Digitalization and democracy
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Eike has a Master of Science in International Relations from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. She was affiliated with ARENA through an MA student grant.

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Preface

The EU has expanded in depth and breadth across a range of member states with greatly different makeups, making the European integration process more differentiated. *EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy* (EU3D) is a research project that specifies the conditions under which differentiation is politically acceptable, institutionally sustainable, and democratically legitimate; and singles out those forms of differentiation that engender dominance.

EU3D brings together around 50 researchers in 10 European countries and is coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo. The project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, Societal Challenges 6: Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies (2019-2023).

The present report is part of the project's work on Opinions, Debates and Reforms (WP 4), which focuses on the conditions for democratisation in contemporary Europe. This report is very relevant, as it focuses on the EU's response to fake news and post-truth. Fake news and post-truth are inimical to democracy, which relies on a mode and conduct of politics that is attentive to facts. In recent years, EU leaders have grown increasingly concerned about the manner in which false information disturbs political processes. This report analyses both the EU's contributions to the public discourse on fake news, and how it balances upholding liberal values and freedom of expression and contending with disinformation.

John Erik Fossum
EU3D Scientific Coordinator

Abstract

Since 2016, the terms fake news and post-truth have become discursive signifiers of the contemporary international political environment. Concerns that voters base their important political decisions on false information, or even consciously disregard hard scientific facts and objective research has encouraged both academics, politicians and the wider public to debates about the links between media and politics, and disinformation and democracy. In April 2018, the EU responded to such concerns with a new policy for tackling online disinformation. This report sets out to explore how the EU's policy contributes to current debates and contemporary public discourse around fake news and post-truth. Drawing on the analytical tools of discourse theory, this report examines how the EU understands these phenomena, especially in relation to the liberal democratic principle of freedom of expression. Embedded in this study, is an attempt to map out the discursive struggle to define these phenomena, and how the EU's understanding of democracy both influences, and is influenced by, these. The report applies a poststructural theoretical framework, arguing that the EU's effort to tackle online disinformation is about more than the presence of fake news or 'alternative facts'. By studying the EU's construction of these phenomena, as well as causal explanations and actors identified in relation to the current proliferation, this report contributes to our understanding of the EU's identity as an international actor. The focus is especially on issues raised in relation to the EU's reputation as a pillar of liberal democracy. Within contemporary post-truth discourses, a representation of online and social media as enablers of disinformation is observed. This representation of democracy is similarly found in the EU's discourse on online disinformation. The EU's discourse on disinformation further serves as an argument for the actions taken to tackle the phenomena, specifically for a self-regulatory Code of Practice for online platforms and stakeholders. However, this representation of online platforms as both purveyors and regulators of disinformation is not unproblematic. As the discussion of findings will argue, the principle of freedom of expression is used as both an argument for the EU's actions and inaction at the same time.

Acknowledgement

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2016, the 'Vote Leave' campaign won the referendum in the United Kingdom (UK) and Donald Jr. Trump was elected President of the United States (US) against the backdrop of campaigns shrouded in controversy and spectacle. Many were shocked at these outcomes, as the leaders of these campaigns had continuously been caught making false and non-factual statements, like the first's claims about sending £350 million a week to the EU and the latter having openly promoted the 'birther story' (the conspiracy theory that Barack Obama was not born in the US and, thus, disqualified to be President). Concerns that voters based their important political decisions on false information, or even consciously disregarded hard scientific facts and objective research, rather voting according to their personal beliefs and subjective feelings, led to widespread public debate about what this would mean for democracy. In public discourse terms like fake news and post-truth became key words and influential signifiers of the contemporary, characterising the current political era as one of declining public trust in established institutions, media, and public authorities.

In April 2018, the European Commission (EC) issued a Communication titled 'Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach', based on a call from the European Parliament (EP) for an analysis of the current

situation and legal framework with regard to fake news, in order to determine the possibility for legislative intervention to limit its spread (EC, 2018). Here, disinformation is described as a major challenge for Europe and European democracy that, by eroding trust in institutions and media, science and empirical evidence, impairs citizens ability to make informed decisions, and, thus, hampers democracy itself.

This report sets out to explore how the EU's policy on online disinformation contributes to current debates and public discourse about fake news and post-truth. As important topics of contemporary international politics, fake news, post-truth and online disinformation are highly relevant for the discipline of International Relations (IR). Despite much debate within academic and IR literature, few have sought to map out the discourses around these phenomena, and different actors' understandings and representations of these. This report aims to help close the gap, by trying to establish the EU's understanding of these phenomena, especially in relation to demcratic principles of freedom of expression. The report applies a post-structural theoretical framework, examining how understandings and representations of the phenomena, as well as the contemporary international environment, relate to democratic principles of freedom of expression. Drawing on the analytical tools of discourse theory, this report examines how the EU can be viewed as an actor in a discursive struggle to define fake news, as well as whether or not we have entered an era defined by post-truth. The findings will further link this policy to the polity itself, and how the policy's discourse speaks to the EU's identity. An attempt to map out the discursive struggle in itself, and how the EU's position in it is part of defining the EU as an actor is, therefore, embedded in this study.

1.1 Why study the EU's policy on tackling online disinformation?

Originating from an interest in recent political developments, this report set out to explore the contemporary discourse around fake news and post-truth. This report sees the European Union (EU) as a particularly interesting actor within contemporary debates regarding these issues. First and foremost, the EU has been, and continues to be, a significant actor within these debates and discourses, both due to its direct concern with the result

of the Brexit referendum and due to its significant role in international politics. The EU is directly involved with these phenomena and debates, due to concerns that fake news and online disinformation may have impacted voters' decisions in the Brexit referendum, and ultimately the UK's decision to leave the EU. This arguably gives the EU a vested interest in exploring whether or not this was the case, as well as whether or not a similar impact and opt-out could be expected from other member states. As such, it may not be surprising that the EU is very engaged in public debate over these issues. However, the EU has long been engaged in broader public and political debates about the online public sphere and the regulations of the internet (or lack thereof). Many of its member states have a long history of media regulation, aiming to ensure transparency and freedom of expression, which is also one of the fundamental rights in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EC 2018a). In addition to this, the global spread and reach of the internet and online sphere, may give an international actor like the EU a particular position to impact decision making in this policy area. The topic of online disinformation and issues raised by it are both domestic and international, with influential companies and platforms both situated in a sovereign state, and spanned globally at the same time. As an actor with both an internal international dimension and an external towards other actors, the EU may be in a particular position to influence discourse on online disinformation.

