Communication Theory, 2024, **00**, 1–12
https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtae013
Original Article

The shift to authenticity: a framework for analysis of political truth claims

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Abstract

It is often claimed that political disinformation is more abundant than ever, that populists are particularly prone to lying, and that we live in an era of post-truth or epistemic relativism. Contrary to these views, we interpret this historical trend as a shift from objective to authentic forms of political truth claims. We develop a diagnostic framework that captures different types of political truth claims and their distinct elements. This framework enables interrogation and understanding of the current state of epistemic contestation and change. The rise of both populist and deliberative approaches to democracy, which we use as key examples, are indicators of a gradual shift towards a greater importance of authenticity in the public sphere. We nuance this proposition by distinguishing between different forms of authenticity employed by populist and deliberative politics: communicative authenticity in deliberative politics and original and personal authenticity in populist politics.

Keywords: post-truth, truth claims, authenticity, populism, deliberation.

What is going on with truth in politics? In this article we critique the concept of post-truth and propose an alternative diagnosis of the current changes in political truth-telling practices in Western democracies. Rather than the often-expressed concerns with relativism, we observe a more specific shift in performances of political truth claims. Truth does not so much lose its importance as we witness a shift from objective and expertise-based forms of truth, evidence and epistemic authority to more authentic forms. This is for example evident in the rise in "belief speaking" and fall in "fact speaking" observed in the US (Lasser et al., 2023) as well as the more than quadrupling of political and often populist leaders globally between 1990 and 2018 who are characterized by their emphasis on direct and unmediated communication to their supporters, the frequent dismissal of expertise, and personalistic forms of leadership (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 19). In other words, performances of truth in politics rest increasingly on claims to be, for example, who you say you are, what you have always been, or what you are supposed to be, or on claims to say what you really think. This shift responds to a public demand for increased authenticity in politics (Hansard Society, 2019, p. 17) and beyond (see e.g., Barker & Taylor, 2007, on music) that is driven from several different directions—not only the populism mentioned above but also deliberative politics that values the inclusion of experiences and perspectives based on diverse identities; that is, from types of politics that, in very different ways, seek to respond to perceived crises of democracy.

This shift toward authenticity still needs more systematic conceptualization and empirical verification, and to that end we introduce three analytical innovations to the post-truth debate (after a short critique of the post-truth diagnosis). First, we open the notion of truth to a broader spectrum of propositions than the usual narrow focus on objective or scientific truth that directs much of established scholarship on, for example, mis- and disinformation (e.g., Pennycook et al., 2020). Second, we develop a framework of types of political truth claims that catalogues their performative elements. This framework is also intended to serve as a diagnostic tool for future empirical analyses of the shift we describe. Third, we develop the distinct forms of authenticity that political actors mobilize within such claims. In the last parts of the article, we exemplify how they do so in populist and deliberative politics to make the postulated shift more tangible.

The post-truth diagnosis and the performative use of truth claims in politics

Prompted by conditions of political polarization, anti-science politics and spreading mis- and disinformation, several diagnoses of the current state of truth in politics are circulating in public debates and scholarly discussions. Common narratives include that disinformation is more abundant than ever (Bennett and Livingston, 2018), and that people can no longer agree on what is true and have lost the common ground that consensual factual statements are supposed to provide (Van Aelst et al., 2017). It is argued that truth has become a subjective matter, a question of feeling or personal perspective, or that "postmodernism gone wrong" (van Zoonen, 2012, p. 57) has resulted in epistemic relativism. Post-truth scholarship has also often related its main diagnosis of a loss of common ground to populism (Waisbord, 2018), with the idea that populists are particularly prone to lying or do not really care about truth. Whatever the explanation, the remedy to this situation of "post truth" is, according to these narratives, to turn again to the facts established by science, which, it may be implied, is a unitary endeavor purged of all subjective experience and reference to specific standpoints, and which identifies undeniable truths.

Received: 2 October 2023. **Revised:** 24 May 2024. **Accepted:** 26 May 2024

Critics such as Vogelmann (2018) see the diagnosis of "post-truth" as conceptually vague and redundant (if truth has always been at stake, what is really new and specific about this new era?). Post-truth as a concept is also epistemologically dubious, he argues (if truth is at stake, where are the clear criteria for truth in the debate?). And it is politically dangerous (if truth is at stake, it is tempting to turn toward authoritarian solutions to restore its power).

We agree that the diagnosis of a post-truth era suffers from several shortcomings. The first relates to the question of who defines what is true. Here, post-truth discourse tends to favor the evaluation of claims according to scientific criteria, norms and standards rather than analyzing more widespread public preferences and modes of scrutiny. That is, normative rather than pragmatic theories are adopted. The second shortcoming is the consequent narrow focus on scientific or objective types of truth claims. The third shortcoming concerns the question of whether our era is essentially shaped by epistemic nihilism (truth being irrelevant to communicators and audiences) or relativism (truth being believed to be a matter of personal attitude) as opposed to a simple surge of objective falsehoods, and whether postmodernism is at the roots of this relativism. We briefly address each shortcoming in turn.

The first problem, that of who defines truth, was exemplified very prominently by Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, during which supporters boasted banners of "Trump 4 truth"[1] while media institutions counted his many lies. Should we then base our diagnosis on the fact that Trump's claims contradict what scientists and journalists have established as true (with whom we academics often tend to agree)? Should we focus on his own presumed knowledge of the falsehood of many of his claims and his intention to deliberately disinform (the approach to disinformation in general that Hameleers [2023] would suggest)? Or should we, as we would suggest, focus on the content and types of claims he makes and in what sense they claim to be "the truth" and actually matter to his supporters? We argue that a diagnosis of actual shifts in public communication should, in the first instance, be based on a pragmatic conceptual framework that aims to capture the specific characteristics of publicly made truth claims, as opposed to judging social reality by the standards of scientific truth and our own commitments to certain types of factual claims. The reason for this is that such a pragmatic theory allows us to deal with questions of how people *use* truth claims in public discourse, how soundly they contest them, and what standards they deem appropriate in different contexts of discourse and therefore with how perceptions of truth are changing in the current era.

