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Abstract

This project will assess whether narratives (political belief systems) or truth (a metric of belief or conformity to reality) are sufficient solutions to the issues surrounding today's political discourse. It will address the conflicting aims of political discourse, changing definitions of truth and language, the dynamics of distrust and self-interest, the Internet's mixed effects on discourse, and the implications of human psychology for truth. In response, I will argue in support of the need for accountability and the need to clarify the purpose of discourse rather than using narrative or truth alone, since their aims and definitions lack a consensus. Underlying this argument will be an opposition to the idealistic solutions to discourse which assume an eventual perfect state of discourse. They should be replaced by process-based solutions that recognise the dynamics of individuals in discourse - namely, imperfect rationality, a search for understanding, and a desire for empowerment.

Introduction

Political discourse, the means by which political interests are communicated, is an essential part of the political process, particularly in democracies where politicians are intended to be representatives of voters. The breakdown of political discourse is not a recent phenomenon, but the Brexit vote and the 2016 US presidential elections made the phrase “post-truth” highly prominent. “Post-truth” refers to the growing preference for narratives - personalised, appealing stories that create meaning in politics - over truth, weakening the power of discourse to effectively represent voters’ interests. This project emerged out of a hope that there are solutions to fix discourse, understanding that “post-truth” is not just an issue with politicians disregarding the value of truth. It leads to wider questions about the nature of politics: the compatibility of discourse with different political systems, the choice to accept or fight against psychological instincts like confirmation bias, the Foucauldian relationship between power and knowledge, and the future of discourses which have been permanently realigned by the paradigm shift towards the Internet as the dominant mode of discourse.

From political discourse springs political action. This project will explore how this process of translating communication into action has been compromised, focusing on the changing roles of narrative and truth in contemporary political discourse. The central idea will be that of relationships in politics and how they are affected by trust, changing standards of truth, and feelings of political disenfranchisement. Connecting the theory of narrative and truth with practical considerations of incentives and motivations within politics, I will explore how democratic discourse becomes dysfunctional in times of uncertainty, and how a solution to discourse needs to consider our human fallibility and desire for trust.

Literature Review

Defining Political Discourse, Narrative, and Truth

1. What is political discourse and what does it achieve?

Political discourse, according to Amaglobeli¹, is the process in which groups communicate their specific interests (like religion, nationalism, and environmentalism). This serves 'material goals': benefits such as wealth, representation, or access to more rights are achieved. Discourse also defines the social boundaries of acceptable discussion, like views on race or sexuality², so discourse often centres on a few major, widely-accepted interests as part of discursive dominance.³ Political discourse is a means of communication, one where politicians and voters can be both communicators and listeners, and this dynamic is essential for voters to have their interests represented.

Political discourse has a number of functions. Fuller⁴ argues that there are two prevailing views on discourse: "authoritarians" want politicians to be the sole communicators and voters to be the sole listeners as they believe the ruling class, with their expertise, are best able to discuss and represent the interests of the general population; "democrats", meanwhile, see the role of politicians and voters as communicators and communicated as fluid, recognising that political discourse can empower voters to speak about their interests and experiences directly. Kellner⁵ believes the general population should engage in political discourse to appreciate the political interests of others, and to develop critical thinking skills as opposed to group thinking. Legg⁶ similarly argues that political discourse is an opportunity to build up trust between groups and individuals, though she disagrees that discourse alone can develop critical thinking. She sees discourse not as a means of education, but purely as a means of projecting and discussing interests.

There is a clear definition of political discourse - the communication of interests to serve material goals - but the issue lies in disagreements over how voters can have their interests represented (directly or indirectly), and how to create politician-voter trust.

¹ Amaglobeli (2018) Published in the Journal of Education in Black Sea Region does not have a notable h-index or influence, but is written by an academic - Gigi Amoglobelli at International Black Sea University who specialises in the philosophy of politics and language, giving him the necessary expertise

² Ibid.

³ Sharma (2011) This source is published in India Review under Taylor and Francis, which is a highly respected journal and so has likely been peer reviewed to a high standard.

⁴ Fuller (2018) Steve Fuller has a doctorate in History and Philosophy of Science from the University of Cambridge, indicating that he is reputable and his work is academic. His work focuses primarily on 'social epistemology', which looks at how people can collectively gather information. Fuller has a good ability to see, though his views may be influenced by prevailing liberal attitudes in universities.

⁵ Kellner (2018) Douglas Kellner has a doctorate in Philosophy from Columbia University, and in particular researches culture, media, and communication. His writings, including this essay, are from the 21st Century which is key to have the ability to see the impact that the Internet and other technologies have had. However, his academic position rather than one that is directly involved in politics means may be unable to consider the limitations of political discourse.

⁶ Legg (2018) Catherine Legg is a Senior Lecturer at Deakin University, with her background in Philosophy giving her the necessary expertise.

2. What are truth and narrative, and what are their roles in political discourse?

Truth and narrative are both tools used in political discourse. Truth is a metric - at its broadest, a measure of objectivity; at its narrowest, an indication of a belief. Narrative is a rhetorical technique which represents interests by providing a framework for understanding events and the motivations of individuals.

There are various views of truth. Hill⁷, for instance, rejects the idea of a universal repository of truth and only recognises truth in relation to a body of knowledge, like factual truth (verifiable by experience, e.g. Mount Everest is the world's tallest mountain), historical truth (selected by a historian's judgement of sources from the past, e.g. the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991), and rational truth (the application of logic to reach conclusions, e.g. 2 plus 2 equal 4). Pierce and Rorty largely agree: both regard truth as beliefs derived from inquiry, with Pierce⁸ viewing these beliefs as personal and Rorty⁹ as communal. Hill, Pierce, and Rorty all agree that truth cannot be an absolute metric, especially when individuals reject universal truth. Truth still has a use, however: Rider¹⁰ argues that truth establishes a common understanding essential for daily living. Clark¹¹ also recognises the need for a common base of knowledge, especially in the context of combating misinformation, but points out that only revealing the truth is not enough to convince individuals to accept it. Meanwhile, Frankfurt¹² perceives truth not as a matter of being convinced, but having a willingness to trust others. He argues that the existence of truth is usually accepted by truth tellers and conscious liars, but not by 'bullshitters' - those who disregard truth entirely. His claim is that truth itself is not the issue; rather, 'bullshitters' exacerbate overblown doubts about objective truth. Consequently, to him, establishing stable facts through cooperation in verifying truth should be preferred over personal beliefs. In *Power of the Powerless*, Havel¹³ believes that truth places limits on arbitrary power by holding governments accountable for their words and actions. He argues that an unquestioning and conforming public are the greatest danger to the idea of truth, since standards for truth become irrelevant when not

⁷ Hill (2020) Samantha Rose Hill has a doctorate in Political Science from University of Massachusetts, Amherst, giving her significant expertise. She has done post-doctoral research in Germany, Hannah Arendt's homeland, suggesting she has a very good understanding of Arendt's original work (since translations can often skew the subtleties of meaning). The level of academic rigour implies a lack of vested interest or notable bias.

