Chapter 6

Disinformation and narratives

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In his 1996-book about "Hundred Years of the Popular Press", as the subtitle read, the journalist Matthew Engel quotes the Code of Practice, which *The Sun* had issued on 27 May 1993. The first item, Engel writes,

> was headed ACCURACY: 'The first and foremost requirement of journalists in the 1990s', it said, 'is accuracy. So if you are not 100 per cent sure of your facts don't write the story.' (Engels, 1996, p. 303)

Engel goes on to explain the significance of the instruction:

> The telling part of that sentence is the reference to the 1990s. Delete it from the instruction and you have what an innocent might take to be an immutable journalistic law, one that might have been endorsed by Northcliffe or C. P. Scott or R. D. Blumenfeld. By adding the three little words 'in the 1990s', *The Sun* was issuing a fashion note. Accuracy was in fashion, like shorter skirts and baggy tops. (ibid.)

The reason that accuracy was en vogue, Engel expands, lay in the "mess" (ibid.) in which British institutions from the monarchy to the Government found themselves. Press scandals contributed to the ill reputation of royals and politicians: "But the nature of stories like this is that they absolutely do have to be accurate", as otherwise journalists would risk "new laws to curb the press" (Engels, 1996, p. 304), or libel suits. Engel's remarks illuminate from a different perspective, and for the British context, what Tuchman observed in US newsrooms. It also shows that accuracy was a conscious and central concern of the tabloid press at the time when the Euromyths emerged. That is not to say that popular newspapers such as *The Sun* would shy away from lies to pursue their political leaning, and Engel indeed notes such "mendacity" in how *The Sun* wrote about Labour and in particular Neil Kinnock (p. 297). However, *The Sun*'s Code of Practice shows that inaccuracies and untruths were not easily accepted in tabloid newspapers in

the 1990s. To the contrary: in particular popular newspapers such as *The Sun* had a heightened

awareness of the risks involved when reporting falsehoods. The disinformation on which the

Euromyths embarked gains added significance before this background. The emphasis that *The*

*Sun* put on accuracy in their Code of Practice suggests that the untruths, which the Euromyths

promulgated, were not accidental. The disinformation they disseminated cannot be dismissed as

just something that comes with the territory of tabloid newspapers.


*6.1. Euromyths as disinformation*

The Euromyths spread a web of lies. They created a net of falsehoods, exaggerations and

distortions that left their audience with the vague notion of mostly trivial alleged facts and a

much more certain idea of the Eurosceptic myth the news stories created. In the debate about the

so-called "fake news", the Euromyths therefore occupy a unique space. They did not tell untruths

to establish one particular piece of false information in the mind of their audiences. They are

different from the kind of single fake stories that, individually, sparked conspiracy illusions, such

as the claim that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and therefore not eligible to be

president, or that the US president George Bush was behind the 9/11 attacks (Warner & Neville-

Shepard, 2014), different from made-up claims that fuelled conspiracy illusions and led to

criminal action, such as the infamous "Pizzagate" (Tandoc Jr., Lim, & Ling, 2018), also different

from allegations that were invented to discredit a specific group of people, such as the fabricated

news film of alleged violence, purportedly committed by immigrants in Sweden, a fabrication

that was followed by further fabrications, including the real interview of a fake expert (Bennett

& Livingston, 2018). The Euromyths, in contrast, told not one monstrous untruth, but a multitude

of mostly trivial lies. Their impact unfolded through accumulation and, crucially, through their

narrative structure as Barthesian myth, as shown in the previous two chapters.

Still, the Euromyths news stories can be considered as disinformation according to the

common definitions. They fit the influential definition of disinformation by Wardle and

Derakhshan (2017): "Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social

group, organization or country" (p. 20). The Euromyths tick all boxes: they made claims that

were false, their falsehoods were deliberately created, and they were intended to harm the

reputation of the EU. Bennet and Livingstone (2018) suggest a similar definition of

disinformation that equally applies to Euromyths news stories: "intentional falsehoods spread as

news stories […] to advance political goals" (p. 124). The European Commission in their

"Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation" similarly,

if slightly wider, defined: "Disinformation […] includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or

misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or

for profit" (European Commission, 2018, p. 3). Although Euromyths news stories did not publish

falsehoods for profit, both other criteria apply: the "false, inaccurate, or misleading information"

and the intention to cause harm to the reputation of EU and its institutions. Admittedly, the

classification of the Euromyths as untrue has to rely on the refutations which the European

Commission published on their Euromyths blog. However, as discussed in Chapter 2,  this can be

justified, not least because the blog follows internationally recognized principles of fact-

checking.

However, while Euromyths news stories can undoubtedly be classified as disinformation,

they differ from the clear and unambiguous outright fabrications such as the "birther", the

"truther", the "Pizzagate" stories, or the faked documentary of allegedly violent immigrants

mentioned above, Consequently, the refutations published on the Euromyths blog are often complicated. Out of 383 entries on the Euromyths blog (when removing duplications and including only entries that reference a media source as opposed to a claim made, for instance, by a politician), only little more than a fifths (83) of the rebuttals outrightly dismiss the assertions Euromyths news stories made: 31 times Euromyths blog entries use the word "wrong"; 18 times a claim is called "false", three times of with the added emphasis "completely false", twice "simply false", and once "utterly false"; the word "untrue" is used 17 times, emphasized three times as "wholly untrue", twice each as absolutely untrue" or "completely untrue", and once each as "entirely untrue" and "utterly untrue"; a further 14 times the Euromyths blog deems a claim to be "not the case"; three times it called the story "not true".[1] However, there are many more claims which the Euroblog rejects without using words such as "untrue" or "false". For instance, a news story, published in *The Sun* in February 2004, maintained that "[r]ed-faced women will have to hand in their clapped-out sex toys under a new EU law", because, allegedly, "[t]hey must take back old vibrators for recycling before they can buy a new one" (Wooding, 2004, February 2004). The Euromyths blog corrects: "There is no requirement for anyone to hand in old electrical goods before being allowed to purchase new ones, merely that they should be able to do so free of charge if they so wish." (Sex toys must be handed in, 2004, February 4). The 'vibrator'-story in the *Sun*, thus, wrongly reports as obligation what in fact is a right; the article also deliberately picks a lurid example to turn a story about recycling electrical goods into a story about sex. Using a quote by "Tory MP David Amess", the *Sun*-story also suggests that the alleged regulation "is yet another example of a crazy, ill-thought-out European directive" (Wooding, 2004, February 4), linking it to the intertextual chain that was discussed in the previous two chapters and thus to the Barthesian myth of European preposterousness. The

disinformation consists of the misrepresentation of an existing directive and the false claim that it exemplified "another […] crazy" European interference. It is used as a myth because its simplification allows it to be used as an "alibi" (Barthes, 2013 [1957], p. 239) for a Eurosceptic concept.