Secondly, the report considers the EU a major actor within the international system, and, thus, sees its engagement in deliberating online disinformation as having potential to significantly influence understandings of the phenomena. As a particular kind of non-state international actor, with a status as something more than an intergovernmental organisation, yet less than a fully-fledged European state, conceptualisations of the EU vary greatly within the discipline of International Relations (IR). However, as one of the world's major economic powers it is widely recognised to have a significant influence within international diplomacy and the broader world order (Hill, Smith & Vanhoonacker, 2017, p.5). It has also been argued that the EU for a long time has represented a pillar and a laboratory of the liberal order. The EU's role in the world is described as having been shaped around a self-understanding as a liberal democratic area (Lucarelli, 2018). Following this, the report sees the EU's

discourse, including language, behaviour and practices, as having potential to influence international discourse and understandings on online disinformation and its impact on liberal democratic freedom of expression. It assumes that developments in the world contribute to the shaping of the EU and its discourse, and, equally, that the EU's discourse impacts international developments. This report, thus, focuses on the EU's policy on online disinformation, as it considers it an important contribution to contemporary interpretations and understandings of the phenomena, the online public sphere and the international political environment.

1.2 Objective and research questions

In this section, the objective and research questions guiding the report are presented and justified. Departing from a theoretical interest in how discourse takes part in constructing the very worlds they intend to describe, as well as an acute interest in the seemingly significant change in international political discourse, this report set out to explore contemporary discourse around fake news and post-truth. The objective is, furthermore, to understand the EU's interpretation of and response to these phenomena, especially in regard to liberal democratic principles of freedom of expression.

The research questions have been constructed in an effort to clarify these objectives of the report and to guide the research process. As the report draws on post-structural theory, an objective of this study is to address how meaning is created in the construction of concepts and framing of phenomena. It assumes that the EU's interpretation depends on abstractions and complexity reductions in its description of the world, including its descriptions of online disinformation, the online public sphere and actors involved. It also assumes that some interpretations gain more influence and become more dominant than others, and that some understandings of the world come to 'have very real effects upon our lives' (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.197). The report, therefore, aims to examine how the EU's discourse on online disinformation may impact public understandings of the phenomena, and understandings of (whether or) how it ought to be addressed. Drawing on the analytical tools of discourse theory, the report aims to examine how the EU's policy on online disinformation understands the phenomena, particularly in relation to

democracy and freedom of expression. Based on these objectives, the report's main research question (RQ) is as follows:

What does the EU's discourse on online disinformation reveal about its understanding of democratic freedom of expression?

In order to address this question, the report will look at how the EU frames online disinformation, how it is constructed as a problem, and for whom, as well as what (or who) are considered the causes and solutions to this problem. Furthermore, the EU's efforts to tackle online disinformation is viewed as both an outcome of public discourse, and contemporary understandings of the international environment, and a contribution to these. As such, an attempt to map out the contemporary public discourse around these terms and issues is also embedded in the study. Thus, a further research question (sub-RQ) guiding this report is: How does the EU engage in the contemporary struggle to define 'fake news'?

In order to address this question, the report will look at the different stakeholders that the EU engages with to find solutions to the problem, and who it does not engage with, aiming to situate the EU as an actor in relation to the other actors identified. In addition to this, the study also aims to address how the policy's discourse speaks to the identity of the EU. Questions regarding the meaning-making of the EU also raises questions regarding its identity. As the EU is seen as a major non-state international actor within international relations, this report explores the interconnectedness of discourse and power in regards to the politics of provision of information. The study assumes that the EU's discourse impacts international developments, and, equally, that developments in the world contribute to the shaping of the EU. The report, moreover, aims to address how the contemporary struggle to define 'fake news' and 'post-truth' ties into the broader social-, economic-, and political-, international context of 2020. Another research question (2. sub-RQ) guiding this study is, therefore: What does the EU's discourse on online disinformation reveal about its understanding of the contemporary international environment?

1.3 Report structure

This report is structured into seven chapters. Chapter two introduces the reader to the contemporary public debate and discourse surrounding fake

news and post-truth, including various definitions of these, causal explanations and actors identified in relation to the current proliferation, as well as issues raised in regard to democratic freedom of expression. In chapter three, academic responses to the post-truth debate within the discipline of IR are outlined, and presented in relation to different theoretical paradigms. This chapter also puts forward the theoretical framework for this report, and lays out the post-structural understanding of discourse and its inherent connection to power. The fourth chapter presents the methodological approach and choices made in the report. It, furthermore, addresses challenges and limitations in relation to these. Chapter five presents the findings from the discourse analysis of the EU's policy on online disinformation. These findings are, then, reflected on and discussed in relation to the contemporary public discourse and the theoretical framework of the report in chapter six. Chapter seven concludes this report, and suggests some interesting avenues for further research, based on the report's findings.

Chapter 2

Fake News and Post-truth

This chapter lays out the contemporary discourse around key terms and issues of the contemporary debate on online disinformation. Since 2016, the terms fake news and post-truth have become discursive signifiers of the contemporary international political environment. These terms are both related to the main political events of that year, the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of President Trump in the US. Writings on these topics have escalated ever since, both in the public media and in academia, and fake news and post-truth are still major topics of public debate. This chapter begins by mapping out various definitions and employments of fake news and post-truth, and the discursive struggles surrounding them. In doing this, it also differentiates these terms from similar concepts, such as parody and propaganda, as well as what is understood to demarcate the contemporary post-truth era from earlier times. The chapter presents how different journalists, political commentators and media scholars have engaged with these terms, also highlighting how different actors, attempting to explain the proliferation of fake news and the public decline of trust in established institutions, have made causal links between these contemporary issues and other societal developments in recent history. Following this, the chapter moves on to highlight common themes in these discourses, arguing that these often present quite dystopian views on contemporary developments of democratic societies. Towards the end, I

reflect on how the discourse about these terms carry with them and reveal specific assumptions and political arguments. The report further argues that the discourse around these phenomena illustrate contemporary power struggles for discursive hegemony. Conclusively the chapter sums up some of the main characteristics of contemporary discourse on these issues, before moving to responses to these topics within the discipline of IR in chapter three.

2.1 Fake news

As a highly relevant term for this study on online disinformation, with a variety of definitions and meanings in public discourse, it is important to situate fake news in a historic context, as well as map out the contemporary definitions of the term. This chapter, therefore, presents an overview of definitional debates and discourse around this term.

Despite being referred to as a 'buzzword', neither the term fake news nor the different phenomena now described as such are new (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). What is novel is the significant increase in use of this term in public discourse. In recent years, more specifically since 2016, fake news has not only entered scholarly discourse outside of journalism studies, but even everyday conversations, and there is wide public debate about the (global) spread and influence of fake news (McNair, 2018, p.ix). The current US President actively used the term in the run up to the election, and has continued to use the term, both in his public speeches and on social media, since entering office. In the contemporary public debate, fake news is, thus, frequently associated with President Trump and his supporters' accusations against various media agencies, broadcasters and journalists of biased or false reporting, not only discrediting their journalism, but even calling them 'the enemy of the American People' (@realDonaldTrump 2017, Feb. 17). Even though President Trump was not the first person to invoke the term, the context and meaning he has assigned to the term seems to be quite distinct from that of previous employments of it. His usage of the term has, thus, not only increased debate about the phenomena, but also about the term itself and how it is or should be defined.