⁸ Olsson (2017) Olsson has a PhD in Theoretical Philosophy, meaning he has the expertise necessary to fully understand the arguments which Pierce and Rorty put forward about truth acquisition. While the text does indicate some bias towards the ideas of Rorty, the author makes sure to be objective and present the ideas given first and then provide his opinion.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rider (2018) Sharon Rider is a Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at Uppsala University, while Michael Peters has a PhD in Philosophy of Education from the University of Auckland. The source is published in Springer, a highly-regarded journal, a sign of expertise and putting academics ahead of other vested interests.

¹¹ Clark (2012) Roy Peter Clark holds a senior role at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, a journalism think-tank. This shows his expertise, and there are few signs of any vested political or financial interest. However, as this is only an article it should be regarded with some caution.

¹² Frankfurt (2005) Published in the highly respected Princeton University Press, which although potentially having a liberal slant as an academic institution, has a high reputation to uphold.

¹³ Havel (1978) Vaclav Havel was a leading dissident of Communism in Czechoslovakia, eventually helping to overthrow the regime. He has first hand experience with truth and Communism, since he was arrested a number of times and watched by secret police for his activities in the dissident organisation Charter 77. He has experience as a political writer, and has been directly involved in the process of questioning authoritarian regimes.

demanded. Keane¹⁴ approaches this issue of scrutiny from the other direction: he argues that monitory democracies - societies which have extra-parliamentary checks on power - are eroding trust in government and leading to an increasing uncertainty about truth.¹⁵ Though Havel and Keane present two extremes of the effects of scrutiny, they both imagine truth as a measure against unregulated power, a role which must be preserved. The consensus about truth seems to be that its limitations are not a sufficient justification to completely disregard it, and that generally truth is a way of reaching a common understanding about certain topics.

Narratives, meanwhile, seek to propagate a particular kind of understanding over others. Patterson and Monroe¹⁶ define narratives as stories formed from human imagination which carry an underlying meaning. They “connect disparate facts to make sense of reality”, using implied causality (even where there may be none) and pre-existing beliefs to understand the motivations of events, individuals, and groups. Narratives also suggest a vision of what the future should look like, such as the widespread acceptance of a belief or a change in the political system, by providing moral judgements for specific entities and events¹⁷ - the opposition to a belief may be looked down upon, while a lack of change in the political system represents a moral failing. This leads Mayer¹⁸ to assert narrative as “the most powerful tool for collective action”, as the agenda of a narrative often aligns with that of individuals, giving a collective banner under which many individuals can collectively express their views. For politicians meanwhile, narrative is a potent rhetorical device. Sadowsky¹⁹ believes that identity and leadership ability are closely linked, and so the most successful and inspirational political figures are those who “lead by autobiography”: fostering a personal narrative about the role the politician plays in a country helps voters understand what political candidates value and relate to them on both a moral and personal level. Narrative, more so than truth, is selective: certain factors are selected over others when explaining causality, such as economic factors in Marxist theory. By necessity, some factors are viewed as less important or silenced entirely. Green and Brock²⁰ see this as dangerous, since it places appeal ahead of fact: “good fiction can be no less convincing, no less compelling, than non-fiction; indeed, it is often more so.” Combined with Bruner’s²¹ suggestion that stories are viewed

¹⁴ Keane (2011) John Keane is published in Springer, a reputable and influential journal. He likely has no vested interests since the tone of speech is not sensationalist.

¹⁵ Keane (2013) John Keane is a Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney, and has authored a number of books on democracy, implying he has the necessary expertise. In 2021, he was nominated for both the Balzan Prize and Holberg Prize for his contributions in political thinking, a testament to both his expertise and academic rigour (most likely lacking vested interest). *The Conversation* is an academic media outlet.

¹⁶ Patterson and Monroe (1998). Patterson and Monroe work in the Department of Politics and Society in the University of California, an indication of reputation. The source does not have bias since it is only an exploration of the literature on narrative. Though the source is older, the ideas on narrative still remain relevant since the theory has not greatly changed.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mayer (2014) Frederick W. Mayer is a Professor of Public Policy, Political Science, and Environment at Duke University, a leading academic institution in the US. The reputation and expertise is further confirmed by the source, which was published by the Oxford University Press, which means the work is academic and well-referenced.

¹⁹ Sadowsky (2017) John Sadowsky was a Distinguished Professor at Grenoble École de Management, a highly respected French graduate business school, for two decades. This suggests he is reliable and lacking in vested interest in the topic discussed, whereas his many consultations with Fortune 500 demonstrates he has a very good ability to see success in leadership.

²⁰ Green and Brock (2000) The source belongs to the American Psychological Association, a highly-respected academic institution. Melanie Green and Timothy Brock both work at Ohio State University in the Department of Psychology, showing that they are reliable due to their academic reputations

²¹ Bruner (2002) In 2002, Jerome Bruner was found to be the 28th most cited psychologist of the 20th Century. Along with his PhD credentials, this demonstrates how he was both influential and commanded a strong reputation.

with a desire to understand their 'lifelikeness' (conformity to reality), narratives can establish appealing yet untrue perspectives on events. Mayer²² takes on a similar view, claiming, "All stories are fictions; some fictions are true". Foucault²³ also warns against this appeal, arguing that narratives falsely comfort its adherents into believing that progress is being made towards a given goal. Overall, the role of a narrative is clearer than that of truth, with criticisms of narrative primarily stemming from their misuse. Narratives, thus, establish stories to represent the interests of individuals and groups in a coherent manner.