The disinformation spread by Euromyths news stories often amounts to a distortion, a wilful exaggeration, or misleading selection of facts. Indeed, the Euromyths blog uses the word "misleading" 44 times. In many cases, as discussed in Chapter 4, the disinformation simplifies a complex reality to fit an ideological purpose. Consequently, many refutations on the Euromyths blog are longer than the news stories they reject. For instance, the rebuttal of the 'birth certificate'-news story that was analysed in detail in the previous chapter, contains 635 words, whereas the news story itself only consist of 463 words. The (anger-evoking) simple claim upheld in the news story contends that the EU wants to force the EU flag onto British birth certificates – as well as on other official documents such as marriage, civil partnership and death certificates. The Euromyths blog corrects that "[t]hese assertions are wrong" (The EU is not forcing the UK to abolish or change national birth certificates, 2013, August 13). Instead, the blog entry explains:

> The core idea is that member states should recognise each other's basic documents – like birth and marriage certificates for individuals or legal entities for companies – without the need for special stamps or legalisation. Currently, such a special certification stamp – called an apostille – is needed to prove the authenticity of a document. Legalisation is required to certify that the signatures on it are genuine. The cost of these provisions – dating from an era when countries only trusted public documents when they were certified by another country's foreign ministry – is estimated at £284 million (€330 million) per year. Much of this cost falls on UK citizens who want to move, work, or buy property or set up businesses elsewhere in the EU.

So the Commission's proposal looks to abolish unnecessary, outdated and costly red tape. It is ironic therefore that the same newspapers which continuously lambast the EU for allegedly creating red tape seem to find the proposal so offensive. (ibid.)

The complexity of the real story would destroy the simple clarity of the Eurosceptic myth, as discussed in Chapter 4. The disinformation serves the purpose to articulate the myth of antagonistic British-European relations that serves a Eurosceptic ideology.

The disinformation of the Euromyths has its starting point with the real world. It does not fantasize as conspiracy stories such as the "birther", "truther", or "Pizzagate" fabrications do, or, more recently, made-up lies such as the conspiracy fantasy that Covid-19 was linked to 5G technology (BBC News, 2020, April 21). Instead, they distort existing regulations and produce a caricature that selects and exaggerates aspects and also invents new ones. The distortions follow a theme and employ a narrative structure that constructs the Eurosceptic myth of antagonistic British-European relations. They are therefore also different from the widespread type of Covid-19-misinformation found by Brennen, Simon, Howard, and Nielsen (2020), that "contained some true information, but the details were reformulated, selected, and re-contextualised in ways that made them false or misleading" (p. 4). As an example for this kind of disinformation (or, if indeed unintentional, misinformation) the authors cite a widely shared social media post that "offered medical advice from someone's uncle, combining both accurate and inaccurate information", claiming that the virus would be killed by heat of just 27 degree Celsius, when it is correct that heat kills the virus, but that the temperature needs to be considerable higher. Crucially, such untruths, although like the Euromyths they mix reality and falsehoods, they are also, in contrast to the Euromyths, random and do not accumulate to a mythical narrative in Barthes' sense.

A caricature is more difficult to dispute than a mere invention. That the Euromyths often took their starting point from existing directives, forced the European Commission to complicated refutations that could not compete with the simplifications employed by the Euromyths news stories. The rebuttal of the iconic 'bananas'-story provides a good example. It reads:

> Truth: Yes … and no. Curved bananas have not been banned. In fact, as with the supposed banning of curved cucumbers, the Commission regulation classifies bananas according to quality and size for the sake of easing the trade of bananas internationally. Quality standards are necessary in order that people buying and ordering bananas can rest assured that what they are getting lives up to their expectations. Individual EU member states have tended to have their own standards, as has the industry (whose standards are often very stringent). The European Commission was asked by the Council of Ministers and the industry to prepare a draft regulation laying down EU quality standards, and this has been the subject of consultation for some time now. As such it represents a consensus position. The following points should be noted however:
> 1) These are minimal rules, applied solely to green, unripe bananas, rather than those destined for the processing industry.
> 2) These standards should improve the quality of bananas produced within the Community. They should thus be able to command a higher price in the Community markets. This should also help reduce Community aid and therefore relieve pressure on the Community budget.
> 3) Far from being an interference in trade these norms should facilitate it throughout the Community. (Bananas and Brussels, 1994, September 21)

The longevity and impact of the 'bananas'-story is testimony to how ineffective the Commission's correction has been. It is also an indication that the disinformation of the Euromyths were immune to fact-checking (Henkel, 2018). As this book argues, the Euromyths embedded the disinformation in a narrative structure that created a Barthesian myth. Not the

untruths by themselves proved to be effective and in the end harmful, but the Eurosceptic myth which they generated.

European officials quickly realised that their rebuttals had no effect, as Sarah Helm, Brussels correspondent for *The Independent*, revealed: "Officials are clearly frustrated by their inability to respond effectively to the British right-wing press. 'We answer them but the trouble is our answers aren't funny,' said a senior Eurocrat." (Helm, 2011, October 23). Consequently, the Euromyths blog, at some stage, attempted to employ humour for their refutations. For instance, the blog tried to assume a jokey tone when rejecting the claim that a European directive, "sneaked into British law by Women's Minister Harriet Harman", made it an "offence, punishable by unlimited compensation orders, to allow customers to chat up bar staff" and that "employers will risk being sued if a bar worker or waitress complains of being called 'love' or 'darling', or if staff overhear customers telling sexist jokes" (Daily Mail, 2008, March 31). The correction on the Euromyths blog read:

> You're alright, love. EU rules on equal treatment don't get into pubs – it's up to the national authorities, sweetheart, to decide what you can and cannot say in your local. So not to worry, poppet. And we all know, hinny, there's plenty more nonsense where that one came from! (You're alright, love, the EU's not banning saying 'love' in pubs, 2008, March 31)

However, the Commission attempts at being funny were as fruitless as the serious rebuttals. Humour is only one contributing element in the Eurosceptic myth that the Euromyths news stories stories produced. The Commission's blog copied the jokey tone, but not the narrative structure that generated the Barthesian myth. Their language did not offer the ambiguity that

allows the myth to enter (Barthes, 2013 [1957], p. 243). It cannot be turned into an "alibi" (Barthes, 2013 [1957], p. 239) for an ideological message, as Chapter 4 demonstrated it to happen to Euromyths news stories. The refutations on the Euromyths blog rejected the factual inaccuracies but did not address the Barthesian myth created by the Euromyths. Thus, they remained ultimately ineffective.