Complementing Krause and colleagues' work on the nuances and variability of scientific truth claims (see e.g., Krause et al., 2022), our diagnosis is therefore based on the concept of *public facts*. Public facts are about matters of public concern and are inherently unstable and have changing political charges (Marres, 2018, p. 454) compared to scientific facts. The latter are treated as relatively more stable in science itself once uncertainties have been resolved and controversies have been settled according to the internal logics of science. Public facts are publicly contested and arrived at, even where they rest on or concern scientific matters and come to overlap with scientific facts. Our contention is that what citizens in many Western democracies consider to be legitimate public facts is changing, and performances of truth-telling by a variety of political actors respond to this. Research shows, for instance, a disconnect between voters' perceived accuracy of a politician's claims and support for that politician (Swire et al., 2017) in contexts where groups of voters feel disenfranchised by the political system (Hahl et al., 2018), such as the UK and the US (Hansard Society, 2019, p. 13; Wike & Schumacher, 2020, p. 19).

We therefore approach truth claims as communicatively performed (Alexander, 2006) and aimed at connecting with or persuading an audience of their veracity in ways that often rely on non-objective forms of truth. This brings us to the second problem with post-truth, namely the narrow conception of truth as necessarily objectively given. Our concern is not with what truth *is* (and whether there is more or less of it to be found in current politics) and more with what political actors in the broadest sense *present* as truth-apt utterances, that is, with truth claims as communicatively performed. Our focus is on these performances by political actors, rather than the mediation and reception of claims. It is this performance that is currently brought into question in the minds of the public and being politicized, and it is this performance that is moving away from objective claims to truth, as Lasser and colleagues show is the case in the US (2023). In other words, we observe a shift in the foundations of what constitutes legitimate truth-telling in the performance of public facts. Such performances seek to convince the audience of the veracity of the claim, persuade them of a certain state of reality, or establish common ground through a collective process of meaning-making that involves shared symbols and narratives, not just evidence in the scientific sense. For example, Nigel Farage's frequent depictions with a pint of beer during the U.K. referendum campaign to leave the EU established his authority to truth through a performance of inhabiting British values rather than by providing scientific evidence of any threat to them.

Furthermore, the concept of performativity implies that it is not only important *what* claim is made (e.g., describing a problem that is then to be solved politically), but *that* and *how* it is made. The fact that, and the way in which, the act of truth-telling is performed is part of the message (e.g., that the communicator *dares* to speak the truth or that they are *capable* of explaining what is the matter). Similarly, we are interested in *performances* of authenticity rather than what or who is authentic according to our own judgment. Political leaders may present themselves as authentic persons, and audiences may or may not accept those performances as truly authentic, similarly to Weber's concept of charisma as an ascribed, not inherent property (see Weber (1922, p. 140), and Peterson (2005) on authenticity as socially constructed).

As to the third problem with the diagnosis of post-truth—the role of relativism—the reduction of "postmodernism" to a more or less unitary relativist movement that has supposedly brought about the current state of post-truth neglects the complexity of struggles in science, politics, and the media (Sismondo, 2017; Vogelmann, 2022, p. 316–328). Furthermore, postmodernism or poststructuralism have very restricted immediate impact on the present relationship between truth and politics if they are understood as specific scholarly movements instead of using them in such catch-all terms to capture any kind of supposed relativism (Rosenfeld, 2019, p. 143–146).

An era of epistemic contestation

In contrast to the diagnosis of relativism, we argue that subjective forms of truth are not new. Personal experience and

felt conviction have been the basis of truth claims as long as, if not longer than, suppositions about objectivity. Moreover, politics has always been about a mix of claims: of truth, moral rightness, and aesthetics, among others. Truth, therefore, occupies a specific role in politics and, as Hannah Arendt asserted more than half a century ago, an uncomfortable one that is often politicized (Arendt, 1967; but see Beiner, 2008, for a critical assessment). This process of politicization more than ever occupies public debate—which political camp is in possession of the truth, who can be accused of lying or manipulating truth, and whether, when, and what type of truth actually matters. Two examples of this trend are Donald Trump's then-presidential spokesperson Kellyanne Conway's phrase "alternative facts" and the ensuing cacophonic eruption, and the ongoing clamor over the claims of some transgender people that only they can know the truth of their experience and hence of what knowledge should dictate policy on the area. In very different ways, these debates are both signs of a trend of increased politicization and contestation over the nature of truth and its role in politics.

From this perspective, what is changing differs from the much-debated relativism diagnosis summarized above. Rather, we propose that we are currently observing a shift from one type of truth claims as dominant in political truth-telling performances to a state of normatively ambivalent contestation between different types of truth claims. Our central supposition is that authenticity plays a special role in this contestation since it has in recent decades become a scarce political commodity, and one that has simultaneously become a democratic value for many citizens (Valgarðsson et al., 2021). One shift in many politicians' performances of public facts is therefore from a reliance on expertise, scientific evidence and logical reasoning (see e.g., Eyal, 2019, on the crisis of expertise) to authenticity as the primary source of epistemic legitimacy, as exemplified by Boris Johnson's political narrative and style and the appeal of Donald Trump's truth claims (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022; Montgomery, 2017), despite supporters' knowledge that they are lies (Hahl et al., 2018).