Fake news has, furthermore, also within academia, been applied to a wide range of related yet distinct types of content, and the contemporary academic employment of and meaning assigned to the term also seems

different from earlier. In their chapter of The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies, Boler and Nemorin (2013), for instance, wrote that '[a] form of dissent that saw meteoric rise in popularity during this decade is satire, and specifically "fake news" such as The Daily Show and the Colbert Report' (Boler & Nemorin, 2013, p.401). This study, then, defined fake news as a form of satire, referring to mock news programmes on television, which use humor or exaggeration to comment and provide critique on political and social affairs, as well as powerful actors in society. Boler and Nemorin (2013) defined this satirical form of entertainment as fake news, further arguing that it challenged both political authorities and the form and discourse of the news media, as they 'persistently challenged the absurdity of news coverage as well as the absurdity and lies of politicians' (Boler & Nemorin, 2013, p.401). Berkowitz and Schwartz (2016) further argued that these types of fake news could contribute to forming a 'Fifth Estate' and serve as 'watchdogs of the press', stating that even though 'mainstream journalism likes to declare itself the watchdog estate, "fake news" puts "real news" into the position of needing to be watched' (p. 6). The argument was, then, that, by enabling critique of the news media itself, fake news could contribute to ensuring the maintenance of professional journalistic standards and conduct, and in this way help improve the credibility of news media (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016). In contemporary discourse, however, fake news is generally not understood as satire, and is, furthermore, generally not considered to have a positive impact on professional journalism, or society at large for that matter.

Tandoc et al. (2018) did a review of how previous academic studies had defined and operationalised the term, and found that contemporary employments and definitions differ from earlier versions, in that fake news in the contemporary debate mostly refers to fabricated or false stories spreading on social media. Focusing on academic articles that used the actual term 'fake news', and not related terms, they collected 34 articles from the period between 2003 and 2017. The majority of these had studied the phenomena from a journalistic perspective, while other disciplines included psychology, computer science, and political science. Examining the employments of the term in these articles they developed a typology of fake news, based on the different levels of facticity and deception in each type. This was used to define six different types of fake news: news

satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda. The first two types were described as having less of an intention to deceive, whereas the fabricated or manipulated types were distinguished by containing lower levels of facticity. According to their findings, earlier studies applied the term to describe content produced for entertainment purposes, such as news parodies and political satires, whereas current employments of fake news often referred to inaccurate and/or fabricated content with lower levels of facticity (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Contemporary operationalisations of fake news, then, often refer to fabrication, described as 'articles which have no factual basis but are published in the style of news articles to create legitimacy' (Tandoc, Lim & Ling 2018, p.143). This is the main difference between satire and news parody. Like satire, parodies also seek to humour audiences through a presentation format that mimics mainstream news media. However, instead of providing direct commentary on current affairs, parodies create non-factual information in order to do so. A successful news parody is described as, 'with a "wink" to the audience, being able to carry off a sophisticated balance between that which might be possible and that which is absurd' (Tandoc, Lim & Ling 2018, p.142). The Onion, one of the most popular parody sites in the U.S., has been frequently referenced in debates about fake news. Without any disclaimers declaring its parody premise, only extravagant claims, such as a readership of '4.3 trillion', 'universally revered coverage', and being 'the single most powerful and influential organization in human history' (The Onion, 'October 18, 1996'), hint at it not being a mainstream news source. The producers assume that their viewers and readers share the joke, however, there is always a certain risk of misunderstandings. In instances where the parody is (too) subtle, the fabricated content can be interpreted as mainstream news. This was exemplified when the Chinese newspaper The People's Daily ran a 55-page photo spread of Kim Jong Un inspired by a 'report' in The Onion that he had been judged the 'sexiest man alive' (BBC 2012). This case illustrates how people can be deceived by such fabricated content if they do not understand the premise of parody. Even disclaimers on such sites can be lost, and the fabricated content consumed as an actual news report.

Fabrication also seems to be the underlying meaning of the operationalisation used in Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) paper, where fake

news is defined as 'news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers' (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p.213). The intent, here, refers to the falsification, and not to whether it seeks to entertain or inform. Thus, this definition includes articles that originate on entertainment platforms, yet could be misunderstood as factual, especially when viewed in isolation on social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Manipulation of images and videos can also be used to support or create a fictional narrative. The digitalisation of cameras and photos as well as the development of affordable editing software programmes and techniques, has made the manipulation of images and video increasingly common. Techniques for manipulation range from performing simple adjustments to complex and more invasive changes, from increasing colour saturation and removing minor elements to the removal or insertion of persons or objects into an image or video. The related term misappropriation, refers to cases where a non-manipulated photo is taken out of its original context, either intentionally or not, to represent a different context and support a false or fabricated story. These techniques have received increased attention recently, mostly in the context of citizen journalism and social media, where images or videos like these may be shared, with more or less text attached to it, to create the impression of being legitimate news items or recordings of newsworthy events (Tandoc, Lim & Ling 2018).

Although the producer's motivations can be difficult to assert, and separating entertainment purposes from disinformation purposes may be quite challenging in practice, contemporary definitions of fake news often stress the intentions behind its production. Furthermore, in the contemporary discourse, fake news more often refers to false stories that do not contain any implicit understanding between the author and the reader that the item is fabricated. The Guardian proposes a definition of fake news as 'fictions deliberately fabricated and presented as non-fiction with intent to mislead recipients into treating fiction as fact or into doubting verifiable fact' (The Guardian) and The BBC defines fake news as 'false information deliberately circulated by hoax news sites to misinform, usually for political or commercial purposes' (BBC). The media scholar Brian McNair (2018), similarly, explicitly excludes parody, satire and conspiracy theories in his definition, describing fake news as '[i]ntentional disinformation (invention or falsification of known facts) for political and/or commercial purposes, presented as real news' (McNair, 2018,

p.38). These definitions, then, all emphasise that fake news are stories produced, either for profit or for ideological or political purposes, with intent to mislead and misinform.

This leads us to the operationalisations of fake news, which are comparable to those of advertisement or propaganda. Firstly, Tandoc et al. (2018) argue that advertisement that adopts formats and/or narratives similar to that of legacy news media, is a distinct type of fake news, as it is produced in an effort to increase sales, with a particular emphasis on financial gain as the primary motivation. An advertising format, termed native advertising, combines product placement with newsworthy, factual or scientific information, so that the insertion of the product or a company seems relevant for the context, and the advertisement is disguised as part of a more informational piece, enhancing its legitimacy with consumers. For the reader, it can be difficult to distinguish such items from 'genuine news feature[s]', as the content often includes interviews, official sources, statistics, and/or scholarly studies (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018, p.146). Press releases about a product, company or service that are published with an adherence to news styles and/or on news sites, often with an unbalanced focus on positive aspects of that being advertised (exaggerating its novelty or enhancement), may have the same potential to be considered and consumed as a legitimate news article with verified and balanced information (Tandoc, Lim & Ling 2018). When it comes to political advertisement, however, the main motivation is not financial gain, but rather ideological.