### 6.1.1. Euromyths news stories as propaganda

The disinformation that the Euromyths news stories employ comes closest to what Tandoc et al. (2018), in their typology of scholarly definitions of "fake news", classify as "propaganda":

> propaganda is often based on facts, but includes bias that promotes a particular side or perspective. Such blending of news and commentary, while not unheard of in journalism, hides behind the appropriation of being an objective piece of news; however, the goal is often to persuade rather than to inform. (p. 147)

In contrast to propaganda, though, as defined by Tandoc at al., the Euromyths are only "based on facts" in so far they use facts to distort and report them selectively. Also, propaganda usually is associated with a political party, a political organization or a state actor, a, in Tandoc et al.'s words, "political entity" that has set out "to influence public perceptions" with the "overt purpose […] to benefit a public figure, organization or government" (ibid.). What links the Euromyths to propaganda is their narrative structure that, as we have seen in the two previous chapters, "promotes a particular side or perspective" and that is constructed "to persuade rather than to inform".

An extensive body of literature has researched the link between propaganda and media since the 1930s (cf. Freelon & Wells, 2020), which cannot be discussed in the context of this book. However, some traits can be pointed out that researchers found to be present in propaganda and that similarly appear in Euromyths news stories.

Khaldarova and Pantti (2016) analysed what they call "fake news" stories, covering the Ukraine crisis, on the Russian television channel Channel One "as a proxy for Russian strategic narratives" and compared them with the Kiev-based fact-checking project StopFake and its "debunkings of these stories as counter-narratives" (p. 893). Khaldarova and Pantti describe "strategic narratives" as "a tool for political actors to articulate a position on a specific issue and to shape perceptions and actions of domestic and international audiences" (ibid.). They find that

> the power of strategic narratives does not solely rest on their credibility. Strategic narratives carried by Channel One's journalistically dubious stories can be seen aiming, in the first place, to appeal to emotions and to "blur" the border between what is real and what is not: in other words to form a context in which other messages can be communicated with greater ease (p. 899).

Khaldarova and Pantti conclude that the "fabricated and bizarre news reports", which Channel One distributed, "can be understood as agitation propaganda that is designed to provoke an affective response from the public" (ibid.).

This concept of "strategic narratives" has some similarities with the Barthesian myth that the Euromyths news stories create. Both use emotions, both "'blur' the border between what is real and what is not" to promote "other messages". Also, the emotions that both employ "can be understood as agitation propaganda that is designed to provoke an affective response from the public". Khaldarova and Pantti contend "that false news stories may represent the distillation of

the Russian state narrative, having the purpose of supporting already-constructed identity claims, rather than reporting on events" (p. 893). Similarly, the false Euromyths news stories represent a Eurosceptic narrative that supported the British identity of a witty, defiant people (Henkel, 2020).

Furthermore, the Euromyths news stories also share some of the traits of the seminal seven propaganda devices that were identified by the journalist Clyde R. Miller in the 1930s (Sproule, 2001), in particular the name-calling (e.g., calling European officials "[p]o-faced penpushers" [Spanton, 2005, August 4] or "Europrats" [Allen, 1994, October 28]); the "[p]lain folk", where "[p]ersuaders and leaders present themselves as 'just plain folks' to establish an identity with ordinary Americans" (Sproule, 2001, p. 136), which has its equivalent in the emphasis of ordinary British people standing up against the alleged intrusion of the EU; and the use of "[d]istortions and omissions [that] throw up a smoke screen such that the audience forgets inconvenient information and embraces half truths" (ibid.), which is precisely what the Euromyths do when they report selectively and distort the EU regulations and directives in a way that constructs them as a danger for British sovereignty.

### 6.1.2. Disinformation, storytelling, and identity

The election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016, as well as the vote for Brexit in the United Kingdom just five months earlier, caused shock among the liberal elites in Western democracies. It spurned what Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan (2018) called "an indubitable cottage industry of opinion pieces, blogs, and articles" (p. 110) that put the concepts of "post-truth" and "fake news" firmly at the heart of the problem. The phenomenon dubbed "post-truth"

has also sparked an explosion of scholarly research. Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou, between 2015 and 2018, collected "more than 125 academic publications and over 350 news articles, opinion pieces and commentaries in prominent outlets written by public intellectuals, journalists and political actors" when they searched "on both Google Scholar and ten Western news outlets" for the terms "fake news", "post-truth", "post-factual", "alternative facts", and "post-factuality" (2020, p. 31). Usually, the point of departure for these studies and essays was the normative idea that the legitimacy of democracies requires a process of deliberation among its citizens that is facilitated through truthful communication (McKay & Tenove, 2020, p.2 ; Waisbord, 2018). Often, the focus lay on how untruths and lies were generated and distributed in the digital sphere (Miller & Vaccari, 2020; Tenove, 2020). The gross violation of factual correctness appeared to be the central problem, as Mejia et al. notice: "most […] seemed to agree that only this new concept of the post-truth could explain how a racist, misogynistic, neo-nationalist member of the economic elite could win a presidential election" (2018, p. 110).

More recently, though, the focus has shifted. As Shannon McGregor and Daniel Kreiss, reflecting on a Knight/Gallup survey that found four out of five Americans to be concerned that misinformation would influence the US presidential election, suggest in an essay for *Slate*:

> While a large number of research studies since 2016 have demonstrated the stunning prevalence of mis- and disinformation on social media, there remains little in the way of evidence of their effectiveness to justify the widespread concern of the American public. (McGregor & Kreiss, 2020, October 30)

McGregor and Kreiss do not dismiss the idea that mis- and disinformation should be a concern. However:

It's that the factual element shouldn't be the focus. Journalists and voters should pay more attention to the motivations, content, and drivers of mis- and disinformation. Research on those examines how people might share information, regardless of its factual basis, to forge collective identity with others, how actors strategically utilize racial divisions to further disinformation, and how far-right groups manipulate the media to spread radicalizing conspiracy theories, in turn driving misguided searches for "the truth." Research in this vein helps explain *why* and *how* certain groups in this country seek to deepen political and social divides, at times using misinformation as a tool. (ibid.)