Rather than seeing the current epistemic contestation as an effect of the perhaps misguided reception of a supposedly unitary scholarly paradigm of postmodernism, we suppose a more long-term and structural change over many decades to be at the root of this historical development. Educational expansion and economic prosperity have led to a stronger emphasis on an anti-authoritarian, socially liberal, post-materialist society with values of self-fulfillment (see, for example, Inglehart, 1977, and the ensuing literature and discussion). Emancipatory movements have reclaimed the recognition of identities of different social groups (Fraser, 1995). These developments have led to more powerful challenges against epistemic and political authorities by a larger part of the population. Demands for more participation even take the form of a "rebellion of the citizens" across different fields (Gerhards, 2001, dates the beginning of this process to the 1960s). Both left- and right-wing opposition has emerged against policies that have been presented as having no alternatives (Norris and Inglehart, 2018). Politicians are criticized for what is seen as technocratic rhetoric that does not acknowledge the perspectives of those affected by policy. They are also attacked for their apparent insincerity in media-oriented, staged performances designed to avoid scrutiny of their agendas (Kefford et al., 2021). In the view of different social groups, the promises of democracy and participation remain unfulfilled.

We suggest that the impetus of these multiple drives toward democratization and recognition of individual perspectives in the broadest sense (whether in normatively desirable forms or other, more problematic understandings) are at the root of a shift towards increased epistemic contestation where value is increasingly attributed to claims that exhibit different understandings of authenticity. On the left and right, certain milieus feel that they have the right to better representation and/or to have their individual experiences validated. They turn against what they see as non-responsive, overreaching, technocratic, or manipulative elites, and/or rigid institutional structures (as reflected in the variety of theses of post-democracy or post-politics and repoliticization; see, for example, Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2020, for a critical discussion).

Certain (if far from all) political leaders have responded to this call for more authenticity, using their own experiences, personalities, and communicative styles, or the experiences of those they claim to represent, as legitimation for political truth claims. In addition to old and new age spiritual and religious doctrines that promise to enable people to access their inner truth or sense a deeper truth about the world, politicians and citizens have turned to alternatives to the liberal model of democracy that value authenticity in different forms more explicitly. With these different sources of epistemic contestation, nuanced understandings of authenticity, and diverse political responses to a desire for authenticity, we cannot simply claim that authenticity in one single form has replaced objective truth in politics. Instead, we observe an increasing competition between different types or elements of claims that do not only oppose elites with ordinary citizens but also different social groups and different factions of elites. Citizens are not simply at odds with experts and political elites over objective truth. Instead, depending on the issue or public figure in question, different speakers claiming expertise or political leadership and different social milieus oppose each other, ascribing or denying authority, sincerity, charisma etc. Rightwing populism and deliberative democracy are both contributing in very different ways to this process of change by offering citizens means of negotiating and channeling the lack of recognition they experience in public life.

With respect to causes of this shift, we therefore agree with the general impression that (right-wing) populist communication has contributed prominently to it. However, our argument adopts more nuanced distinctions than a populism–anti-populism position-taking, for authenticity is also deployed by other forms of politics than populism. In deliberative forms of democracy, diversity in participants is valued because they can speak authentically to the different personal experiences they bring to the debate. Indeed, deliberation and populism are both hailed, sometimes for very different reasons, as responses to perceived crises of democracy (see, for example, Curato et al., (2022) on deliberation; and Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, (2019) on populism) (and in the case of populist communication, also as constructing such crisis; see Moffitt, 2016). They are therefore particularly well suited to illustrate a potential shift in the performance of claims of truth and authenticity.

Building on the above critique of the post-truth diagnosis, we wish to imbue it with more nuance so as to inform an equally nuanced approach to its causes and remedies. Our

primary concern in this article is to offer a diagnostic tool that can aid this project, starting with a categorization of truth claims and their elements.

Truth claims and their elements

Truth claims can be demarcated from other claims according to their content. Habermas's (1987) theory of communicative action is helpful in distinguishing between claims of normative rightness (for example that people should be able to freely choose their place of residence), evaluative claims (for example that this street would look nicer with more trees), claims of truthfulness (i.e., claims that one actually believes what one says), and truth claims proper. We use this distinction merely to delineate the category of truth claims externally (but unlike Habermas, include claims of truthfulness in the broader category of truth claims, see below). Below we break this notion of truth claims into subcategories. We include in our treatment claims not only about what is the case but also what could be the case and what must necessarily be the case. We therefore approach truth claims as performances of the actual, the necessary and the possible.

As indicated above, many analyses of truth claims in politics and the public sphere, in particular in the recent wave of research on mis- and disinformation, adopt an understanding of truth claims that focuses on scientific facts. In such research, truth claims are understood as statements of facts about the external world and a dichotomous scheme of evaluation (true/false) is often adopted. More nuanced approaches appreciate the variability of truth value, for instance according to the attainability and fluidity of knowledge and evidence through professionally established modes of scientific research and evaluation standards such as peer review (Krause et al., 2022; Oreskes, 2019). However, in performances and discussions of truth claims in the public sphere (including by political actors), public facts and their grounds of contestation rarely comply with these criteria. Instead, citizens often scrutinize performances, for instance for the performer's truthfulness, certainty and authority. They ask, for example, is this politician's claim that their economic policy benefits low-income households motivated by opportunism or sincere beliefs (*truthfulness*)? Or how sure does this doctor on television appear to be that vaccines are safe even if (as some citizens see it) experts are divided (*certainty*)? Or can this young climate activist who has not worked a single day in their life really speak to how ordinary citizens can reasonably get to their workplace (*authority*)? Truth claims in the public sphere are therefore often different in character from scientific facts and include claims based on personal experience, feelings and a vaguely defined common sense.