The literature indicates that both truth and narrative aid in understanding ideas: truth uses agreement (to reality or between individuals) to provide a common understanding on a given topic, whereas narrative uses stories (which may be true or not) to push forward one view about a given topic to represent a particular interest group. Ciovacco²⁴ ascribes this subtle difference to the way in which both are communicated. Narrative is interpreted by the speaker with a certain intention, and interpreted again by listeners, for whom the interpretations may vary greatly. Truth, meanwhile, does not deviate from what Ciovacco calls the "objective base position", meaning that both the speaker and listener do not vary in their interpretations. Using these comparisons, it appears that truth and narrative are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The relationship between the two will become particularly important in the next section.

Problems in political discourse

Discourse often does more than represent voter interests, so problems involving narrative and truth arise: politicians exploit the uncertainty of language, politicians and voters act in excessive self-interest, distrust develops as a result, the Internet both expands and undermines the sphere of discourse, and human psychology is used to achieve these goals.

1. The variability of language in discourse

Political discourse uses the medium of language to represent the interests of individuals. The language that is chosen to achieve this goal is important so that the correct meaning is understood by listeners. In journalism, Clark²⁵ sees the general (but not universal) principle of objectivity as necessary in the communication of events, to ensure clarity and make information useful. However, he claims that 'engaged' writing is needed to share truth that is in the public interest, such as the January 2021 Capitol raids, where neutrality does not suffice. In making these assertions, Clark implies a subtle distinction between the communication of information and the representation of

²² Mayer (2014)

²³ Patterson and Monroe (1998)

²⁴ Ciovacco (2020) Carl Ciovacco has a Ph.D. from the Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs, implying a high level of expertise. His tenure at Booz Allen Hamilton, a major management and consultancy firm, indicates that he very likely has personal experience with the creation and reaction to narratives.

²⁵ Clark (2021) This source contains an evident slant against Trump, and is published on a think-tank website rather than a journal. This subjectivity is justified, however, by the expertise and reputation of the author, Roy Peter Clark, who frequently discusses ethics in journalism and has written a number of books on journalism. His several-decade experience is also of great use.

interests, a distinction which underlies the political discourse of politicians. There is a need to distinguish between politicians as public servants and politicians as the representatives of particular interest groups.

Within journalism, there is disagreement on how neutral language is achieved. 'Loaded' language, according to Hayakawa²⁶, encourages particular interpretations and opinions by using purposefully controversial or otherwise biased words or phrases. He claims that the antidote to this bias is a 'realistic balance' of positive and negative attributes, yet this is problematic: Moeller²⁷ recalls an internal memo sent out after the September 11 attacks by Stephen Jukes of Reuters asking for the careful selection of words in newspaper reports. "We all know that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter... it adds little to call the attack on the World Trade Center a terrorist attack," Jukes said²⁸, emphasising a journalist's role to avoid moral judgements (and so establish a narrative). Moeller said that this caused a substantial controversy, but more importantly suggests that the representation of public interests by politicians is highly problematic when clarity of communication (through neutrality) and passing moral judgements (to reflect public opinion) are concurrent aims. Patterson and Monroe²⁹ argue that narratives present an interpretation of reality through moral judgements, meaning that the creation of narratives for politicians is unavoidable when they outline a consistent policy and thus moral code. Moeller³⁰ also notes how President Clinton avoided the word 'genocide' when describing the situation in Rwanda during his presidency, to avoid the legal obligation for US intervention, and reflecting that language also bears a legal dimension which places limits on how far public interests can be represented. Derrida³¹, meanwhile, argues that the meaning of language is never static. He claims that the conveyed meaning, 'signifiers', can never perfectly represent the intended meaning, the 'signified'. Overall, the literature seems to agree that clarity in political discourse, and communication more widely, is often obfuscated by both the limited capabilities of language to express neutrality, and the politician's need to represent interests and thus accept some level of bias.

However, politicians do not solely represent the public interest - they often use political discourse to send a message. Davis³² says that occasionally "embellishing plain English can clarify context", giving the example of vague language in diplomacy as an indication of a desire to cooperate rather than to take a combative and unproductive attitude. Usually, he argues, language choices indicate allegiance to a party or interest rather than necessarily arguing for a particular position, much how Lakoff³³

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Allan and Zelizer (2004) Susan D. Moeller (Allan and Zelizer are the editors) is an Associate Professor of Media and International Affairs, and has written a number of books on the role of journalism and media. This book reports on factual information and thus has no notable bias.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Patterson and Monroe (1998)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. References Derrida's ideas.

³² Davis (2018) Evan Davis has worked for the BBC for nearly 30 years, presenting on Radio 4's *Today* programme for 6 years, which discussed current affairs. He has a strong journalist reputation to uphold, and his ability to see is evident by the length and seniority of his tenure at the BBC, a highly-respected news outlet.

³³ Grindstaff (2006) Laura Grindstaff is a Professor of Sociology at UC Davis, a university with very high research activity, researching primarily about American popular culture, making her well-informed on the matter of cultural frames. She has a

suggests that US conservatives refer to phrases like ‘welfare reform’ or ‘family values’. Lakoff terms this ecosystem of words ‘frames’, which he describes as interpretations of the world through a particular lens, much like narratives. Both Davis and Lakoff realise, however, that using discourse to send a message to those who agree with a politician does not foster the dialogue necessary to create a productive discussion with those who have opposing interests, and instead emphasises differences.

2. Self-interest

Politicians can use discourse to improve or preserve their careers: Kotre³⁴ mentions John Dean of the Watergate affair whose testimony greatly differed from the recordings given as evidence by the prosecution. For Dean, it was the “meeting as it should have been”. Kotre is not bothered whether this was an accident or if his account was deliberately twisted; he sees memory as the creation of oneself and their character, presenting a conflict between personal identity and truth. Self-deception in the aim of self-preservation becomes dangerous when it occurs in the individuals in which political power is vested.³⁵ Meanwhile, Davis³⁶ uses the Clinton-Lewinsky affair to demonstrate the fine line between a near lie and outright lie, upon which an entire career or life can rest. Clinton exploited the definition of ‘sex’ and ‘what “is” is’ in an attempt to avoid prosecution, indicating that a model of truth as binary is limited. Arendt³⁷ provides an alternative view of truth, suggesting that it can be expressed in terms of proximity - statements can be further or closer to the truth. Davis³⁸ applies a similar line of thinking to the behaviour of politicians, claiming that the current binary approach to truth means that those concerned primarily with self-interest remain unpunished so long as they do not cross the legal or reputational line. For instance, in an interview³⁹ Putin did concede that poisoning Skripal in the Salisbury incident had been unjustified as he had already been punished, yet asserted treason as the “gravest crime possible.” In saying this, Putin was equivocal in his overall message, and this confusion makes judgements of moral character more challenging.