Francesca Polletta and Jessica Callahan (2017) point in the same direction when they argue that the "allusiveness" of storytelling through which "we glean a story's point by reference to stories we have heard before" can make the truth of stories "relatively unimportant to their value": "Stories' persuasive power lies in their ability to call up other compelling stories." (p. 394). Polletta and Callahan contend that this allusive power of storytelling, disregarding its factual correctness or lacking resonance with any real experiences of its audiences, helps to explain Donald Trump's appeal:

Donald Trump did not win the election because he told a single story that knitted together Americans' fears, hopes, and anxieties in a compelling way. Rather, the stories he told, along with the arguments he made, slogans he floated, and facts he claimed all drew on and reinforced already existing stories of cultural loss that, we have argued, owed as much to what people heard about on TV and radio, remembered from childhood, and perceived their group as having experienced as it owed to what they directly experienced themselves. (p.403)

The lies that Trump told alluded to a web of remembered stories. They were persuasive, argue Polletta and Callaghan, because of the allusive quality of the false stories. Similarly, Mejia et al. (2018) suggest that researchers should not mainly focus on untruths when investigating the use and impact of disinformation: "Post-truth criticism has its place. However, it often assumes

that the problems plaguing the world are due to a lack of knowledge as opposed to the possessive investment of a particular ideology." (p. 114). If though, as Daniel Kreiss, Regina Lawrence, and Shannon McGregor (2020) theorise, democracies should be understood "in primarily identity-based terms", rather than as resulting from information-based deliberations and decisions (p. 2), and if, furthermore, as Kreiss et al. posit, identities are created through communication as "political leaders and candidates use media to construct and convey their social identities, and therefore their political identities" (ibid.), then Trump's 2016 campaign did indeed not primarily succeed because "people were duped". Instead,

> the Trump campaign thrived on the effective communication of identity ownership, particularly on making White racial identity—and its supposed opposites, like "the Squad"—salient and the basis for casting a vote for president (p. 4).

Critical discourse studies, and specifically Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach, have, for some time and drawing on Benedict Anderson's seminal concept of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006 [1991]), provided a theoretical framework and empirical case studies to demonstrate how national identities are discursively constructed (e.g., Wodak et al., 1998; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009). Based on extensive empirical data from Austria, including élite politicians' commemorative speeches, excerpts from media discourses (such as newspapers and pro-EU campaigns), seven focus-group discussions, and 24 qualitative interviews, Wodak et al. find that

> there is an interrelationship between the discursive identity constructs propagated by the political and media élites and those observed in semi-public and quasi-private settings. The discursive national identification 'products' offered by these political and media élites to their targeted audiences was influenced partly by the demand of these target groups for images to reinforce their national confidence. At the same time, these élites

endeavoured to satisfy such demands for national identity, at times by creating, emphasising, or – as illustrated by the myth of permanent neutrality – by playing down particular features of this identity. (p. 202)

As Kreiss et al. stated for the Trump campaign, Wodak et al.'s empirical research shows that and how identities are discursively constructed.

This is relevant for the study of disinformation. As we have seen, constructed identities can draw on fabrications and lies. Focussing exclusively on the factual (in)correctness, as Mejia et al. argue, promotes the nostalgic illusion "that we once lived in an era of unproblematic truth" (p. 111) that only needs to be recovered like a lost paradise. The belief that lies, such as those spread by Donald Trump, could be countered by mere factual correction – and related media education – overlooks that the real problem arises from the construction of a partisan identity based on a racist ideology that facilitated the lies. To ignore this connection, Mejia et al. argue, "makes post-truth scholarship and reporting complicit with postrace politics" (p. 110): "It is troubling to suggest that we now live in a post-truth era when our history includes the three-fifths compromise, ongoing segregation, uneven drug policies, and other atrocities." (p. 120). In other words: when investigating disinformation, scholarship needs to focus on ideology rather than on an illusionary lost truth. Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou (2020) come to a similar conclusion when investigating current post-truth discourses and their reaction to a democracy in crisis:

Arguing that what is currently under attack is solely truth and evidence – and that the solution is to give power back to traditionally privileged groups – is part of wider attempts at de-politicizing, de-democratising and hollowing out Western democracies, taking power away from the people and placing it in the hands of the few. (p. 155)

Farkas and Schou's as well as Mejia et al.'s observation chime with the central purpose of this book. The Euromyths are a relevant object of study because, over decades, they

transported and promoted an ideology that naturalised Euroscepticism and finally resulted in the UK to leave the European Union. The falsehoods they spread, when taken in themselves, are trivial and inconsequential. Not much is gained by fact-checking that indeed bent bananas and curved cucumbers are still sold in British shops, that condoms available in the UK are not too small for British men, or barmaids in British pubs – and across the European continent – are still wearing tops with a plunging neckline. The falsehoods, as the analyses in Chapter 4 and 5 demonstrated, were the means which a Eurosceptic ideology utilized to persuade. Through their allusive storytelling and their persuasive, in Roland Barthes' words, "euphoric" simplicity and thus "clarity" (2013 [1957], p. 256, footnote), they unfolded their impact as an ideal vehicle for a Eurosceptic ideology. Their lies, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, were not accidental. They were needed to achieve the ideological clarity that accurate reporting could not have achieved. For precisely this reason it would be a distraction to focus on the content of the lies rather than their narrative structure and strategy, which served their ideological purpose. Or, as Mejia et al. (2018) write in regard to the racist ideology spread through Donald Trump's lies: "the post-truth has long operated as racism by alternative means" (p. 120). The Euromyths used their falsehoods to construct a British identity against the EU.

In the remaining part of this chapter, I will now turn to the question how the narrative structures and strategies that the Euromyths employed were mirrored in speeches, op-eds and tweets of the pro-Brexit campaign.

*6.2. The Brexit campaign: speeches, op-eds, tweets*

The investigation of speeches and op-eds will focus on one of the central figures in the campaign for Brexit: Boris Johnson. Indeed, Johnson now is also commonly seen as the inventor of the Euromyths (e.g., Quatremer, 2016, July 15; hutch0, 2020, February 28). He himself has contributed to this image when, in the *Telegraph*-column that he used to announce his decision to campaign for Leave, he reminisced his time as a Brussels-based correspondent to claim that "I informed readers about euro-condoms and the great war against the British prawn cocktail flavour crisp" (Johnson, 2016, March 16). Thirteen years earlier, he had even bragged how his untruthful reporting had, allegedly, contributed to the "downfall" of Europe:

> Day after day, I would sit in my wonderful office in Brussels, looking out at the ponds, and I would marvel, in a horrified way, at the impact of news from Brussels. It was like chucking a crust into the water, and watching the fish boil and thrash to get it. (Johnson, 2003, September 15)

Many of Johnson's colleagues, as well as his two biographers, confirm that he notoriously fabricated stories to disparage the EU (Helm, 2011, October 23; Gimson, 2007, pp. 98-99; Purnell, 2011, pp. 115-128; Fletcher, 2016). Johnson's deputy in Brussels, Sonia Purnell, wrote in her biography about her former bureau chief:

> Of course, Boris did not invent Euroscepticism – there were others who had long been hostile to the Euro-project – but he helped to take it out of the hands of its traditional proponents from the Left […] and to make it an attractive and emotionally resonant cause for the Right. (Purnell, 2011, p. 115).