When public facts are approached in scholarship with operational definitions derived from scientific facts, we lose consideration of their public epistemological foundations, and we miss the ability to analyze the structure of truth claims, their social function and communicative constructedness. Given our concern with performances of public facts, we thus include claims based on different types of truth rather than narrowing our remit to scientific forms of truth. In the following we delineate the broader range of truth claims that can be found in public debates:

Types of truth claims

Within the category of truth claims, we broaden our scope beyond objective truth claims in the narrow sense that describe external reality and include other forms of truth that, through successful performances of claims, lead audiences to accept them as truth.[2]

The category of claims of *objective truth* includes descriptions of the state of reality, causal explanations and prognoses on the external world that claim to be, in principle, attainable and verifiable independently of individual standpoints. These forms of objective truth can be further broken down, for instance according to whether reality is described through statistical representation or journalistic reports. Objective truth relies on professional norms and codes of conduct, such as those prescribed by law, journalism and positivist (social) science. We reiterate that political truth claims are social performances that seek to convince audiences of their truth value. Political claims to objectivity, for example, often cannot boast absolute veracity but should be seen as rhetorical constructions (Lawson, 2023) involving selective presentation that may serve strategic purposes and can be intersubjectively contested.

Other forms of truth that form the basis of political truth claims include *experiential truth*, which, like objective truth, can manifest in reports of what really happened. However, the representation of reality offered in experiential truth claims is not representative of a broader population, nor is it an aggregate of multiple experiences or perspectives. For example, one person's experience of discrimination may not apply to everyone, even where it points to a broader problem. Knowledge is derived from individual experience, valued as such, and in the borderline case, fundamentally unattainable by others in the same way as the original knower. Standpoint theory, for instance in the case of feminism, approaches truth as based on knowledge that cannot be shared because it needs to be experienced by a subjugated group, while the ideology of neoliberalism sees knowledge as dispersed across society and mobilized by market forces but not easily reproducible by, or even conveyable to, others (Pils and Schoenegger, 2021).

Claims of *rational truth* are presented as logically deducted instead of being empirically verifiable (Arendt, 1967). However, whether something is presented and accepted as logically true in political debates does not necessarily have to depend on normative rules of reasoning.

Claims about *inner states* (e.g., that one is angry about a new law) have a truth value in a broader sense; for instance, one can claim or deny that someone expresses their own or others' "true" needs or convictions. Such claims are highly prevalent in modern politics and political contestations over truth. For example, Boris Johnson's claims in late 2021 and early 2022 that he did not conceive of the social gatherings of his department during COVID-19 lockdowns as "parties" is a claim about his inner state (his conception of "social gatherings") intended to rebut objective truth claims about the events actually taking place.

Other types of truth than the above can be distinguished but are less salient in political truth claims and in the current epistemological shift that is occurring in political communication. We mention here as an example *ritual truth*, which is socially constructed and perpetuated through the collective performance of norms and rituals (Durkheim, 1915, bk. II, chp 5).

Elements of truth claims

Below we detail the elements that make up performances of each of the above types of truth claim. Table 1 maps out the form that each element can take in different types of truth claim.

Modality and subjective commitment

As indicated above, modality captures the difference between actual (what is), necessary (what necessarily must be), and possible (what could be) states of affairs in truth claims. Analytically, this enables dissection of strategically deployed modality (e.g., someone claiming that it is *impossible* to supply a country electricity solely through renewable energy sources) and the criteria applied to actuality, necessity and possibility. In addition to performances of modality that denote the status of a claim with regard to the world(s) it refers to, subjective commitment indicates the claim-maker's personal confidence in their truth claim. Different types of truth claim can gain legitimacy from high or low levels of professed certainty, from being sure and confident to stipulating certain conditions only under which one is tentatively recognizing the claim's veracity.

Reasons to believe

Claimants often present audiences with reasons to believe their truth claims to make them convincing. Reasons to believe can either relate to the claim itself (*evidence*) or to the identity of the claimant or of their personal or institutional source (*authority*). Different audiences may emphasize evidence or authority respectively (or both), and political claim makers play into these preferences. *Evidence* is usually deemed acceptable according to the type of truth claim, e.g., scientific evidence may substantiate objective claims; personal testimony can evidence experiential claims. *Authority* can also be ascribed to institutional sources and actors other than the claimant. However, one of the most effective forms of authority stems from the *personal* qualities of the claimant and also depends on the type of truth claim. It includes expertise, intellectual integrity, social standing, group membership, moral rectitude, etc.

Ways of knowing

The content of a political truth claim can be *given* in a range of different ways. "Objective" truth claims tend to be based on perception (i.e., an objective external reality that can be perceived through the senses, or at least indirectly through traces or means of measurement). Rational truth relies on logical deduction. Other forms of truth can be constituted by testimony, memory, intuition, induction, introspection, practice (e.g., through the repetitive performance of rituals or through artistic practice), and so on.

Communicative authenticity

For a political truth claim to be perceived as valid and as a legitimate contribution to a public discussion, it is expected to follow a range of maxims (Grice, 1975), such as being relevant and informative. Most importantly in our context, claims must display communicative authenticity; i.e., the claimant must perform their belief in the truthfulness of the claim they make (below we discuss other variants of authenticity that are only relevant to specific types of truth claims and/or forms of politics). Logically speaking, a claim can be true in substance without the claimant believing it. However, the appearance of believing one's own claim is a prerequisite for a successful performance of political truth claims, except

Table 1. Typical elements of different types of truth claims

	Objective truth	Experiential truth	Rational truth	Inner truth
Ways of knowing	Sense perception, observation or interviewing; measurement; methods of experimentation and positivist science	Individual experience mediated by memory	Logical deduction	Introspection or intuition.
Modality and subjective commitment	The actual and the possible (through predictive modelling); uncertainty must be acknowledged according to professional norms; unprofessed uncertainty can delegitimize.	The actual; commitment/certainty is inherent in the claimant's apparent trust in their own perception and memory.	The necessary; high level of certainty.	The actual, necessary and possible; high level of commitment/certainty (as these states of affairs derive from inner conviction); "deep" inner truth may also be hidden and thus uncertain.
Reasons to believe	*Evidence:* statistics and other quantitative data, unbiased journalistic reporting. *Authority:* expertise, status and intellectual/professional integrity.	*Evidence:* personal testimony. *Authority:* group membership, social standing (high or low) or distinct personal circumstances.	*Evidence:* rational argumentation. *Authority:* expertise, status and/or cognitive ability.	*Evidence:* personal testimony, emotional performance. *Authority:* group membership, personal rectitude, being in touch with oneself.
Communicative authenticity	Epistemic norms, not communicative authenticity, determine veracity but demand that the communication of fact be unbiased by subjective judgments or beliefs.	Claim-makers must give an accurate account of their experiences as they genuinely recollect them.	Logically correct deduction, not communicative authenticity, determine veracity but demands that communication of rational truth be unbiased by personal beliefs and not succumb to logical fallacy.	Accurate and honest communication of claimants' identity, feelings or conscience to the audience enables audience understanding.

in contexts of sarcasm and irony where this maxim is purposely inverted.