Politicians can also use discourse to maintain their bases of support. Hildreth et al.⁴⁰ show a link between loyalty and the feeling that corruption is justified, indicating that group identity often trumps

socially-left slant since she wants to encourage the idea of progressive cultural frames, but her academic reputation means she provides a meaningful analysis of conservative frames and what can be learned from them, rather than critiquing them

³⁴ Kotre (1995) John Kotre has a PhD in Psychology from the University of Chicago, indicating that he has the expertise necessary to discuss topics such as memory. His long academic background suggests that he has a reputation to uphold.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Davis (2018)

³⁷ Hill (2020) Samantha Rose Hill has a doctorate in Political Science from University of Massachusetts, Amherst, giving her significant expertise. She has done post-doctoral research in German, Hannah Arendt's homeland, suggesting she has a very good understanding of Arendt's original work (since translations can often skew the subtleties of meaning). The level of academic rigour implies a lack of vested interest or notable bias.

³⁸ Davis (2018)

³⁹ Barber and Foy (2019) The source is a direct transcript of a discussion with Putin, so there is no bias or concern of conflicting interests.

⁴⁰ Hildreth et al. (2016) Hildreth, the lead author, has a doctorate in Organisation Behaviour. This confirms his interest in loyalty and ethical decision-making, and the academic background demonstrates his need to uphold a good reputation. However, psychological studies are often difficult to replicate so the source should be treated with some scepticism.

personal values. Pruessen⁴¹ identifies the discourse of American exceptionalism, which suffers from the intentional silences and gaps of narrative - it neglects the shameful parts of US history like Native American policy and slavery. He believes this lets politicians tactically avoid the whole truth, something particularly effective when there is an unspoken agreement to avoid certain uncomfortable topics (since the myth of exceptionalism is so widely accepted).⁴² In these cases, truth becomes an inconvenience, and comfortable lies are incentivised if politicians are to keep their base of support.

Finally, politicians can use political discourse to divide opposition. Reiss⁴³ discusses Soviet disinformation campaigns, like the story that AIDS was a biological weapon tested on homosexual and homeless people. Since these narratives contained an element of truth - like the view that the CIA was a boogeyman - they were convincing enough to stir up controversy in the US. Reiss notes that similar strategies are being used by Russia today, particularly in the online sphere, where discourse is undermined by pitting competing narratives against each other.

3. Distrust in politician-voter relations

Voters use frames to understand issues⁴⁴, which are affected by voter distrust. They use belief systems like religion or liberalism to establish their views, then perceive all facts and issues through these frames, rather than allowing facts and knowledge to precede a critical and thoughtful judgement of an issue⁴⁵. This reflects Kotre's⁴⁶ link between identity and memory in that, when presented with new information, voters are more likely to see how much it agrees with their existing beliefs, rather than refining their judgements and changing their views. This preference for opinions before evidence is a symptom of an increasing distrust in politicians⁴⁷. An Edelman⁴⁸ survey reports that UK citizens feel the government does not consider their interests and that their communication during crises is poor. When facts are unavailable, doubt develops. Even when facts are available, Grindstaff⁴⁹ argues that a distrust in what politicians say means voters rationally retreat to personal experiences when informing voting habits or views in political discourse. Hill⁵⁰ says (factual) truth then becomes paramount in establishing a collective memory of the past, so that individuals can relate to each others' experiences in political discourse. A failure to establish trust between voters and politicians can thus create polarisation, as a lack of common reality hampers cooperation.

⁴¹ Pruessen (2021) Ronald W. Pruessen is a Professor of History at the University of Toronto, and the article explicitly states that there is no conflict of interest which could result in financial benefit. More generally, *The Conversation* is a non-profit network of media outlets which has articles written by academics and researchers. This maintains reputation and expertise.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Reiss (2019) Megan Reiss has a PhD in Public Policy from the University of Texas, and is a visiting fellow at the National Security Institute at George Mason University. These are signs of expertise relevant to the topic of disinformation. The source is written from an American perspective, but the information is factual meaning it is less likely to be highly biased.

⁴⁴ Grindstaff (2006)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Kotre (1995)

⁴⁷ Edelman (2018) Edelman is the world's largest public relations firm (by revenue), so it has an interest in informing its marketing clients of the facts. These survey results provide a rough indication of reasons, but the sample size of respondents is limited (at only 906) so the results cannot be completely trusted to be accurate.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Grindstaff (2006)

⁵⁰ Hill (2020)

Politicians can choose to take advantage of distrust, further entrenching the cycle. Keane⁵¹ recognises that certain frames reject an objective truth and so risk devaluing the importance of actual truth. Politicians, to serve their own interests, are able to deceive, silence opposition, and disregard the truth without consequence since these allegations can be simply rejected. Davis⁵² suggests that politicians are incentivised to do so due to short-termism: politicians have terms of only a few years, giving them little time to develop a reputation for honesty and integrity, characteristics which become evident only after the effects of positive political decisions can be eventually seen and experienced. Additionally, the need to maintain a good reputation once in office diminishes, since election cycles determine whether they get into office or not; when the elected fail or refuse to deliver on campaign promises, voters are limited in what they can do.⁵³ Krastev⁵⁴ says this makes it unclear where power is held, since voters feel like they lack the power to represent their interests. This has two effects: politicians use other institutions as scapegoats (such as regulatory agencies or courts) to explain why political change cannot be enacted; and voters are more likely to vote for authoritarian characters who make populist promises and spread conspiracies, both of which use narrative to their advantage.⁵⁵ Krastev and Davis both recognise that distrust in politicians and exploitation of said distrust establishes a cycle which exacerbates the problem and makes political discourse ineffective, since voter interests are left unrepresented.