Fake news has, then, also been used to describe fabrications and false stories produced for ideological purposes, assigning the term a meaning comparable to that of propaganda. Propaganda can, similarly to advertisement, be described as presenting an unbalanced account, and is defined as 'news stories which are created by a political entity to influence public perceptions. The overt purpose is to benefit a public figure, organization or government' (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018, p.146). Fake news was employed in this meaning in a study investigating (fake) news stories from an official Russian channel (Channel One), broadcasted both in Russia and internationally, which was described as 'the [Russian] government's strongest asset in its information warfare' (Khaldarova and Pantti 2016, p.891). The article further indicated that the news channel may

be used for 'strategic narratives' and 'a tool for political actors to articulate a position on a specific issue and to shape perceptions and actions of domestic and international audiences' (Khaldarova and Pantti 2016, p.893). Like advertisements, propaganda may incorporate some factual information, however, it is unbalanced, biased, and promotes a particular perspective or account, giving the narrative a clear cause, message or direction, limiting possible alternative interpretations. The goal of such narratives is to be consumed as an objective account and news piece, while the producers are not merely intending to inform, but to persuade the audience to come to a given conclusion (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Due to the variety of definitions and phenomena of fake news, some scholars describe its use in the contemporary public discourse as 'an umbrella term for a range of other phenomena linked to ideas of persuasion and deceit' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.54). Many consider the ambiguity of the term problematic, arguing that it is a foundational question in order to solve the issues related to the phenomena. In an editorial of the European Journal on Risk Regulation, Alberto Alemanno (2018) writes that fake news 'has a variety of definitions, most of which emphasise the breadth of the term. As a result, there is no universal agreement on where the problem lies and how to frame it' (Alemanno 2018, p.2). Facebook, similarly, in a report on 'information operations', describes fake news as a 'catch-all phrase' referring to 'everything from news articles that are factually incorrect to opinion pieces, parodies and sarcasm, hoaxes, rumors, memes, online abuse, and factual misstatements by public figures that are reported in otherwise accurate news pieces' (Weedon, Nuland, & Stamos, 2017). This is, then, considered problematic as 'without common definitions, we cannot understand or fully address these issues' (Weedon, Nuland, & Stamos, 2017).

As the breadth and ambiguity of the term is considered problematic, some have argued for the abandonment of the term altogether. In a more recent study on the diffusion of 'false stories' on social media, Allcott and Gentzkow, for instance, instead of fake news, used the term mis-information (Allcott, Gentzkow, & Yu, 2019). Bennet and Livingston (2018) also suggest caution in adopting the term fake news, based 'on grounds that it tends to frame the problem as isolated incidents of falsehood and confusion' (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018, p.124).

Considering fake news as more of a systemic problem, they prefer instead the notion of disinformation, which they define as 'intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals' (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018, p.124). This definition explicitly highlights systemic political impacts, as they consider disinformation a problem that needs solving, yet one that 'requires more than just fact-checking and setting the record straight and goes to deeper issues of repairing political institutions and democratic values' (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018, p.124). In this way, the ambiguities of fake news can be circumvented, and the ideological purposes emphasised, without excluding production by sources other than explicitly political entities or organisations, as is commonly associated with the term propaganda.

Despite these definitional debates, this report has still chosen to lay out the variety of interpretations and representations of fake news, as these ambiguities of the term serve to illustrate how the discourses around fake news are part of creating the very phenomena they are trying to describe. Fake news has, furthermore, often been constructed as a cause or symptom of a wider decline in public trust in established institutions and authoritative providers of information. This decline in trust is, moreover, seen as a significant feature of contemporary politics. The term and phenomena of fake news is, furthermore, an important discursive signifier of contemporary debates about the current state of democracy. In the following we turn to contemporary politics, by taking a closer look at post-truth.

2.2 Post-truth

As another discursive signifier of contemporary debates in international politics, the report finds it important to give an overview of definitions and discourse of the term post-truth. This term goes to the core of understandings of the link between information and contemporary democratic governance, and is, thus, important to consider in regard to the analysis of the EU's policy on online disinformation. This chapter, therefore, gives a brief overview of the term and discourse around it.

Post-truth won the Oxford English Dictionary's (OED) Word of the Year 2016, described as an adjective and defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.' (Oxford

Dictionaries, 2016). Like fake news, the term is not new, but was described as having moved from the margins to the mainstream within the course of a year, and has become a buzzword in contemporary discourse. It is often employed in the phrase post-truth politics, as a discursive signifier and description of contemporary international politics. The prefix 'post' in the compound word does not refer to the time after a specified situation or event, and is, thus, not implying that we have at some point been living in truth or that we are now living in a time without truth. The term rather denotes that the value of or interest in truth has declined. The OED traces the first usage of the term in this meaning back to a 1992 essay by Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in The Nation magazine. 'Reflecting on the IranContra scandal and the Persian Gulf War, Tesich lamented that "we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world"' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). The OED further writes that there is evidence of the term being used before this, but then only in the meaning 'after the truth was known', and not in the sense used in contemporary discourse, that truth itself has become irrelevant (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

Post-truth is also linked to several similar terms. Already in 2005, Harry Frankfurt (2005), in the opening lines of his book On Bullshit, voiced his concerns regarding what he saw as a striking feature of the culture and society, arguing that there had been an increase in bullshit in public discourse. Bullshit is described as a statement, which is not necessarily a lie, but is said regardless of whether or not it is representing the truth. In its essence, then, bullshit is when someone 'offers a description of a certain state of affairs without genuinely submitting to the constraints which the endeavor to provide an accurate representation of reality imposes' (Frankfurt, 2005, p.32). This laxity with the truth-value of a statement is what links the term to post-truth. Someone who tells the truth is guided by the authority of the truth, as is the liar who defies that authority, however, the bullshitter ignores this authority altogether, and therefore 'bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are' (Frankfurt, 2005, p.61). He, furthermore, worried that the practice of bullshit had become so normalised that it did not attract much concern, with most people being 'rather confident in their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it' (Frankfurt, 2005, p.1). Similar to this, the American comedian Stephen Colbert popularised a more informal term, truthiness,

to describe a belief in what you feel to be true rather than what the facts will support. Truthiness won the American Dialect Society's Word of the Year in 2005, who wrote in their report on it that 'truthiness refers to the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true' (American Dialect Society, 2006). Post-truth similarly refers to a public preference for what one individually believes to be true, rather than established facts or knowledge.

Post-truth, however, extends these notions of isolated qualities of particular assertions 'to a general characteristic of our age' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). In this post-truth era, then, 'Truth and Reason have been superseded by alternative facts and individual gut feelings' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.2). Post-truth is also described as the contemporary international zeitgeist (Boler & Davis, 2018, p.75). This zeitgeist is described as an almost cataclysmic political shift, not only capturing a series of individual societal developments, but also a completely new political landscape. It is, furthermore, not confined to the U.K., but describes an international, or even global, political zeitgeist. Phenomena like 'Trump, Le Pen, Farage, Brexit, populism, anti-immigration, [and] climate change denial' are all said to signal these developments, not any of the specific events or phenomena independently, but taken together, they are seen as indicators of the current post-truth era (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.49). In this way, post-truth describes our current age and international political environment as one in which individual emotions and personal beliefs shape domestic and international politics, and one in which the value of truth and objective facts has declined significantly, or even become irrelevant.