The role of authenticity in truth claims and political communication

We argued above that the role of authenticity in legitimizing and evaluating political truth claims is increasing and is increasingly contested. Differentiating between different understandings of authenticity enables a more nuanced analysis of these processes. We therefore delineate three categories of authenticity that map onto the entities involved in the communication of truth claims—the object of a claim, the claimant, and the performance of the claim—and illustrate how these forms of authenticity function in relation to the types of truth and their elements outlined above:

1) **Original authenticity:** This understanding of authenticity refers to the construction of an *object* as being in its original state or its identity as an original with a certain provenience (Peterson, 2005). The object may also be an immaterial entity, a practice or idea that is transmitted in an uncorrupted fashion. For example, we speak of an authentic painting by Picasso, authentic (as opposed to, e.g., commercialized) folk music, or the authentic way of life in rural communities. Usually, originally authentic objects are valued in politics: authentic messages can be trusted; authentic culture is considered worth subsidizing or defending against foreign influence. A claim of original authenticity is often a very specific subtype of an objective or experiential truth claim (together with an evaluative component) in that it proposes that something has not been altered in an undesirable way, such as claims about what is a true national tradition. Original authenticity is established by expert investigation or personal experience in practices of authentication (Peterson, 2005). Original authenticity can also for example be attached to evidence in objective truth claims (e.g., uncompromised data), or it can relate to ways of knowing (e.g., unbiased transmission of knowledge) in a variety of types of truth claims.
2) **Personal authenticity:** Authenticity can be an attribute of a *person* who is true to themselves. In its *essential* form, personal authenticity can account for the realization of a presumed pre-existing essence that has awaited its full development, such as the full flourishing of womanhood after an experience of suppression. In its *existential* form, it appertains to the independent and courageous act of a person that creates part of their identity or purpose in life, such as someone being a self-made man. Both the essential and existential understandings are often contrasted to social influences, constraints, institutions and alienation (on these different understandings see, e.g., Ferrara, 2009, Noetzel 1999; Trilling 1971; Turner 1976). Such understandings therefore align with performances of charismatic political leadership and disruptive forms of politics. Personal authenticity is often evoked in particularly emphatic, deep claims of inner truth that involve essential or existential aspects of the claimant's identity. Personal authenticity can also be presented as a reason to believe other types of claims. For example, claims about the external world can be accepted as valid (sometimes even at the expense of literal truth) due to the claimant's identity as a genuinely ordinary person or honorable professional or as someone with particular intuitive insights.
3) **Communicative authenticity:** Authenticity can also be seen as an attribute of a *communicative act*. The performance of the claim is an expression of certain aspects of the claimant's inner self, personality or identity or some of their true beliefs or experiences. As indicated above, communicative authenticity as a maxim is an element of any performed truth claim. However, it can also—and often is in modern politics—be the *subject* of inner truth claims, for example in the form of emphatic claims of being true to oneself or to one's beliefs, often performed through demonstrative confidence or emotional expressivity (McCarthy, 2016). Such claims can, however, also include the performance of sincere doubt which may make the communicator all the more credible. As a reason to believe, (consistent and demonstrative) communicative authenticity can replace other forms of evidence that may not be available (such as in the case of inner truths) or that are not easily communicable to lay audiences (such as in the case of objective truth or complex rational truths).

Performances of authenticity thus play a part in different types and elements of truth claims. What these seemingly disparate subtypes and elements of truth claims have in common, and what makes claims of authenticity attractive for many, is that they normatively emphasize the seemingly immediate and unmediated, and the genuinely personal or traditional over the institutionally, technically or economically mediated, the tactical and calculated, the biased, cynical or technocratic. While this needs empirical verification, we suggest that we are currently witnessing an increase in claims that rely on different types of authenticity at the expense of other traditional types and elements of truth claims.

As indicated above, certain forms of authenticity have always played a role in politics. Authentic ways of living and knowing have formed the foundation of earlier calls for social and cultural renewal in the Western world, such as the romantic, life reform, and counter-cultural movements, and of the left-alternative milieu (Reichardt, 2008; Tripold, 2012). Although understandings of democracy and authenticity vary over time and with different schools of thought, most broadly assume citizens and the popular will to be authentic in some form or another (Noetzel, 1999). For example, the popular will should not arise through falsification, coercion or manipulation as this would make it inauthentic in the *original* sense of being recorded and transmitted correctly. This would render citizens inauthentic in the *personal* sense of not being true to their freely formed preferences or essential identity. Some understandings of democracy also hold that the popular will cannot be a mere aggregation of individual interests expressed without any regard for the common good (Noetzel, 1999). This would similarly compromise citizens' *personal* authenticity because aggregation is a form of distortion, and it would fail to realize the authentic (*original*) essence of democracy. However, liberal and proceduralist schools of thought have emphasized that any attempt to postulate a true popular will and its authentic representation is confronted with irreducible pluralism (Rawls, 1993) and will turn into illiberalism (Saffon & Urbinati, 2013). Thus, different

understandings of democracy imply or deny certain understandings of authenticity.