4. The Internet's effect on political discourse and information access

The Internet has democratised discourse, though whether its effect on policy change and the representation of interests has been positive is less certain. The Internet has improved participation and access to discourse⁵⁶, and discourse has become increasingly “non-hierarchical”⁵⁷ i.e. not primarily determined by the most powerful individuals and groups, thereby giving a platform for grassroots political organisation. In circumventing traditional media, Internet users can discuss interests relevant to them and avoid limitations on free speech.⁵⁸ This can be negative, though: Benkler et al. argue that the 2014 Gamergate controversy, a reactionary campaign harassing female video game developers and journalists seeking greater social justice, demonstrates the Internet's deep political polarisation rather than willingness to engage in more free discourse. Polarisation

⁵¹ Keane (2013) John Keane is a Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney, and has authored a number of books on democracy, implying he has the necessary expertise. In 2021, he was nominated for both the Balzan Prize and Holberg Prize for his contributions in political thinking, a testament to both his expertise and academic rigour (most likely lacking vested interest). *The Conversation* is an academic media outlet.

⁵² Davis (2018)

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Krastev (2017) Ivan Krastev is a fellow at a number of social sciences institutes, and a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times and The Guardian. While this does suggest a moderate left-wing bias, the academic reputation of the Nexus Institute as the publication source indicates a good degree of expertise.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ford (2018) Derek Ford has a PhD in cultural foundations of education from Syracuse University, a sign of expertise.. His writings are very recent, making them particularly relevant. This work is published in Springer, a peer-reviewed journal.

⁵⁷ Benkler et al. (2018) Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts all work at Harvard University in the Internet and Society Center. The reputation of the university and the prestige of Oxford's publishing press implies that the work is academic, most likely devoid of vested interest, and factually correct.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

meant discourse broke down, and proponents of Gamergate resorted to tactics like doxxing (the leaking of personal details), death threats, and social shaming. Movements such as ‘Unite the Right’ in Charlottesville have resulted in physical violence, deviating from true political discourse where voters’ interests become policy after deliberation and communication. Decentralised networks capable of intimidation campaigns often solely focus on causing harm to individuals, detracting attention away from productive discussion.⁵⁹ Thus, the Internet has established a means both for greater genuine political representation for interest groups and for reactionary movements to impede political discourse through hate speech and physical violence. Where this balance between these aims lies is uncertain, however.

While the Internet has also improved access to information, misinformation has been able to spread more easily, according to Vasu et al.⁶⁰ They argue that, because Internet users have not been taught fact-checking skills and source analysis, the ease of sharing information and opinions on the internet has resulted in challenges for confirming the veracity of sources.⁶¹ Meanwhile, echo chambers strengthen and skew these opinions, and are a result of the ‘Splinternet’ - the formation of distinct and separate online communities. These communities are often exclusionary, taking away from the cross-group interactions needed for discourse and contributing to a preference for unbalanced information.⁶²

5. How human psychology affects the aims of truth and narrative

Benkler et al.⁶³ argue that voter behaviour and media consumption is not rational, relying on appeal to character rather than policy, meaning politicians can sometimes neglect voters and the truth. Benkler et al. reject the “folk theory of democracy” which assumes voters make informed decisions in elections based on the policies of candidates; rather, voters select candidates based on factors with little relevance to competency or planned policy.⁶⁴ The “Michigan Model” suggests voters make social decisions - in general, people are divided along party lines, not ideology (or relevant policy). Consequently, voters typically shift their views to align with their chosen candidate, rather than choosing a different candidate if the voter’s opinion on a policy changes.⁶⁵ Grindstaff⁶⁶ concurs with this finding, since a retreat to personal experience is one to an individual’s community (and likely party) rather than their personal abstract philosophy. This “ideological schizophrenia” - a

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Vasu et al. (2018) The primary author has a PhD in International Relations from the University of Wales, meaning he has great expertise. This source is explanatory, and so is largely objective in nature. It describes trends with tentative language such as ‘can’ and ‘in many cases’, demonstrating that these are not universal principles, even if they are often observed. The source is published in the Nanyang Technological University, and so commands a strong academic reputation.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Kumar (2001) There is limited information available online about the author and the source is in an online magazine, which makes them less reliable. However, the ideas referred to by Crews from the Cato Institute are well-documented so the source does refer to expertise. Though the source is fairly old, it describes the Internet as it still exists today.

⁶³ Benkler et al. (2018)

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Grindstaff (2006)

disassociation from ideological principles in favour of emotional appeal - suggests that political discourse becomes futile if dialectical methods do not represent genuine voter interests and policy does not change accordingly.⁶⁷

Ciovacco⁶⁸ agrees, arguing that media outlets can use their position of authority to encourage conformity to particular narratives in the news (like the narrative that Russia is the biggest threat to the US). Media must also consider limited attention spans of viewers, resulting in concise news stories which may lack nuance or rely excessively on generalisations. Together, conformity and a lack of nuance means truth as a way of holding power to account becomes weakened and standards for truth become less important.

Politicians and those who wield the most power can exploit access to information, affecting how voters form opinions and undermining their desire to represent their own genuine interests. Nickerson⁶⁹ observes that people develop their strongest opinions when first exposed to a piece of information (the primacy effect) and then, often unknowingly, look for supporting evidence (confirmation bias), while Davis⁷⁰ notes a willingness to make judgements based only on limited evidence. These biases challenge a voter's ability to be critical and to know their own interests: Chomsky⁷¹ elaborates on access, asserting that bureaucratic organisations form symbiotic relations with traditional media which provide both sides with significant leverage over the flow of information and opinions of voters, since it is traditional media which will have best access to political institutions, emergency services, and government representatives. The first exposure on news comes from them, making use of the primacy effect. This structure seeks most of all to preserve itself using a "moral division of labor: officials have and give the facts; reporters merely get them." The narrative of the status quo is upheld and access to truth - particularly for breaking news - is concentrated in the more powerful institutions.⁷² Vasu et al.⁷³ instead place greater emphasis on how confirmation bias contributes to a greater susceptibility to fake news. In particular, those who subscribe to a deep distrust of the state apparatus and linked institutions like traditional media are likely to believe in conspiracies, undermining political discourse by detaching individuals from the shared experience of reality.