What made Johnson's Eurosceptic fabrications successful, according to Purnell, were distortion and humour, the ingredients that also went into the making of the Euromyths: "Boris whipped up Eurosceptic fervour in the most devilishly clever way, using a potent cocktail of humour and gross exaggeration" (ibid.). However, to consider Johnson as the inventor of the Euromyths

appears to falsify history, as will become apparent from a closer look at his reports from his time as EC correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* (1989–1994).

*6.2.1. Euromyths as symbolic articulation of Eurosceptic ideology*

Although well known for his false reporting, Johnson's made-up stories are different from the Euromyths genre, less concerned with trivial regulations than with eye-catching claims, such as one of his best known and most often quoted fabrications that the Berlaymont, the European Commission's headquarter, was to be blown up because it had been found to be contaminated with asbestos (Purnell, 2011, p. 125).

Instead of inventing the Euromyths genre, Johnson seem to have adopted a growing and increasingly popular trend at the time of polemic Eurosceptic reporting. Indeed, some of Johnson's contemporaries recall that he was not a Eurosceptic during his first one or two years in Brussels, but then changed his tune to advance his career (Purnell, 2011, p. 122). Of the two Euromyths, which Johnson refers to in his 2016 *Telegraph* column, only one seems to have originated with him. In May 1991 he reported about an alleged dispute between Italy and the European Commission about the size for condoms (Johnson, 1991, May 10). The article tells a different story from the 'condom'-story which *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* published three years later (and which the Euromyths blog refuted): it claims that the "Italian rubber industry has fallen foul of EC rules by making undersized condoms" (ibid.), rather than that European condoms are too small for British men. The article, which was – other than the sample Euromyths stories analysed in the previous chapter – given little prominence in the layout of the page, being placed on the bottom right hand side and without illustration, uses the exactness of minute specifications

for condom-sizes and its contrast to heavy-handed decision-making to comical effect ("All 12 member states have agreed that an unstretched condom should be 16 centimetres long."; "Experts had determined that the maximum permitted width for a condom should be 55mm." [ibid.]). However, Johnson's 'condom'-story does not construct any commonality with its audience, does not create a metadiscourse, or evoke an emotional attitude, and therefore contains none of the elements which, as shown in the previous two chapters, were essential for the Euromyths genre.

The other Euromyths to which Johnson's 2016 column alludes, claims that the European Commission tried to abolish the prawn cocktail flavour crisp – an issue about which the Representation of the European Commission in the UK has archived a lengthy exchange of letters, as mentioned in Chapter 2. A search in the Gale Primary Sources digital archive of the *Daily Telegraph*, using the key word "prawn cocktail" and "Boris Johnson" as author, shows a feature profile of Pascal Lamy, at the time EU Commissioner Jacques Delors' chief of staff as the earliest occurrence (Johnson, 1992, March 5). The article references the prawn cocktail flavour crisp issue as an already known story. Johnson mentions it twice in this article, in both instances to frame the European Community as a hostile power: "How did it happen that Brussels stuck for so long, so obstinately, to its plan to abolish prawn cocktail flavour crisps by banning the sweeteners used in them?" (ibid.). Johnson goes on to quote an anonymous "EC agricultural official" who defends the draft legislation concerning crisps by pointing out that the process took "months, if not years, under the noses of national governments", that therefore the British Government had itself to blame for not spotting the changes, and that the Commission was "completely well-meaning", as it was "engaged in the last complex and crucial process of harmonisation in the run-up to the 1993 single market" (ibid). Johnson counters the official's

reasoning with listing alleged regulations ("Is it really possible, on those grounds, to justify the Euro-condom? Or the ruling that carrots are fruit, or that good British ice-cream, chocolate and sausages could not be properly so called?" [ibid.])-, three of which have been refuted by the Euromyths blog (EU to push for standard condom size, 1994, October 19; Chocolate or 'vegelate', 1998, April 8; The infamous "euro-sausage" threatens British bangers, 2001, June 15). Johnson utilizes the trivial regulation stories to argue that the European Community interferes unduly with British life, which prefigures the use of Euromyths as an articulation for the antagonistic British-European relationship.

In the last but one paragraph of the Pascal Lamy-profile feature, Johnson returns to the prawn cocktail flavour crisps and recalls:

> I will never forget the righteous tone of the woman who was actually responsible for the drafting of the paragraph that would have eliminated the prawn cocktail flavour crisp, even though British Government health officers ruled that the artificial sweeteners concerned could only be harmful in vast doses. "Why should school children eat all these crisps?" she demanded. "It's bad for them." (Johnson, 1992, March 5)

Johnson concludes that "the EC commission officials have views about what is good in the world and what is not. They also have an awesome legislative arsenal to order the Community to their taste" (ibid). The prawn cocktail flavour crisp issue becomes for Johnson what in later years the bent bananas issue became for the Eurosceptic discourse: he frequently references it (e.g., Johnson, 1992, June 23; Johnson, 1994, March 5; Johnson, 1994, July 20; Johnson, 1996, July 31) to support the claim that European officials are "spitting on our national culture, trampling on our traditions" (Johnson, 1996, July 31). The prawn cocktail flavour crisps turns into shorthand for the belief "that sooner or later rules made in a foreign land will exasperate the British", as Johnson wrote in his farewell piece to his five years as "EC correspondent"

(Johnson, 1994, March 5). Rather than inventing the Euromyths genre, Johnson began during his years as Brussels correspondent to use Euromyths stories as symbolic articulations of a Eurosceptic ideology. He did not create the Euromyths, but his writing certainly prefigured their use as Barthesian myths of an antagonistic British-European relationship.

*6.2.1.2. Argumentation in campaign addresses*

I will now turn to the question how the narrative structure and strategies of the Euromyths were echoed in the Brexit campaign. For the analysis of campaign addresses, op-eds, and speeches I will draw on the discourse-historical approach that has been developed over decades by Ruth Wodak and her (changing) team (e.g., Wodak et al., 1990; Wodak et al., 1998; Wodak et al., 2009, Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). In particular, I will build on the analysis of argumentation schemes (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, pp. 46–53).

The investigation begins with two examples of Johnson's campaign addresses in the run-up to the EU referendum on 23 June 2016. At the time he was the major of London and the main figure-head – albeit not official leader – of the Vote Leave campaign. He gave both short speeches while on tour through Britain with the Vote Leave campaign. Both speeches will be analysed in the form in which they were recorded on video.