Since 2016, writings on this have increased dramatically, and the discourse surrounding both post-truth and fake news have often been quite dystopian. The contemporary situation or political environment is often referred to as a state of crisis, foreshadowing the demise and fall of western democracy, as core structures of our democracies are under siege from fake news, bots and other vandals. Various arguments and narratives construct the rise of fake news as a cause and/or symptom of a wider decline in public trust. This decline in public trust, of public elites, media, politicians and institutions, has led to a post-truth era, where nobody trusts or believes in facts or reason, leaning instead on their emotions and

beliefs. This is, then, considered to be creating a wider crisis or threat to liberal democracy as a form of governance, as fake news and populism are chipping away at the basic pillars of the Enlightenment. According to this narrative, 'rationalism, reason and fact are being superseded by gut feelings and partisan politics' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.45). The media scholar McNair (2018) perfectly illustrates such a narrative, when he writes:

> The progress of human civilisation since the early modern era has been built not least on a notion that Truth is a 'thing', accessible through agreed procedures of experimental replication (science), verification and corroboration of sources and evidence (journalism) or rational, informed debate based on either of the first two (deliberation). When Truth becomes a movable feast [...] human civilisation risks going backwards to the days when a genius such as Galileo could be tortured for discovering that the Earth was not the centre of the universe and daring to say so. Bizarrely, this is where the fake news phenomenon could take us.
>
> (McNair, 2018, p.76)

Post-truth discourses often depoliticise fake news, representing it as if it were beyond the realm of human dispute or conflict, and just an object of natural existence that should be handled to avoid human suffering. The question then, no longer is about whether or not fake news and post-truth are part of a problem or not, but how this problem can be solved. For instance, many have used medical terms to describe contemporary phenomena in these post-truth discourses, comparing fake news to 'a dangerous, infectious disease proliferating with alarming speed from body to body through interpersonal contact' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.46). The French president Emmanuel Macron, in a speech to the US Congress, emphasised the need to protect democracy from the threat of fake news, comparing it to 'an ever-growing virus' that exposes citizens to 'irrational fear and imaginary risks' (Macron, 2018). Its viral nature is, in such discourses, compared to the spread of a virus, and fake news as a form of pandemic that is causing the equivalent of a public health crisis, killing people's minds. Following this line of thought, many academics and public figures have argued for the necessity of studying the 'epidemiology of fake news' in order to settle a societal 'diagnosis', discovering 'fake news pathogens' and testing out 'possible cures' (Farkas & Schou, 2020,

p.47). The objective is often, then, to be able to develop a societal vaccination against fake news in order to protect people from catching the disease. These medicalised discourses, then, have a tendency to portray fake news similarly to descriptions of objects and elements in the natural sciences. It, then, attains an existence and life of its own, 'similar to strains of bacteria or viruses' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.47). By framing fake news in this way, the logical response is also to limit its spread and contaminating effect, instead of questioning and deliberating the existence of the problem to begin with. In this way fake news and post-truth is depoliticised, as indisputable facts or accurate descriptions of the state of the world (Farkas & Schou, 2020).

Post-truth discourses, as illustrated by these crisis narratives and medicalised descriptions of fake news, have, furthermore, tended to presuppose a very particular understanding of democracy and how it ought to function. There is often an implicit, yet pervasive, model of certain forms of power and political ordering as being natural and necessary for democracies to function. Macron (2018), for instance, emphasises some key terms of this discourse in his speech to the US Congress, when he stated that '[w]ithout reason, without truth, there is no real democracy – because democracy is about true choices and rational decisions. The corruption of information is an attempt to corrode the very spirit of our democracies' (Macron, 2018). Reason, truth, and rational decision-making is, here, constructed as what constitutes a 'real democracy'. Farkas and Schou (2020) argue that this way of thinking about democracy has become dominant in contemporary political debates, and that this understanding 'is both politically charged and normatively risky. What it essentially does is equate the idea of democracy with the ideas of reason, rationality and truth in an a priori fashion' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.5). Post-truth, then, becomes a description of a crisis of democracy, because emotions and personal beliefs are more influential to public opinion and political outcomes, than reason, truth and rationality. This is in conflict with an understanding of democracy as based on citizens reasoning their way to a decision based on objective truths.

The discourses of post-truth and fake news are closely linked, in that both refer to democracy, and particularly to the link between information or knowledge and democracy as a form of governance. We have begun to see

how these terms function as ambiguous, yet important, discursive signifiers of debates about the current state of democracy. In debates around these terms one of the major questions is related to the origin of these issues. Why have we entered an age of fake news and post-truth politics? And who or what is to blame for the current crisis of democracy? In attempts to find answers to these questions, a series of different factors have been identified as causes or carriers of these phenomena. The following will, therefore, turn to look closer at the constructions of causal explanations and linkages made to other recent developments, as well as various actors, within these discourses.

2.3 Digitalisation and other causal explanations

Several different factors have been cast as causes or explanations for the proliferation of fake news and the contemporary post-truth moment. Online and social media is often seen as either having been taken advantage of by villainous actors or as villains in themselves that enable the proliferation of fake news. Professional journalism and traditional media have been accused of declining standards, which are seen to have driven the public to lose trust in mainstream media and seek other sources of information, for instance, online or social media. Public authorities and politicians have also been cast as both targets of fake news and reasons for its proliferation in the contemporary post-truth age. The way these factors and actors are constructed also contributes to framing the contemporary political environment and current problems in regard to fake news, as well as the potential solutions to these. The report, therefore, finds it important to map out the causal explanations that have been identified in post-truth discourses, as well as various actors that are seen to have contributed to the contemporary democratic predicaments.

A common feature of fake news and post-truth discourses, is reference to the digitalisation of information and the online public sphere. The recent developments in communication technology that enabled the dramatic increase in production, dissemination and availability of information, has both been hailed as a powerful democratising force that unites the world in one global public sphere online, and criticised as a force that enables polarisation and division, and the promotion of misinformation and deception (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.55). The internet and online media

have in these views posed challenges to former gatekeepers of information, such as the traditional media, governmental institutions, scientific communities and academia, as the availability of alternative sources of information has increased. Many, furthermore, see digital media as one of the main generators of the rise of fake news, for instance, McNair argues that 'if the internet ushered in a more diverse and decentralised public sphere of global reach and accessibility, it has also created the pathways down which fake news and other malicious forms of content can spread' (McNair, 2018, p.59).