⁶⁷ Benkler et al. (2018)

⁶⁸ Ciovacco (2020)

⁶⁹ Nickerson (1998) Raymond S. Nickerson has a PhD in experimental psychology from Tufts University, and is a fellow at a number of organisations including the American Psychological Association. The source is very well-referenced, indicating a high level of familiarity with the topic of confirmation bias, and presents objective information.

⁷⁰ Davis (2018)

⁷¹ Herman and Chomsky (1994) Noam Chomsky has written over 150 books on the topics of mass media, conflicts, and politics. He is one of the world's most cited scholars, and although his dislike for the US' system of governance and capitalism pervades his writings, his work is highly influential and academic. His work is subjective but *Manufacturing Consent* contains many references to factual information to back up his arguments.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Vasu et al. (2018)

Discussion

Narrative or discourse alone cannot fix discourse. In this discussion, I will argue in support of greater accountability in political discourse, as well as the need to recognise political discourse as a democratic tool for empowering individuals. In pursuing these aims, the power and significance of the individual in politics will be recognised

The need for accountability

Accountability is needed to rebuild trust in the political process and to make truth more meaningful. Truth becomes fragile when its manipulation becomes widespread, so it is harder to tell if something is a truth or a lie. Trust in political figures decreases, disincentivising healthy political engagement and increasing the appeal of radical or purposefully deceitful narratives and politicians. Accountability is an attempt to restore the distinction between what is true and what is not, creating political discourse based upon understanding, not polarisation.

1. Biases affect our understanding of truth

Simply by existing, truths are not biased. At the point where they have not been observed or communicated, they have no purpose and so they have not been manipulated to serve a particular interest. This also implies that truths exist independent of human thought. Though Pierce⁷⁴ and Rorty⁷⁵ challenge this, perceiving the truths we recognise solely as beliefs without absolute certainty about reality, such a distinction has little use in practice. We still need to place trust in truths if we are to have a functional political system and more broadly a functioning day-to-day life. Though Pierce and Rorty are correct in the strict sense of arguing that truth is a belief insofar as it is based on probability, much how the scientific method does not seek absolute truths but measures the likelihood of particular phenomena, a statistical model of truth has neither much appeal nor use to a general population. The issue at hand should not be the nature of truth, but how existing truths are framed in a way that questions their reality. For the purposes of political engagement then, there should be a distinction between the objective truths of reality and their subjective interpretations, a distinction enabled by accountability.

When truths are observed or communicated, biases are always present and manipulate the truth. All individuals have their own beliefs, prejudices, and experiences which contribute to forming a particular worldview through which all information received and passed on is filtered. As a result, biases can result in half-truths, the use of a particular tone in communication to imply an opinion about the truth, or the omitting of contextual information that is required for the truth to be fully understood. Even well-intentioned individuals are subject to biases, since they still have their own worldview. Stephen

⁷⁴ Olsson (2017)

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Jukes⁷⁶ challenges this idea, arguing that it is unhelpful to introduce biases into communication, implying that language - like truth - exists independent of human thought. However, Jukes is flawed in believing that language can at any point be free from biases or distortions in meaning. Humans create language, unlike truth, and so the very thing language means is dependent on the person who creates or perpetuates it. Instead, Derrida⁷⁷ is more valid in asserting that the intended meaning of language can never be perfectly represented as he recognises the futility in attempting to give absolute, unchanging meanings to words. Language is a product of human culture and experience, meaning that its nuances are constantly changing. There is no unbiased language as all words are shaped by humans, so it is necessary to recognise that a complete lack of bias is not possible. Biases do lie on a spectrum, however. With accountability, we can recognise that we are not entirely beholden to biases, though, as we can differentiate between those that are unavoidable and those which are intentionally deceiving.

Biases also exploit the power of emotional appeal through narratives, which can compromise truth. Though narratives recognise the human desire for meaning, they can easily choose to treat truth as optional. Brock and Green⁷⁸ share this concern, arguing that fiction is often more appealing than reality. Narratives are particularly potent when they contain an element of truth and become tools not to inform but to deceive under the guise of a respect for truth. This is a real concern, as Reiss⁷⁹ argues, since the strategy was used by Russia in the 1980s to spread conspiracies about the AIDS epidemic. The common perception of the CIA as a boogeyman strengthened this narrative, allowing malicious intent to create more distance from the truth. Only through accountability and bringing the disinformation campaign to light was the narrative no longer perpetuated.⁸⁰ The production of narrative with biases did not resolve the issue of misinformation; it being exposed did.

Although Sadowsky believes that there are benefits to personal narratives, suggesting that the most influential political figures “lead by autobiography”⁸¹ to demonstrate how they fit into politics, this does not reflect a respect for any values other than political success. A politician can craft a personal narrative and be successful regardless of whether they recognise the importance of accountability. To tolerate the stories which politicians use to explain their role is to place appeal and charisma above all other values, likely ignoring their track record for truthfulness and actual policies. This is reflected in Benkler et al.’s⁸² research, indicating “ideological schizophrenia”. Voting does not tend to occur rationally along party or ideological lines; voters choose the candidates they like most according to their personality. Such voting behaviour is only exacerbated by the proliferation of narratives, with truth and tangible political concerns becoming secondary to the emotional aspects of politics. In doing so, political discourse is increasingly detached from reality and is more reflective of changing

⁷⁶ Allan and Zelizer (2004)

⁷⁷ Patterson and Monroe (1998)

⁷⁸ Green and Brock (2000)

⁷⁹ Reiss (2019)

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Sadowsky (2017)

⁸² Benkler et al. (2018)

emotional states and the narratives perpetuated. Without a clear consensus on the nature of truth and reality or common political aims, polarisation develops. Also, truth holds little importance outside the framework prescribed by the narrative: truth is only perceived as significant if it is somehow relevant to the interest. There is less empathy for particular issues faced by other political interest groups. Thus, accountability is necessary to question narratives before they create powerful yet imaginary divisions with real political impact.

2. Our ability to find truth is limited

Since truths exist independently of human thought, Hill⁸³ correctly observes that truths are tangible as they relate to bodies of knowledge that can be verified. However, our ability to verify truth is made more difficult by our preference for appeal over truth, which strengthens existing biases and makes our beliefs dogmatic. Accountability can shift this balance by making truth more accessible and significant.