The recent rise of populism alongside the turn toward more participatory and deliberative forms of politics are indicators of an increased competition among authenticity and other types and elements of claims. Both populism and deliberative democracy pose challenges to a more traditional idea of liberal democracy that idealizes scientific expertise and objective media reports as its factual basis and that defines democracy mostly as the aggregation of preferences at the expense of certain forms of authenticity. While both populist and deliberative truth claims champion authenticity, they do so in different ways. Below, we discuss the increased role of authenticity with the examples of populist and deliberative politics and discuss the often radically different forms of, and functions they assign to, claims of truth and authenticity. We ask the following three questions of scholarship on populism and deliberation: What role do epistemic elites play in the theory and practice of populist communication/deliberation? Does populism/deliberation valorize specific types of truth? What role does authenticity play in populist/deliberative truth-telling? With these questions, we aim to tease out the epistemic dimension from existing theory and begin to patch together a more coherent theoretical picture from empirical findings where, as in the case of rightwing populism, we do not yet have a comprehensive account of its "political theory."

Truth and authenticity in populist politics

Populist communicative practices challenge not only the elite's political power but also their epistemic power. While populism is consistently antagonistic to what it presents as hegemonic and illegitimate forms of truth-telling, it does not display a ubiquitous and consistent conception of truth and its role in democratic practice. Yet the non-pluralist and illiberal forms of populism that are currently prevalent in the West share some important tendencies. We appreciate that other populisms, especially some leftwing ones, are committed to agonistic contestation over truth claims. However, we focus on the narrower community of rightwing illiberal populisms that tend toward more exclusionary uses of truth in democratic life. We do so because their performances of truth-telling are more clearly distinct from our other example of deliberative politics and therefore better illustrates our point that different politics use distinct forms of authenticity on the basis of their normative conceptions of democracy. In this context we conceive of populism as a communicative process that expresses and constructs a worldview that favors an authentic silent majority opposed to a corrupt or conspiring elite, that is performed through morally infused claims to political representation, and that often cooccurs with social conservatism, nationalism and/or nativism (from here on referred to by the shorthand "rightwing populism" or simply "populism") (De Vreese et al., 2018; Moffitt, 2016; Sorensen, 2021; Stavrakakis et al., 2017). We tease out tendencies in populist truth-telling by asking the above three questions of populism theory and empirical studies.

First, what role do epistemic elites play in the theory and practice of populist communication? The antagonism between the people and the elite that is at the core of populism is often argued to extend to epistemic elites in the form of officially sanctioned truth-tellers. This takes the form of anti-media and anti-science populism (see e.g., Mede and Schäfer, 2020). Bellolio (2022) conceptualizes three populist objections to science. Populism's moral distrust of elites sees scientists purposively work against the interests of the people and as being in cahoots with the political elite. Populists' democratic objection lies in the unelected nature of scientists that deprive the people of sovereignty. Finally, in an epistemic objection, populists evoke the chasm between folk wisdom and—to most citizens—unreachable scientific methods of arriving at truth. Anti-media populism is similarly characterized by narratives about collusion between the media and the political elite (Fawzi, 2020) and used to legitimize the populist's alternative representation of reality. Accusations of "fake news" and bias against mainstream media and scientists, such as then-President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro's repeated attacks on journalists and scientists, therefore, appear to undermine the objectivity of specific individuals and institutions and their more general adherence to professional standards rather than to repudiate *objective types* of truth-telling per se. In both cases, we need to question whether populism is actually committed to particular knowledge forms or a consistent populist epistemology (Bellolio, 2022) or rather engages in a more strategic or ideology-driven mix-and-match preference for certain forms of truth that enable it to undermine a given context-specific epistemic authority.

This leads us to our second question of whether populism valorizes specific types of truth as we have distinguished them above. Theoretically, ideological approaches to populism highlight a commitment to common sense (Betz, 1994). This can take the form of "banal epistemic populism" (Krämer, 2021, p. 2), which favors types of truth accessible to ordinary people. Empirical studies of media populism, such as Saurette and Gunster's (2011) analysis of talk radio and Harsin's (2018) study of "emo-truth" in a French rightwing populist movement, demonstrate a commitment to *experiential truth* based on personal experience and *inner truth* based on emotional intensity, both of which populists can rhetorically attribute to "common sense" (Rosenfeld, 2011).

However, the empirical picture is uneven. Ylä-Anttila (2018) finds that both rightwing populist media outlets and citizens also valorize *objective truth*. In these cases, populists turn the tables and ascribe bias and collusion to those scientists and media that non-populists would see as objective and instead endorse those that suit the given populist and conservative narrative. Krämer distinguishes this "conservative scientism" from banal epistemic populism as it attacks epistemic elites on the basis of their perceived ideological misrepresentation of reality rather than in the name of the people (2021, p. 4). Conspiracy theorists rely on a third form of truth, a *pseudo-rational truth* that suggests that "everything is connected" (Harambam and Aupers, 2021). Conspiracy theory movements such as QAnon's calls to "do your own research" and "think for yourself" share populism's Manichean division between an evil elite and good people and are directed against political as well as epistemic authorities. With such inconsistent commitments to different types of truth, what are the tendencies in populism's epistemic preferences?

We address this through our third question, does authenticity play a special role in populist truth-telling? An important aspect of populism's anti-elitism pertains to the elite's lack of *communicative authenticity* in their political communication (Kefford et al., 2021). Accusations of spin and political strategizing—the elite saying what needs to be said to

achieve certain political ends and deceiving the people to serve their own interests—drive much of populism's anti-elitist narrative. Yet the exposition and denunciation of the elite's lack of communicative authenticity is not matched by populists' own performances of communicative authenticity. Their truth claims are frequently untrue in respect of their factual value, lies are knowingly told, and audiences and followers are often aware of this (Hahl et al., 2018, p. 3).