In May 2016, *The Telegraph* website reported the launch of the campaign bus (sporting the notorious slogan "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund the NHS instead"). The website posted a short clip that showed Johnson addressing the public with a reference to the Euromyths:

It is absolutely crazy, absolutely crazy that the European Union is telling us how powerful our vacuum cleaners have got to be, what shape our bananas have got to be, and all that kind of thing… (The Telegraph, 2016, May 12, video 00:01:07–00:01:22 [accessed on May 15, 2019, no longer available])

The first reference to an alleged regulation alludes to the claim that the EU intended to ban powerful British vacuum cleaners, which was, for instance, reported in the *Daily Mirror* (Sayid, 2014, August 22; for an analysis cf. Henkel, 2021), and rejected on the Euromyths blog (Tidying up the facts about vacuum cleaners, 2014, August 22). The second one references the iconic 'bananas'-story. Johnson calls the alleged regulations "crazy", tapping into the myth of European preposterousness. He hints that the 'vacuum cleaner'- and the 'bananas'-story are just two examples of "all that kind of thing", alluding to the intertextual chain that Euromyths news stories constructed, as the previous chapter has shown. Johnson's audience meets his remarks with chuckles. They know and recognize the Euromyths genre, they expect and conform to the emotion of mirth that is linked to and an essential part of it.

The second video shows Johnson 11 days later on tour in York, just one month ahead of the referendum. The recording starts shortly after the beginning of his address to the assembled crowd:

*Boris Johnson:* We've got one month to go until we take back democracy and take back control for our country! Now, can we do it?

*Crowd:* Yeaah! (cheers)

*Boris Johnson:* Yeah, yes we can! I think we can! I think that they're rattled on the Remain side of the campaign, because they're putting out mooore propaganda than we've seen at any time since 1992, when they said we couldn't leave the European Exchange Rate Mechanism! You remember that?

*Single voices in the crowd:* Yeah! Yeah!

*Boris Johnson:* They tell it will be a disaster, they said interest rates would go up, they said it would be an economic catastrophe if we left the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, that is what the Treasury said, and what happened?

*A single voice:* A lie!

*Boris Johnson:* It was a liberation for the economy.

*Single male voice in the crowd:* Yeah, it was!

*Boris Johnson:* We did better than ever before.

[Pause]

*Boris Johnson:* Why are we sending 10 billion pounds a year net to Brussels? Some of which is spent, my friends, you know, some of which is spent on [emphasizes the next two words] Spanish bullfighting. You think the British taxpayer should be supporting Spanish bullfighting?

*Crowd:* Nooo!

*Boris Johnson:* Absolutely not!

*Single voice in crowd:* [repeats] Absolutely not.

*Boris Johnson:* And it's not just a question of taking back control … of our immigration policy, that's important too, isn't it?

*Crowd:* Yeaah!

Boris Johnson: You know, if somebody's fat cats go into [unintelligible], lobbying the Government, tell the Government that they got to support Remain, what do they know, what do they know the impact of immigration on school places, and hospital waiting lists, and GP service, they know nothing about it.

*Crowd:* [clapping from some people]

*Boris Johnson:* They know absolutely nothing about it!

[The video cuts to a person with Boris Johnson mask waving two flags: the Union Jack and the white rose Yorkshire flag, no voices, then the recording of Boris Johnson's speech continues, there may be a part of Johnson's address missing in between the two takes.]

*Boris Johnson:* We cannot hope to govern an independent nation, we cannot hope to have an independent democracy in this country, as long – as we are – members – of the EU.

*Single voice:* Hurrah!

*Boris Johnson:* So, vote Leave, my friends! Vote Leave! Campaign with all your might and all your heart between now and June the 23rd! Let's take back control! Take back control of this democracy! Take back control of this country! Show that we can stand on our own two feet again! Because we can, can't we?

*Crowd:* Yeaah!

*Boris Johnson:* What a great country! What a great country! What a great economy! We can be better off!

*Crowd:* [cheers, claps]. One single male voice: Vote Boris! Vote Boris!

*Boris Johnson:* Let's fight, let's fight against, against the great complacency and the [unintelligible] army of the great establishment! We can win! We can win on June the 23rd. Campaign with me now, on June the 23rd, take back control of our country, vote Leave, and let's make sure that June the 24th is Independence Day. Independence Day.

*Single male voice:* Hurrah!

(AP Archive, 2016, November 16, 00:00:16–00:02:39)

Johnson's central argumentation structure in this address derives from what Ruth Wodak has called "political populism" (2015, p. 29):

'Bureaucrats in Washington', 'technocrats in Brussels', 'liberal elites' or the 'broken/corrupt system' are metonymic nominations and metaphors criticizing a dominant and inward-looking *self-referentiality* (i.e. a democracy for its own sake). Political populism challenges such rigidness and inwardness of the political system […]. That is why political populism postulates that it wants to change or reform 'the system', promises to provide 'new politics' or highlights that 'our nation' or 'our country' must come first. (ibid.)

Johnson begins with an appeal that uses a hidden assumption: the call to "take back democracy and take back control for our country" presupposes that "we" 'lost control', and that 'our country was taken away'. The phrase supposes a Eurosceptic position in the Maastricht tradition that was sketched out in Chapter 5. It also alludes to the populist claim of political elites' self-referentiality that Wodak observes: Johnson's appeal implicitly assumes a 'they' that took "our country"; because his address happens in the context of the Brexit campaign, the implicit 'they' alludes to the European Union. By making the hidden assumption the object of an appeal, Johnson puts the content of the assumption beyond question. The question he puts forward is "can we do it?", not: "did we loose control and/or our country?".

In the next step, Johnson argues that "we" are capable ("yes, we can!") because the Remain side is "rattled"; their weakness shows because they were wrong in the past ("they said it would be an economic catastrophe if we left the European Exchange Rate Mechanism […] and what happened? […] We did better than ever before."). Using the analytical tool suggested by Reisigl and Wodak (2016, p. 47), the structure of the argument can be explicated as follows:

Argument:  They say our economy will be weak when we leave the EU, but they were wrong about our strength in the past (miscalculated the impact of leaving the Exchange Rate Mechanism [ERM]).

Conclusion rule: If they were wrong in the past, they will be wrong in the present.

Truth claim: We – and our economy – will be strong

This "causal scheme" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 51) presents what Reisigl and Wodak call a "causal fallacy" (2016, p. 50). The warnings against the harmful consequences of Brexit are based on economic analysis. Johnson's causal scheme ignores the economic causes and invents instead a rule of historic parallelism: what happened in the past will happen again.