As humans have a tendency to look for sources with appeal rather than truth, media outlets and other producers of information meet this demand and place less importance on truth. In doing so, we hold stronger beliefs about the things we want to believe rather than the truth. In this vein, there are a number of psychological mechanisms which producers of sources can exploit to increase their viewership and viewer retention.

The appeal to limited attention spans places a significant premium on nuance and accuracy when reporting the truth. With the rise of the Internet as the dominant mode of discourse, the democratisation of discourse has given any Internet-connected individual the ability to - instantly and often anonymously - express their opinions, likely with less regulation than other mediums. Ford⁸⁴ argues that this democratisation of discourse has been a net positive for the general public, allowing them to develop a stronger political consciousness and desire for meaningful political change. However, increased access and participation in discourse has, by necessity, increased the volume of information available and decreased the overall quality of information (as checks and verification are limited). To stand out, producers of sources are incentivised to be increasingly controversial and hyperbolic in their content, thereby driving up engagement with their sources. When someone views a source for the first time and regards it as sensationalist, there remains a natural, human tendency to access the source mediated by the primacy effect⁸⁵, where the strongest opinions are formed on the first exposure to a piece of information, incentivises controversy (and so potential inaccuracies). Combined with our tendency to make judgements even with limited information⁸⁶, we as humans are highly susceptible to being deceived or convinced. To maintain engagement, confirmation bias⁸⁷ encourages producers of sources to continuously publish information in the same sensationalist vein,

⁸³ Hill (2020)

⁸⁴ Ford (2018)

⁸⁵ Nickerson (1998)

⁸⁶ Davis (2018)

⁸⁷ Nickerson (1998)

creating deceiving narratives. This undoubtedly contributes to a growing distrust with the state of discourse. The proliferation of communications centred upon a desire to be seen has created an atmosphere in discourse where it is less important to demonstrate nuance and understanding than it is to be heard. Complex issues and truths are much harder to explain when few have the attention span to do so. It is far easier to disregard truth when our attention is constantly diverted by a new sensationalist headline. Only by allowing ourselves to pause and think about our sources through accountability can we gain the greater understanding necessary to engage in meaningful political debate. Shallow impressions result in shallow discourse.

The Internet's large repository of sources has also created what seems like a necessity to use biases and narratives as a shorthand to judge information, a tendency that has been exacerbated with the increasing centralisation of discourse under a small number of major websites. Just as the growth of sensationalism establishes a hierarchy of opinion over truth⁸⁸, the personalisation of information streams through 'Home' and 'For You' pages has paradoxically increased the isolation of individuals on the Internet, who are now less likely to engage in discourse. Once more, Ford's claim that online discourse has become truly democratised is tenuous: online activity is now less about discourse and more about consumption. The aggregation of this activity onto a very limited number of social media websites means that how people spend their time online is greatly influenced by a small number of social media firms. Though Chomsky's⁸⁹ original critique in *Manufacturing Consent* (that traditional media holds the means to information) no longer stands in the strict sense due to the development of the Internet, the forces of conformity and financial interest remain alive and well in the consolidation of online activity under only a few social media firms. Information is still fundamentally beholden to power and wealth. With the common aim of maximising time spent on their respective websites to increase advertising revenues, social media firms appeal to users' biases without considering the implications on truth and discourse. Holding these influential firms responsible for algorithms even they cannot control is essential if we are to question our biases and the way we reach and strengthen them. Without an incentive structure to think critically about the information we consume, a small number of firms can lead us to become either complacent or entrenched in our views and so establish political polarisation. In particular, a lack of accountability can give us a skewed view of the reality of politics. There are interest groups that continue to seek emancipation and tolerance, but when algorithms decide not to show an individual media relating to these narratives, it is easy to become politically disengaged and regard those who propagate political narratives as an unwelcome intrusion into a status quo which, for that individual, may already be comfortable. An inability to recognise the truth of the political struggles others face greatly harms their ability to represent their interests within the standard framework of discourse.

⁸⁸ Benkler et al. (2018)

⁸⁹ Chomsky and Herman (1994)

3. Truth and trust is becoming more uncertain

Political discourse requires truth and trust if it is to function. Accountability strengthens both by providing more certainty and thus creating a greater willingness to cooperate in discourse. When people begin to have doubts about truth, it is more difficult to trust others, both to communicate in good faith and to recognise their interests. A lack of political empowerment has led to the breakdown of discourse.

Uncertainty about truth leads to a breakdown of trust. Individuals trust one another less, and political institutions are trusted less by individuals. Edelman⁹⁰ research indicates endemic distrust of the government in the UK, largely due to poor communication. Truth is essential for political cooperation, since we must work under the assumption that others also have our best interests in mind and that people do not want to actively deceive us. This is particularly a concern on the Internet, where anonymity and limited regulation of speech contribute to an atmosphere where truth is hard to recognise.

The perception of uncertainty can be reversed by accountability, which draws out questions of truth and denounces those who perpetuate false or misleading beliefs. In this sense, narrative is only necessary so long as people have doubts about truth. Narratives provide short-term comfort for those who feel the nature of truth is uncertain, but they also set a dangerous precedent for dogmatism and disengagement from discourse. Grindstaff⁹¹ correctly observes that when there is doubt about truth, it is rational for an individual to retreat to their personal experiences, since this is where they find their beliefs are most certain. When trusting others is a challenge, trusting oneself seems the only safe option. Yet such thinking can easily create distance between individuals and other political stakeholders. Narratives assume a certain universality, as though they are a true reflection of reality that makes more sense than other views of reality. Bruner⁹² terms this the “lifelikeness” of narrative, which develops an unearned confidence for those who believe in the narrative. Since they offer a full explanation of causality⁹³, narratives have the underlying assumption that the knowledge they hold is complete and faultless. The changing and growing nature of truth over time is perceived as a weakness. Truth that is incomplete, lacking in nuance, or always changing becomes a reason to fear, not to accept reality for what it is. The power of narratives to create polarisation is only possible when doubts arise over possible areas of consensus. With accountability, those areas become more visible.