We argue that concerns with communicative authenticity and veracity are replaced by a second type of authenticity—the *personal authenticity* of the populist leader—which is attributed greater value in populist truth claims. Truth claims legitimized through personal authenticity are often performed through emotive display (McCarthy, 2016). They therefore lend themselves to subjective types of truth, such as claims to *inner truth*. Both performances of inner truth and emotion—especially in combination—can create bonds of intimacy that make the personal political (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 109). The populist leader's display of personal authenticity mediates a greater truth about politics through a meta-political narrative that connects to followers' own experiential truth and thereby renders veracity and communicative authenticity irrelevant in the populist leader. This suggests that authenticity functions not only as a personal quality in populist truth-telling but as a social bond between leaders and followers. It adopts a "reality-shaping function" (Kennedy and Kolb, 2016, p. 319) in which followers recognize themselves. Authenticity therefore also plays a key role in the populist construction of "the people" and their identity. For example, in the 2017 French presidential elections, Marine Le Pen made a big point of meeting ordinary people in a market, presenting herself as a single mother of three who understands the concerns of local people, at the same time as her rival, Emanuel Macron, was pictured in an exclusive restaurant.

Overall, our discussion of populist truth-telling suggests that a populist conception of democracy is not necessarily based on commitments to specific types of truth but rather to their social function. First, rightwing populism usually embraces an absolutist rather than a relativist notion of truth, even where this resides in subjective types of truth such as experiential and inner truth. In some cases, this necessarily involves mixing and matching of truth claim elements among different types of truth that do not necessarily "belong together" from a normative perspective. For example, populists may generalize to a broader population based on a subjective type of truth such as inner truth, as populist leaders do when they claim to inherently know the (singular) will of the people through common sense. Or they may offer personal testimony as anecdotal evidence to substantiate a supposedly general objective truth claim. Such normatively perverted truth claims become rhetorical devices in populist narratives about the illegitimacy of (epistemic) elites. Second, the criteria for determining the validity of truth claims and the ways of knowing on which they are based are used to build epistemic communities (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, pp. 370–371), for instance in the case of conspiracy theorists. This suggests that populist constructions of "the people" might have an epistemic dimension whereby those who are "in the know" are delineated through the communal acceptance and performance of a specific set of epistemic rules performed through personal authenticity.

Truth and authenticity in deliberative politics

Deliberative conceptions of democracy do not consider truth a subordinate aspect of politics or a pre-political factual basis for it. Rather, they emphasize the "epistemic function" of democracy, the "truth-tracking potential of political deliberation" (Habermas, 2006, p. 413), and the emergent nature of truth through dialogic interaction (Kim and Kim, 2008, p. 57; Stewart et al., 2003, p. 35). However, even the so-called epistemic school in the theory of deliberative democracy (see Min & Wong, 2018, for an overview) does not exclusively focus on factual truth but on political problems more broadly. This includes not only factual claims in the narrow sense, but the best solutions to all kinds of problems, including normative questions, and thereby ascribes to an even broader notion of truth than we have adopted here. However, we will limit ourselves to the role of truth claims in the sense outlined above—excluding normative and other claims that are not presented as factual—in deliberative politics.

To deliberative theorists, democracy is more than majority rule and the aggregation of interests, even if restricted by personal liberties and minority rights. It is based on the collective search for rational consensus—or at least on widely acceptable compromise, critical scrutiny of claims and policies, or votes that are informed by debate. Different approaches demand more or less strict rules for what counts as acceptable and valuable contributions to the deliberative process (see Bächtiger et al., 2010).

Among the different claims that all participants in such discourses are allowed to make are truth claims in the sense we have outlined that can then be scrutinized and substantiated by different forms of evidence and reasoning. Thus, truth is not seen as absolute (as it is in, for example, Arendt's objective and rational conceptions of truth; 1967) as this would ultimately render it anti-pluralist and anti-political (Landemore, 2017) because it is not subject to contestation. We now put our three questions to deliberative theory to ascertain the role that authenticity plays in deliberation.

First, what role do epistemic elites play in the theory and practice of deliberation? In deliberative theory, epistemic elites are primarily appreciated for and evaluated on the basis of their expertise. Deliberation-oriented citizens and public speakers insist that (purported) expertise not be instrumentalized. Their knowledge must be used sincerely in deliberation. In other words, experts must display *communicative authenticity*. However, the problem with expertise in democracy runs deeper if its role is not reduced to providing a widely accepted, pre-political factual basis for political debates and decisions. Expertise requires legitimation because relying on it as a non-expert means accepting the validity of claims on trust. Accepting such authority is to accept epistemic inequality (Moore, 2017, p. 68). Thus, deliberative democracy needs procedures to legitimize and scrutinize epistemic authority and identify communicatively authentic expertise. Systemic deliberative theorists argue that expertise is necessary and can be scrutinized in a network of deliberative bodies and public spheres (Moore, 2017) that are permeable to the perspectives of a wide range of social groups and movements. Deliberative practitioners and citizens may also trust the legitimacy conferred by internal deliberations in expert institutions. Or they may be forced to rely on heuristic criteria such as credentials (*authority*) or perceived ideological biases to

assess expertise. Discomfort with epistemic inequality may draw some citizens to a meta-discourse about the epistemic division of labor and to subaltern public spheres and movements that contest epistemic authority (Moore, 2017), such as the forms of populism discussed above.

The second question is whether deliberative theory valorizes specific types of truth. Contrary to the democratic ideal of political equality, knowledge and epistemic authority are not distributed equally in society (Turner, 2001). Expertise can be seen as either superior or inferior to the knowledge of the broader population, creating a seeming tension between expertocracy and an (epistemic) populism that champions common sense above expertise (Rosenfeld, 2019; Turner, 2001). Deliberative theorists have offered different answers to this problem. Proponents of an epistemic approach are concerned with demonstrating the superiority of diversity in deliberative bodies over expertocracy (Benson, 2021). The emphasis on diversity of experience—and therefore a reliance on *experiential truth* in addition to the rational or objective forms of truth usually expounded by experts—can be seen as part of a turn towards expressivity and authenticity in politics. It therefore relates to standpoint-specific *ways of knowing* where *communicative authenticity* is established by truthfully recounting individual experience.