Early tech-optimists saw the internet as a democratising force that could eradicate issues around media ownership and agenda control that had been around since the days of the press barons, by enabling all citizens to take part in the production and dissemination of information, and contributing to agenda setting and control over narratives of newsworthy events. It was seen as having potential to gather all viewpoints, and thus provide a more comprehensive representation of news and other societal matters (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.56). Similarly, many saw the development of social media to have equal potential to positively impact democracy. Boler and Nemorin (2013) argued that social media could empower citizens living under authoritarian rule to circumvent and counter the state's propaganda, writing that 'the proliferating use of social media and communication technologies for purposes of dissent from official government and/or corporate-interest propaganda offers genuine cause for hope (Boler & Nemorin, 2013, p.411). However, only five years later, Boler and Davis (2018) argue that new forms of state-funded propaganda on social media 'effectively sways voters, suppresses rivals, sows confusion, defames opposition, and spreads fake news' (Boler & Davis, 2018, p.75).

Many of the features of online and social media that were once seen as democratising are now considered the pathways for fake news and a threat to democracy. The decentralised production of content, the ability to share information more directly with those whom it may concern, and the possibility of commenting directly on flaws or false information and continuously updating stories with the most accurate information are examples of such features. Decentralised production is now cast as generating polarisation, as filter bubbles and echo chambers enable citizens to

only receive news and information that conforms to their pre-existing attitudes, beliefs and biases. There is, furthermore, a fear that the viral nature of social media can make citizens less critical of content on these platforms. When content is shared by a trusted friend or contact, people are, then, considered less likely to assess its inherent accuracy or the legitimacy of the original source. This has led to arguments that large shares of the public now live in alternative realities online. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017), for instance, argue that 'the proliferation of media online, combined with platforms such as Facebook that custom-deliver content consonant with a user's likes and behaviors, has rapidly accelerated the creation of alternative epistemic realities' (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017, p.359).

In this way, these discourses construct citizens as both victims and perpetrators of fake news and post-truth. Citizens have in these discourses often been constructed as too uncritical or too vulnerable to misinformmation online. Farkas and Schou (2020) argue that 'there is no shortage of voices arguing that citizens and (perhaps) even entire populations are currently trapped in epistemic worlds or alternative realities, more or less completely disconnected from "proper" truth and rationality' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.60). According to post-truth discourses, individualism, isolation and misguidance have disconnected a large share of the public from reality. As victims of their own filter bubbles and misplaced trust, citizens are, then, described as forming political opinions without evaluating their sources legitimacy or fact-checking their information. Even though there is debate as to what extent citizens are to blame for the contemporary post-truth moment, the overall conclusion is that the public has become indifferent to facts and evidence and 'that millions of citizens have become gullible, easy to deceive and indifferent to truth, living in their own secluded epistemic bubbles' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.61).

Traditional media and professional journalism has, similarly, been cast as both a victim of digitalisation and increased competition within the information market, as well as a cause of the rise of post-truth. The incredible increase and availability of information online, as well as declining profitability within the media sector, have led to dramatic cuts within traditional media. The process of digitalisation, commercialisation, internal fragmentation and the high pressure of 24 hour news cycles, can be

seen as having increased pressure on professional journalism to such an extent that it has led to increased production of low quality content and declining ethical standards within traditional media. Tabloid news and low quality content in established media, is, then, seen as having lowered public trust in journalism, and thereby (partly) caused post-truth. Eroding trust in professional journalism can similarly be seen as having contributed to the rise of fake news, as if people do not trust the traditional media to provide them with professional news stories anymore, they will seek other sources. This may, then, have increased the potential readership for producers of fake news online and made the public more vulnerable to fake news and false information. Thus, some also more or less attribute the rise of fake news to traditional media's declining role as an authoritative gatekeeper and institutional field (Farkas & Schou, 2020). At the same time, however, professional journalism has also been constructed as a critical feature and foundation of democracy, and, thus, many argue for the protection of the media from these developments. Davies (2019), for instance, argues that 'an independent, professional media is what we need to defend at the present moment'. These discourses, then, often seek to restore the authoritative gatekeeping role and agenda setting powers of media outlets, usually by supporting and protecting mainstream news sources (Farkas & Schou, 2020).

Public authorities and politicians have also been constructed as purveyors of disinformation, while at the same time being victims of declining public trust in authorities. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube become important spheres also for political communication (Fuchs, 2020, p.12). Social media allow political actors to circumvent traditional media channels, and former intermediaries of the public sphere, so that they can speak more directly to their followers and publics. Many politicians and state leaders have turned to social media to generate voters and speak to the public, with state leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Matteo Salvini being described as 'enthusiastic users of Twitter', and Boris Johnson using 'Facebook Live to speak directly to "the people" from Downing Street' (Davies, 2019). In this way, public authorities can be seen as contributing to the decline of traditional media, as well as circumventing editorial procedures, such as fact-checking. Furthermore, some politicians and public authorities have been cast as 'systematically infiltrating social media debates using thousands of fake

accounts and ads to impact election outcomes' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.99). Allcott and Gentzkow (2016), also highlight that 'a number of commentators have suggested that Donald Trump would not have been elected president were it not for the influence of fake news' (p.212). Similarly, many also suggest that state actors, such as Russia, deliberately spread disinformation in the media as part of an information warfare against Western states (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). In these various ways, then, politicians and public authorities are also constructed as purveyors of disinformation.

This section has outlined some of the causal explanations and factors that have been constructed as drivers of the proliferation of fake news and the contemporary post-truth moment, and concludes this chapter and outline of public discourse around these phenomena. Digitalisation is a common link in all of the causal explanations outlined above, and more specifically online and social media. Online and social media is in these discourses, then, often seen to enable fake news, either by making it easier for villainous actors to take advantage of the features of these public platforms, or in and of themselves, as the features of online and social media, that were once seen as democratising, are now seen to generate fake news and polarisation. These causal links further serve as suggestions for what needs to change in order to limit their impact on the public, whether it is protection of professional journalism and traditional media (Davies, 2019), or technological solutions to change digital structures (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). The chapter has, in this way, highlighted some of the common themes in these discourses, arguing that these often hold quite dystopian views on contemporary developments of democratic societies. Following this, the next chapter moves on to outline some of the responses to post-truth within the discipline of International Relations (IR).

Chapter 3

Theoretical Background and Framework

This part of the report sets out to clarify the theoretical background and framework for the analysis of the EU's policy on online disinformation. As these phenomena and actors are of great relevance to the discipline of IR, it has been extensively debated within the discipline. An outline of different perspectives and responses to the phenomena is therefore provided. The different responses to post-truth within the discipline are, furthermore, closely linked to the different theoretical frameworks and understandings of the international. This section, therefore, outlines some of the main responses to post-truth within IR, by outlining some of the main theoretical differences within the discipline. As this report draws on a poststructural framework and understanding of discourse, it is also necessary to provide an outline of this. Post-structuralism has been criticised for contributing to a 'relativism' that has led to post-truth. This report, however, argues that a post-structural framework is highly suitable for an interpretive analysis of this kind, seeking to elicit different understandings of these phenomena. Thus, the second section of this chapter lays out the post-structural framework and understanding of discourse for this report.