If a narrative is at any point mistaken, it is unlikely that a person will stop believing in it: the appeal of narrative is not in how it can express truths in a convincing way, but the way it allows its adherents to avoid asking questions and avoid uncertainty. Therefore, narratives disincentive political engagement with those who believe in other narratives since there is no opportunity to build trust nor common

⁹⁰ Edelman (2018)

⁹¹ Grindstaff (2006)

⁹² Bruner (2002)

⁹³ Patterson and Monroe (1998)

ground. Such a state of affairs - one where uncertainty is perceived as a universal negative - makes discourse dysfunctional from the very start. There is no definite answer to the endpoint of discourse, and only with the use of accountability can there be any hope of creating bridges of truth.

Accountability is the necessary counterbalance to political precarity, as it incentivises trust. There is more merit in Havel's view of government scrutiny than Keane's: while Keane claims that monitory democracies⁹⁴ (countries with extra-parliamentary checks on power) erode trust, it is only by this systematic scrutiny over government, as Havel⁹⁵ suggests that uncertainty can be gradually swept away. There is a fear, particularly for adherents of narrative, that approaching the unknown or that which cannot be verified is something to fear, since it exposes the gaps in our collective knowledge. However, to remain blind to the truth through narrative is worse, since it gives no opportunity to develop our understanding of what others want. Kellner⁹⁶ concurs, recognising discourse as a multilateral process. Establishing relationships of trust, mediated by accountability, will create an attitude of perceiving the unknown not as a source of division and resorting to narratives as an explanation, but as requiring a communal project of truth-seeking.

The need to clarify the purpose of political discourse

The second part to fixing discourse is the need to recognise that political discourse is at its core a democratic tool, one which enables individuals to represent their interests. If these aims are compromised, then discourse cannot function and becomes a means for suppression and control.

Often, discourse is poorly regarded for all its divisions, drawn out discussions, and inability to reach consensus. However, these are fundamentally issues of democracy. When discourse is regarded as failing, this comes from the development of anti-democratic sentiment through violence and the belief that individuals are not politically empowered in the existing democratic political system. The purpose of discourse must be recognised not as a means by which privilege is reinforced, but one in which individuals are given the ability to represent their own interests. Discourse cannot be perceived as a rational, neutral enquiry into the ideal policies which should be implemented by a government. Discourse is, above all, an expression of an individual's moral values.

In recent years, the growth of anti-democratic groups indicates a desire to shift away from traditional modes of "democratic", dialectical discourse and towards "authoritarian", elite-driven discourse and, in some cases, violence.⁹⁷ This could be hardly called discourse, however, since the silencing of emancipation narratives would create a skewed image of what society as a whole wants to pursue through serving "material goals."⁹⁸ The contemporary state of discourse, though in a precarious

⁹⁴ Keane (2013)

⁹⁵ Havel (1978)

⁹⁶ Kellner (2018)

⁹⁷ Fuller (2018)

⁹⁸ Amaglobeli (2018)

position in regards to truth and trust, currently allows marginalised groups to communicate. The increasing dominance of such narratives has created fears for those who have traditionally been privileged in politics - white, male, heterosexual - with concerns that today's discourse reflects their material conditions. In other words, there is a growing disdain for democracy because those who have benefited from it in the past feel that the growing demand for marginalised groups to receive material goals, like more rights, has been at their expense, where the breakdown of historical privilege is perceived as a lack of political empowerment.

Thus, these frustrations have increased the appeal of anti-democratic measures to allow these individuals and groups to seek political empowerment through other means. Specifically, populist, authoritarian politicians can become more successful. Krastev⁹⁹ correctly observes that growing uncertainty about where power is held has contributed to this shift in elections, and has enabled the growth of conspiracy theories which compromise discourse and create polarisation as described in previous sections. Together, conspiracies and politicians with authoritarian tendencies can contribute to the incitement of physical violence, as did occur with Gamergate in 2014¹⁰⁰, Unite the Right in 2017¹⁰¹, and the January 6 Capitol Raid in 2021.¹⁰² Common to all of these was frustration with the growing popularity of social justice movements, unfurling into violent, reactionary responses. The belief that these movements constituted an existential threat to the traditionally privileged is one that has been created by the absence of mass engagement with discourse, where narratives have strengthened biases. If individuals mix with the same crowds, both online and offline, the process of radicalisation has far less resistance.

In response to reactionary movements, it is not possible to decry discourse as a failed experiment of democracy in action. By clarifying that discourse is fundamentally a deliberative tool with which political decision-making and interest-representation should function rather than being the first in a chain of increasingly radical and violent means to political empowerment, we challenge the belief that discourse can be dismissed. For those who have historically enjoyed a privileged position in society, discourse often has less use: their material goals have already been served. But for those who have been traditionally marginalised, engaging in discourse is not a choice, but a necessity, if they are to remove their historical disadvantage. In avoiding political discourse, people accept the status quo, which only works to perpetuate existing biases, policies, and views. Therefore, political discourse must be recognised as an inviolable democratic institution which offers a universal forum for representing the interest of individuals, in the hope that each individual feels a genuine sense of political empowerment without the need to perpetuate privilege.

⁹⁹ Krastev (2017)

¹⁰⁰ Benkler et al. (2018)

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Clark (2021)

Conclusion

Political discourse can only be fixed when all political stakeholders recognise the value of truth and engage meaningfully in discourse with other interest groups. When truth is recognised as important through a culture of accountability, trust between voters and political institutions can develop, reducing uncertainty around the nature of truth. Since narratives thrive on appeal and therefore risk political entrenchment, they fail to establish the trust and cooperation needed for effective discourse. A preference of truth over narrative, when enforced by accountability, will help create a feeling of political empowerment through the traditional democratic channels of discourse and elections. Meanwhile, recognising the aims of political discourse and creating genuine engagement rather than division can help foster consensus, limiting polarisation. Though disagreements are inherent to politics, discourse built on trust and engagement is necessary if we are to use our political institutions to create meaningful change.

This project has largely centred upon the existing state of discourse and the ideal solutions that should be implemented. However, there is far more research to be done in being able to transform these ideas into policy. There could be evaluation of the legal measures put in place to regulate speech, with the Internet providing a new frontier to explore the freedom of speech and laws for accountability. The benefits and limitations of digital media literacy are also valuable points of discussion as they present a way to enact society-wide change in attitudes towards Internet discourse and the power of truth. The way in which narratives operate, spread, and sometimes develop into conspiracy theories is essential if we are to reduce the extent of the radicalisation of individuals and reduce negative attitudes towards discourse.

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