Talking about "taking back control" and about "the hideous debacle of the ERM" (Young, 1998, p. 449) evokes central symbolic moments within the Eurosceptic discourse. Johnson's campaign address consists of assembling such moments. The next one is a reference to a Euromyths story: the claim that British taxpayers' money was used to subsidize bullfighting in Spain has been widely reported (e.g., Waterfield & Govan, 2013, May 15; Glaze & Nelson, 2014, November 8; Stevens, 2014, November 9) as well as been refuted on the Euromyths blog (EU funds do not favour bullfighting, 2014, November 19). Johnson uses the story to evoke anger ("You think the British taxpayer should be supporting Spanish bullfighting? *Crowd:* Nooo! *Boris Johnson:* Absolutely not!"). The reference to the Euromyths story is followed by evoking anger against elite politicians ("somebody's fat cats […] lobbying the Government") that do not understand the suffering of the people ("what do they know the impact of immigration on school places, and hospital waiting lists, and GP service, they know nothing about it"), while linking the detached, uncaring elite to the 'threat' and 'burden' of immigration, a topos of right-wind populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wodak, 2015). A recent empirical study by David Smith, David Deacon, and John Downey (2020) that examined the temporal conjunction between the turn of the Vote Leave campaign to populist discourses and the national media coverage of immigration that the media followed the politicians, and that only the campaign's "prioritisation

of immigration immediately forced the topic up the national press agenda, regardless of newspapers' political stance on EU membership" (Smith, Deacon, & Downey, 2020, p. 13). Looking back to the 1990s, though, reveals that the narrative structures in which Johnson conveyed the populist message were formed as he adopted the way how the European Community was covered in Euromyths news stories.

Just as we have seen when tracing the emotional attitude of Euromyths news stories, the evocation of anger is followed by eliciting a positive emotion, in this case hope and pride ("Take back control of this country! Show that we can stand on our own two feet again! Because we can, can't we? […] What a great country! What a great economy!"). Johnson's campaign address mirrors the narrative structure that we found when analysing sample Euromyths news stories in Chapter 4 and 5. Johnson appeals to a shared commonality with his audience, setting the "we" against a "they" which implies the European Union, European elite politicians as well as Remainers. Setting two antagonistic groups against each other while implying that one, the "we" group expresses "the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, 543) follows the pattern of populist speech (Mudde, 2004; Wodak, 2015). The campaign address uses intertextual references (the slogan "taking back control", the ERM controversy, the 'bullfighting'-claim, the immigration debate) as symbolic arguments. They signal agreement without explanation. As the campaign address utilizes the narrative structure known through Euromyths news stories, it build on the familiarity of the Eurosceptic myth of an antagonistic British-European-relationship.

*6.2.2.3. Emotional regime in op-eds and political speeches*

To avoid repetition, I will focus on the expression of emotions, rather than the argumentation structure, when now turning to a sample of two opinion columns and two political speeches by Boris Johnson that cover the time from his announcement that he would campaign for Brexit up to the speech in which, as Prime Minister, he looked forward to the year that would bring Britain's exit from the EU.

The *Telegraph* column through which Boris Johnson declared and explained his decision to support the Vote Leave campaign (Johnson, 2016, March 16) starts with two opposite feelings. The first one is positive and directed towards Europe, Johnson pronounces to "love the old place". The second one is negative as Johnson asserts to "resent the way we continually confuse Europe – the home of the greatest and richest culture in the world, to which Britain is and will be an eternal contributor – with the political project of the European Union" (ibid.). The emotional intro answers to an assumed reproach. The "love" Johnson contends to feel for "Europe" is meant to proof "that there is nothing necessarily anti-European or xenophobic in wanting to vote Leave on June 23" (ibid.). The emotions are staged to counter the reproach of xenophobia and thus the kind of right-wing populism which we saw Johnson performing in his campaign address in York. The first paragraph, though, is the only place where the emotion of "love" occurs. The remaining column explicates the reason for Johnson's resentment against "the political project of the European Union" (ibid.).

The column explicitly refers to the Euromyths, evoking the memory of the "comical" and "ludicrous" effect of alleged EU regulations. Echoing the use of mirth in the Euromyths news stories, Johnson employs laughter to construct the EU as the other to "we", the British people. The intertextual reference to Euromyths can be read as manipulative presupposition (Fairclough, 1992, p. 121): Johnson ignores the corrections to the allegations he repeats and instead uses them

for the "ideological constitution" (ibid.) of his subject, the allegedly ludicrous EU bureaucracy which is alien to the witty British people. The mirth is combined with anger (there are other "infuriating" EU regulations; and as "the public can see all too plainly the impotence of their own elected politicians" – disempowered by the EU – it "enrages them" [Johnson, 2016, March 16]). The anger complements the hilarity. The shared laughter pitches the British "we" against the European "they", constructing a populist national identity myth. The fury expresses national solidarity. Both are overcome by the call for a new "emotional regime" (Reddy, 2001) of (national) confidence and bravery ("This is a truly great country"; "This is a moment to be brave" [Johnson, 2016, March 16]). The emotional regime of confidence results in the call to action: the vote for Leave.

Johnson's September 2017 column, written to justify Brexit, centres on the demand for this new emotional regime of confidence, which is the declared purpose of his comment ("I am here to tell you that this country will succeed in our new national enterprise, and will succeed mightily." [Johnson, 2017, September 15]). He identifies "the loss of confidence" as the reason "why we wanted to join" the EU in the first place. Regaining confidence for the British "we" is the cure (the phrase "we will be able to" is repeated four times; Johnson explicitly demands "Let us have […] confidence", and deplores the "groundless and peculiar lack of confidence" [ibid.]). He finally enacts what he preaches through – confidently – uttering the emotions of national pride ("immense pride in this country" [ibid.]) and related optimism ("I believe we can be the greatest country on Earth." [ibid.]).

The first speech in which Johnson addressed the British people after being elected, realises the new positive emotional regime. Whereas shared laughter previously constructed Britain and the EU as fundamentally different, now, separation achieved, positive emotions are

utilized to forge commonalities between Britons and Europeans, supporting "your good and positive feelings – of warmth and sympathy towards the other nations of Europe because now is the moment – precisely as we leave the EU – to let those natural feelings find renewed expression" (Johnson, 2019, December 13). Johnson's utterance of pride and optimism unites all British nations ("this incredible United Kingdom England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland *together*"; "unleashing the potential of the *whole* country" [ibid., my emphases]). At the same time, the positive emotional regime separates people and government. The obscurely called "people's government" (ibid.) is implicitly constructed as government for the people, not of the people. The people are identified as "you", the government as "we". He wishes for "you" to "take a break from wrangling, a break from politics, and a permanent break from talking about Brexit" and to be "happy and secure", while "in this people's government the work is now being stepped up" (ibid.).