3.1 Post-truth in International Relations

The post-truth debate is of great relevance to the discipline of International Relations (IR), not only due to its impact on contemporary, and potentially future, international relations, but also in relation to the legitimacy of its knowledge claims and its existence as a discipline. First of all, the post-truth debate concerns not only the liberal democratic foundation of individual states, but also the future of the international world order, which has largely been constructed around liberal ideas. Liberal norms and values, such as human rights, individual freedom and an open market, have shaped international relations since WWII, and have been fundamental in the development of the European Union, and its relations with other states. This, and the rising pessimism about the future of democratic governance and the international world order, makes it a highly relevant phenomenon and moment for studies within IR. It is also of great importance to IR as it raises questions about truth, knowledge and power, questioning the authority of knowledge produced within academia in general. The natural sciences have been challenged on issues such as evolution, climate change, medicine and vaccination, and the social sciences have, along with media, state bureaucracy and politicians, been challenged on bias, elitism and usefulness. Truth claims are increasingly questioned and countered. It is therefore not only relevant, but completely necessary, that IR engages with post-truth, in terms of what these claims mean for the future of international relations as well as the future of the discipline (Michelsen, 2018).

Scholars of IR have engaged in debates about the relationship between theory and truth, knowledge and power since the dawn of the discipline, representing a great variety of theoretical underpinnings for analyses of the international, and its different phenomena. According to Michelsen and Tallis (2018), responses to post-truth within IR have tended to take three main forms related to the main traditions of international thought. The first contends that the issues raised are not new, but rather symptoms of changing power distributions within the international system, the second that the norms underpinning the international order are far more resilient than anxious contemporary voices would imply, and the third that post-truth is a 'self-inflicted wound, long in the making' (Michelsen

& Tallis, 2018, pp.8-9). This illustrates how different theoretical perspectives lead to distinct perceptions and evaluations of the contemporary situation. All of these theoretical traditions, along with their perspectives on and responses to post-truth, are based on certain assumptions and normative judgements about the agents and structures of the international system. The ontological and epistemological differences between these theories also have consequences for how the current moment is described, and for what is constructed as problematic and what is not. Furthermore, these responses contribute narratives to the post-truth debate, and have (more or less) potential to impact the public debate about the current state of the world and actions that could or should be taken in order to change (or improve) the current state. It is therefore useful to get an overview of post-truth debates between, what is often considered, the three main theoretical traditions within IR.

From a realist perspective, the discourse of political leaders and public figures, including lying and deception, have always been a part of international power politics (Mearsheimer, 2013). This perspective assumes that the international order is anarchic, due to the lack of an overarching common sovereign. In this self-help world, rational actors always seek to secure their own survival and optimise their power, and will strategically use all available resources in pursuit of the national interest. Thus, the fact that national leaders are telling lies or even disregarding facts when speaking to their own citizens or the international public, is not noteworthy, as this is seen as part of a strategic play in order to secure (what is in the leader's view) the national interest. This does not mean that:

> [L]eaders are enthusiastic about telling lies or to deny that many leaders would prefer to see the international realm governed by a well-defined set of moral principles. But that is not feasible in the absence of a common sovereign to enforce them.
>
> (Mearsheimer, 2013, pp.18-19)

The new communication and information technologies, like social media, are seen, then, as just added platforms for the expressions of power and discursive combat to take place, and do not represent any change to the fundamental underpinnings of the international order. They may have introduced new stakes to the 'game', resulting in more and diverse actors playing their strategic narratives upon a complex new media terrain, with

a proliferating multiplicity of platforms online, but the 'game' has always been, and is still, about power. Following this reasoning, fake news or the post-truth discourses are seen as political tools for actors (most important of which are states) that wish to carve out a hegemonic status for themselves and/or secure their power and sovereignty. This perspective does not, then, consider the post-truth phenomena in themselves interesting, but rather see them as symptoms of changing positions in an eternal competition for power and security between actors (Michelsen & Tallis, 2018).

Liberalism, as the second of the main theoretical paradigms, has had, and still has, a major impact on both the international order and IR as a discipline. The 'liberal ascendency', the rise of liberal ideas and practical implementations, has been described as the 'most important macro-transformation in world politics unfolding over the last two centuries', that has been 'propelling the West and the liberal capitalist system of economics and politics to world preeminence' (Ikenberry, 2009, p.71). Liberal principles have encouraged cooperative relations between states, and led to the construction of extensive international norms and 'rules' of the game, including economic institutions and policies for collective pursuit of growth and welfare for all actors. The post-truth moment has often been cast as a threat to these established structures, challenging core pillars of current liberal democratic forms of governance. However, the case has also been made that precisely because of the established norms and discourses of international political behaviour, post-truth is unlikely to be able to destabilise the relations, including all cooperation, that have been built up over the last 75 years, since the end of the Second World War. The architecture of human rights and international law is robust, and will impose costs on anyone who achieves a reputation for systematic breaches of these and disruptions of international cooperation (Michelsen & Tallis, 2018, p.8).

Several voices within academia have argued that the rise of post-modernism within the social sciences is partly to 'blame' for post-truth. The third perspective describes post-truth is a self-inflicted wound, as scholars and intellectuals have chipped away at and eventually eroded their ability to 'speak truth to power', leaving them with insufficient means to combat blunt falsehood (Michelsen & Tallis, 2018, pp.8-9). The

argument is, then, that the abandonment of scientific objectivity, at least as an aspiration, has left international scholarship as a whole unable to fulfill its mission. In a similar line of reasoning, some have argued that it is not necessarily so much the post-modern destabilisation of 'truth' that has caused the problem, so much as what scholars have failed to do with the resulting vacuum (Michelsen & Tallis, 2018, p.9). IR scholar Colin Wight has also argued that academia has to accept part of the blame for the contemporary situation, arguing that if 'publics no longer seem to care about facts, truth and reason, then we cannot be absolved of all responsibility for this situation. Indeed, if we do deny our responsibility, we as good as admit that we have little impact on society' (Wight, 2018, p.26). In this view, theoretical approaches that do not acknowledge the ontological existence of an objective truth and an epistemological aspiration to come as close to it as possible, have partly caused the contemporary post-truth moment.

The responses identified by Michalsen and Tallis (2018), are far from exhaustive. These theoretical traditions may be dominant within IR, but they are far from the only ones, and there is a wide range of theoretical approaches within the discipline. What has been referred to as 'post-modern approaches', which is a caricature that encompasses a wide variety of critical, post-structural, feminist and post-colonial perspectives (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.203), to name a few, arguably have valuable insights on these topics. Most obviously, because they focus on cultural categories like class, gender and race, which continue to be important factors of contemporary debates and politics. These theoretical approaches have for decades stressed the importance of culture, and problematised the prevalence of elitism, sexism, racism and xenophobia, and highlighted the social construction of individual and group identities, as well as the relationship between identity and politics (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016). These are inherent problems of contemporary international politics and post-truth debates, yet rarely seem to be the main focus of most scholarship within IR. Post-truth, furthermore, demonstrates the need to take the media, popular culture and emotions seriously within the social sciences, and particularly within IR, as the mediatised political culture may greatly impact on current and future developments in international relations. There are well-developed literatures on media and political commun-

ication, emotions in political discourse and the co-constructive relationship between popular culture and world politics.[1] With recurring references to the media, emotions and politics within the contemporary political environment, these should perhaps no longer be confined to the margins of IR scholarship.