However, the epistemic school, as opposed to approaches that emphasize participation over problem-solving, primarily sees diversity as a means to maximize the chance of the best option being proposed and identified in deliberation (Benson, 2021)—not as something that is valued for an expressive function and for its contribution to personal fulfillment (as in *personal authenticity*). In more proceduralist conceptions of deliberation, diverse experience also matters because everyone must be able to make proposals based on problems they experience, or accept proposals on the basis of arguments that convincingly address such experience (Habermas, 1983). The most convincing demands, proposals or critiques can come from unexpected actors, and deliberation therefore must not be restricted to perspectives that one might associate with a specific issue and group. Otherwise, actual inclusive deliberation could, in the most extreme case, simply be replaced by an inner monologue that "simulates" the dispute between different foreseeable, essentialized positions and arguments (Habermas, 1983). In that regard, *personal authenticity* is therefore valued, especially in the context of *inner truth* based on personal and subjective ways of knowing (for example of one's needs, on which demands can then be based) that are inaccessible to others but must, at the same time, be open to scrutiny.

The third question asks what role authenticity plays in deliberative truth-telling. The stricter conceptions of deliberative democracy see truthfulness (*communicative authenticity*) and the sincerely held intention to reach mutual understanding as some of the main preconditions for normatively acceptable contributions to deliberation (Bächtiger et al., 2010), irrespective of the type of truth claim. For example, Habermas delineates different types of biased and, in our sense, communicatively inauthentic claims (Habermas, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 446–467; 1995). One of his main concerns is the distinction between strategic communication and communication that is oriented towards mutual understanding. Strategic communicators only seek to further their own advantage without necessarily revealing their own convictions and are not prepared to change them based on others' arguments. If speakers strategically deceive others about their true beliefs and/or intentions, they lack the necessary commitment to the reciprocity of the debate and its aim of mutual understanding.

This short discussion of truth and authenticity in deliberative conceptions of democracy demonstrates that in most epistemic questions, deliberation, unlike populism, favors communicative authenticity and inclusivity above original or personal authenticity, in particular in an essentialist sense or in the context of broad representative claims. Truthfulness and expertise in politics can involve more than pre-political facts established by "authentic" experts because expertise can be open to scrutiny in complex institutional settings and public spheres. Deliberative democracy is a politics in which diversity of positions and experiences matter. However, participation and authentic self-expression are not necessarily ends in themselves. Instead, many deliberative theorists and practitioners see diverse experiences and authentic communication as a precondition for the epistemic function of democracy. Still, they would mostly agree that actual participation cannot simply be replaced by leaders claiming to be authentic or to authentically represent most, if not all, relevant social groups.

A shift towards authenticity?

Above, we have suggested that the epistemic contestation we are currently witnessing over political truth claims should be thought of as a gradual shift towards the perceived importance of authenticity in public life, rather than a loss of truth or common ground in a post-truth era. In the present concluding section, we will provide an outlook on how we conceptualize, explain and evaluate this shift based on our analytical framework.

While she also cites "postmodernism gone wrong," van Zoonen (2012) describes a more nuanced shift toward subjective forms of knowledge and justifications for truth claims pushed by right-wing populist and left-wing emancipatory movements. But she suspends normative judgment in contrast to often alarmist "post-truth" theses. We propose the similar, but not identical, diagnosis of a potentially increased and normatively ambivalent contestation between different types of truth claim and the role of authenticity in them. To enable empirical analysis, we offer our framework for the analysis of truth claims as a way of scrutinizing their composition and contestation. This includes a broadening of the forms of truth that are accepted as such in public discourse, a focus on the performance of claims rather than simply their content, the breakdown of claims into their component elements, and differentiation of the forms that authenticity can take in relation to different elements of truth claims, exemplified in different understandings of democracy.

The shift toward authenticity and the contestation associated with it is not per se normatively undesirable. Truth claims should compete and be open to communicative contestation in a democracy, also where this involves contestation between different types of truth and between contradictory factual accounts. Public facts, in all their diversity, have value, whether they rely on norms of objectivity or not. It is, however, more problematic when such contestation limits the functioning of the public sphere and political system. This is the case when knowledge contestation results in epistemic polarization—the exclusionary division between different types

of truth—as we see it in anti-science politics. Under such conditions, citizens are at risk of being misled by the perversion of different types of truth claims, such as logical fallacy, because the contestation and deliberation that would usually serve to scrutinize them are rendered illegitimate or dysfunctional. Rather than dismissing non-objective facts, we suggest we direct our theoretically informed and critical attention toward the anti-pluralist ideologies that contest well-founded knowledge or legitimate expertise and claim authenticity and truth exclusively for themselves, and toward the sometimes strategic confusion between types and elements of truth claims. We hope that our contribution will enable further scrutiny of these forms of contestation and their implications for democracy.

The most straightforward way of investigating shifts over time in what are considered legitimate public facts by communicators and audiences in democratic politics would be to deploy our framework to classify claims made in public forums such as parliamentary debates, media coverage, or social media posts and comments as well as older online forums over several decades, both interpreting them as thoroughly as possible and ultimately also quantifying the types and elements of claims. Likewise, the framework can be used to dissect public contestation of truth claims in similar datasets to detect the standards to which people hold political truth claims. We envision that such research would relate truth claims and their elements to understandings of politics and study the ways claims are contested and defended. Ultimately, this will also aid the project of delineating what constitutes legitimate public facts and forms of contestation.

Funding

Funding support for this article was provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/X011631/1)

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

NOTES

1 We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this example.
2 The list of types we have outlined here is not exhaustive—for instance, objective truth could be broken down into several subtypes of journalistic, experimental and statistical forms—but a heuristic that approximates the distinctions that arise in contestations over truth in public discourse.

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Communication Theory, 2024, 00, 1–12
https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtae013
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