Johnson's New Year's message enacts the positive emotional regime as optimism, expecting "a fantastic year", "a remarkable decade for our United Kingdom", "unleashing the enormous potential of the British people". The optimism includes the "British people" in a common "we" ("we are on the path to a brighter future"; "as we build the future this United Kingdom deserves"; "let's together make the 2020s a decade of prosperity and opportunity"). Brexit, in contrast, is no more than a jokey metaphor for work already done ("oven-ready deal" which "has already had its plastic covering pierced and been placed in the microwave").

The emotional attitude in Johnson's opinion columns and speeches mirrors the emotional attitude that we observed in the sample Euromyths news stories. Mirth as well as pride are used to construct a British commonality against the EU. Although Johnson strategically employs the emotion of "love" in the column in which he announced his support for Vote Leave, he later on

employs mirth and pride to construct a populist antagonism of "we" and "they". Just as in the Euromyths news stories, positive emotions are used to overcome negative feelings and to call to action as long as Brexit had not yet happened. After that, the positive emotion of optimism is used to induce passivity. Johnson's soothing optimism and the persuasive metaphor of an "oven-ready deal" depoliticize the the eminent political, namely the at that point future negotiations between the UK Government and the European Union. It has transpired since, what was evident to any astute political observer at the time (e.g., Foster, 2019, December 17), that the appetizing metaphor of readiness was at best misleading. The disinformation results from and is a symptom of an ideology. The simplicity of Johnson's speeches creates, just as the Euromyths did, the blissful clarity of a Barthesian myth.

*6.3. Tweets*

To conclude this chapter, I want to add a few observations concerning how the Brexit campaign appeared on Twitter. Social media, like in any election in modern democracies, played a significant role in the EU referendum in the UK, and there has been extensive research into the impact in particular Twitter had on the referendum and Brexit (e.g.; Grčar, Cherepnalkoski, Mozetič, & Kralj Novak, 2017; Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2017; Gorodnichenko, Pham, & Talavera, 2018; Mancosu & Bobba, 2019; Llewellyn, Cram, Hill, & Favero, 2019). Researchers found that "the pro-Brexit camp was four times more influential" on Twitter than the pro-Remain side (Grčar et al., 2017, p. 1), that the predominance of Euroscepticism on Twitter mirrored the predominance of Euroscepticism in the UK press coverage of the referendum (Hänska &

Bauchowitz, 2017), or that the Leave side had significant impact through spreading false information on social media (Yan, 2019).

In the context of this book I can't match any of these comprehensive analyses. Instead, I performed a simple simple keyword search to establish whether the Euromyths or themes from the Euromyths have been influential. I draw on an available data set of Brexit-related tweets that have been collected between 1 June 2015 and 31 May 2016 (Cram & Llewellyn, 2017). Of the three data sets, which Cram and Llewellyn collected, I use the data set 'official' which contains tweets from the official campaign accounts of Vote Leave, Leave.EU, Open Britain, and People's Vote. This data set contained 37,461 tweet IDs, of which 33,397 could be re-hydrated. The keyword search found that Euromyths themes have not been very present on Twitter. For example, the word "banana" (including #bananas) only returns 19 results, five of which from the pro-Brexit accounts Vote Leave and Leave.EU, all of which allude to the alleged ban of bent bananas, some by including a link to the directive which supposedly proofs the claim (e.g., Vote Leave, 2016). Out of 33,397 tweets 19 (or five for the pro-Brexit camp) mentions suggests that the bananas-Euromyths played a negligible role on Twitter. Even mentions of "£350", which references the most notoriously misleading claim during the EU referendum campaign and would therefore echo the theme of falsehoods, appear only 226 times, 93 of which are mentions by Vote Leave, one by Leave.EU, the remaining 132 were made by the pro-Remain campaign groups.

The mere mentions of keywords, though, do not reflect narratibve structures. The main concern of this book, in how far the narrative structures and strategies of the Euromyths were mirrored elsewhere in the political communication about the UK's role in the EU, will, as far as the social media are concerned, have to be left to future research.

*6.3 Conclusion*

The untruths the Euromyths spread were not accidental. Their falsehoods have to be seen against the background of a heightened concern for accuracy particular in the popular press during the 1990s. The Euromyths spread disinformation as a web of distortions, exaggerations, and outright fabrications. Most commonly, their falsehoods departed from an existing regulation to then twist its purpose or misrepresent its area of application. For this reason, the Euromyths, within a classification of different types of disinformation (Tandoc et al., 2018), most closely match the distortions used in propaganda.

However, recent scholarship has questioned the focus on "post-truth" or "fake news", arguing that centring on untruths and fabrications ignores that the real problem is the underlying ideology. Scholars such as Mejia et al. (2018), McGregor and Kreiss (2020, October 30), or Farkas and Schou (2020) argue that inherent in the talk of "post-truth" is the nostalgic believe in once better democratic politics thriving through accurately informed citizens, which could be restored by fact-checking lies or by media education. However, to believe in a lost "truthful" democracy ignores existing inequalities and the ideologies and power structures through which they arise. This book shares this view. Fighting disinformation is essential for democracies to survive, but to do so requires recognising disinformation as a symptom, not as the illness itself. Consequently, this book is concerned with the inaccuracies spread through Euromyths news stories in so far as they convey the ideology of a depoliticized, naturalised Euroscepticism.

The second part of the chapter, therefore, turned to the question how the narrative structures and strategies, employed by Euromyths news stories to establish their Eurosceptic

ideology, were reflected in the campaign for Brexit. As a case study, the investigation focused on op-eds and speeches by Boris Johnson as one of the leading figures in the pro-Brexit campaign. Johnson is often considered to have originated Euromyths-style reporting during his time as Brussels correspondent for the *Telegraph* (1989–1994). Instead, though, he seems to have adopted the genre rather than inventing it. His campaign addresses and op-eds in the run-up to the referendum in 2016 not only reference various Euromyths, they also employ the narrative structures and strategies, which the previous analyses found in Euromyths news stories. Thus, Johnsons campaign created a Barthesian myth of a naturalized Euroscepticism, just as the Euromyths news stories did.

Footnote

[1] The Euromyths blog was taken off the internet in 2020. However, I had copied all entries in the summer of 2019 for offline use. The last entry at that time dated from 22 November 2018. How often specific phrases occurred on the blog to refute the truth of media reports was established through a word search in the offline document.

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