which we might otherwise consider acting cognitively in good faith? Democratic citizenship demands more than just voting our gut reactions once every two to four years. Instead, among our social responsibilities is participation in the collective governance of our society—that is, to be a part of what Habermas (2015) called "the public sphere."

To participate responsibly in the public sphere, we have a duty to question our prereflective prejudices and to open ourselves to what Porpora (2001) calls the critical space of arguments and counterarguments. Where our views are socially consequential, we are obliged to self-examine them, to keep up with the social arguments about them, and to refuse to indulge our penchant for what Stephen Colbert calls truthiness—that is, for what just feels like truth because it flatters our prejudices.

When we decline to accept this responsibility, deliberative democracy disappears, and it is replaced by a pure power politics where each side tries simply without seeking persuasion to outmobilize the other. It is what characterized the shutdown of the U.S. government between 2018 and 2019. One side insisted on a wall putatively to protect the nation from a nonexistent crisis of illegal immigration, impervious to the fact that illegal immigration was at its lowest level in 50 years. With persuasion an absent possibility, what remained operative was only differential political pressure that continued to polarize rather than unite. It is not a uniquely American phenomenon. Indeed, the word *post-truth* was coined in the United Kingdom and applied to the Brexit debate. In Germany as well, *post-truth* became the 2016 word of the year. While a

propensity for truthiness is not the preserve of any one side, it has been a distinctive trait of the right-wing populism surging across the globe.

Just as responsible citizenship calls us to transcend our narrow self-interest in action, so does it do so in terms of belief. And just as there is an ethics of action, so is there an ethics of belief. We are thus obliged to guard against believing only that which serves our interests when it runs counter to the evidence. Democratic government is not simply a form of expressivism. As citizens and as elected officials, we owe one another not our prereflective prejudices or narrow partisan interests but our responsible discernment of the truth. It is a commitment that must be honored by all sides if we are ever to recapture any guise of deliberative democracy over the mere power politics in which we now find ourselves.

As scholars, too, we need to take truth more seriously and not shy away from it. Judgments of truth are essential to, among other things, questions of bias, which cannot be assessed solely in terms of objectivity interpreted as balance. Doxastic voluntarism should be more studied as part of communication ethics. And as researchers we should seek not so much to attain value neutrality as intellectual honesty and a self-critical pose.

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