In adhering to a post-structural theoretical approach, it could be argued that this report further contributes to the 'relativism' that has been constructed (and at least partly blamed) as a contributing cause to the existence and rise of 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. In this view, by refusing to acknowledge an 'objective truth', here about post-truth or online disinformation, this report only contributes to the damaging effects of these phenomena. This report, however, holds that the post-structural theoretical approach and discourse analytical framework can illuminate how the constructions of such phenomena impact our understanding of them and of our social reality. Even if fake news and post-truth were mere social constructions and not rooted in an 'objective reality', it would not mean that it would not still be valuable to ask what impacts those social constructions have. Whether or not they are based in any objective reality, they have clearly become part of our social realities in that they are part of great public debates, and have informed the construction of EU policies. Whatever their cause, they have real social impacts in that discourse and practice is constructed around them. The report does, thus, not seek to capture the 'objective truth', but rather how the EU's constructions of these phenomena, relations of causality and actors involved can be understood, as a contribution to contemporary debates, especially in regard to liberal democratic principles of freedom of expression. In the following, the theoretical framework for the report is outlined.

3.2 Post-structural and discourse theory

Post-structuralism is described as a critical attitude rather than a grand theoretical paradigm, through which everything is understood. A post-structuralist approach emphasises the importance of representation, the

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[1] See, for instance, Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). *Emotions, media and politics*. John Wiley & Sons., Crawford, N. C. (2014). Institutionalizing passion in world politics: Fear and empathy. *International Theory*, 6(3), 535-557., or Neumann, I. B., and Nexon D. H. (2006). *Harry Potter and International Relations*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

relationship between power and knowledge, and the politics of identity in the study of global affairs. It also critically engages with theories of the international, posing a series of metatheoretical questions, about the theory of theory, 'in order to understand how particular ways of knowing, what counts as knowing, and who can know, have been established over time' (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.198). This attitude acknowledges that all social actors, including both individuals and collectives, continuously engage in interpretations of 'the world', and that, as the world is incredibly complex and can never be understood in its 'totality', every interpretation depends on abstractions and complexity reductions. The ontological existence of objects external to thought, would still mean that an account of these would require interpretation (and thought). Therefore a post-structuralist approach also assumes that '[e]ven the most "object-tive" theory that claims to offer a perfect resemblance of things does not escape the need for interpretation' (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.196). Thus, this theoretical approach disregards the (positivist) idea of an elite/higher-status objective Truth, with a capital T. However, this does not mean that every personal opinion or interpretation will count as equally legitimate knowledge. There is a social component to all interpret-tations and perspectives and to knowledge production. Some understand-dings and interpretations become dominant, whereas others stay on the margins. Thus:

> [D]ominant understandings of world politics are both arbitrary, in the sense that they are but one possibility among a range of possibilities, and non-arbitrary, in the sense that certain social and historical practices have given rise to dominant ways of making 'the world' that have very real effects upon our lives.
>
> (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016, p.197)

From this perspective, all knowledge is, therefore, linked to power, as certain perspectives, discourses or agents have more power to influence public discourse, perceptions and knowledge, and induce change.

Within this perspective, discourse analyses can be useful in order to critically engage with and elicit different interpretations and repress-entations of the world, and is a much used analytical framework and methodological procedure. A discourse can be understood as a particular

way of interpreting and giving meaning to the world. Any one interpretation or discourse is understood to only comprise one way of complexity reduction, that both facilitates and constrains a range of potential expressions and actions that can be performed at any given time. This understanding of the international assumes that there is 'both an original openness to social reality (it could always be otherwise) and a historical closure (it is not otherwise due to historical path dependencies that accumulate over time)' (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.20). Some discourses become sedimented and more established as 'truths' than others, and some even to the point where they are no longer questioned but routineised and taken for granted within the discourse. There is, however, an ever ongoing interplay between sedimentation and reactivation, where the constitutive activity of thought is recovered and the taken-for-granted is once again questioned and destabilised (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.22).

In this way, discourses are different from traditional conceptions of structure in that they are not rigidly fixed. Discourses 'have a structural quality in that they are more than the sum of individual acts, but they are at the same time dependent on the latter' (Diez, 1999, p.611). They are dynamic forces that are continuously renewed and reconstructed, and as such their contents cannot be forever determined, only approximated. Discourses are structures that predispose, but do not determine, as there is always room for creativity. However, 'this creativity is not unlimited, and it does not originate within the individual because the latter operates from a subject position that is in itself discursively produced' (Diez, 1999, p.611). Articulations need not be consciously conceived of as reformulateions within a discourse to be such, and might induce changes within a discourse that were not originally intended. An important part of discourse analysis is, then, to examine 'the extent to which articulations combine linguistic elements in novel ways, or whether they largely reproduce the prevailing rationalities' (Diez, 1999, p.611). Discourses at the same time set limits to what articulations and actions are made possible, yet are also productive and can enable actions and enable change.

Milliken (1999), in an attempt to draw out the theoretical and analytical frameworks of discourse analyses, identified three distinct analytical practices. The first is based on a constructivist understanding of meaning, and describes discourses as systems of signification that construct social

realities. Within this framework, there is an emphasis on the relationships between signs, and how objects are distinguished from one another within the discourse system. Discourses are largely considered to be structured in 'binary oppositions – educated/ignorant, modern/traditional, Western/Third World - that, far from being neutral, establish a relation of power such that one element in the binary is privileged' (Milliken, 1999, p.229). The second is based on the theoretical commitment to discourse productivity, and focuses on dominating or hegemonic discourses and their impact on practices and actions taken. Discourses are, then, seen as productive (or reproductive) of subjects, phenomena, or structures defined by the discourse, as 'beyond giving a language for speaking about (analysing, classifying) phenomena, discourses make intelligible some ways of being in, and acting towards, the world, and of operationalizing a particular "regime of truth" while excluding other possible modes of identity and action' (Milliken, 1999, p.229). The third framework further follows this commitment to discourse productivity, by studying how dominating and hegemonic discourses become such, through the implementation of practices and ways of legitimation. This, then, often emphasises the efforts made to stabilise and fix dominant meanings, as well as 'subjugated knowledges', which are 'alternative discourses excluded or silenced by a hegemonic discourse' (Milliken, 1999, p.230).

This report draws on all of the above theoretical frameworks, but particularly follows an understanding of discourse productivity. The idea of discourse productivity is that not only does discourse reflect interpretations and understandings of the world, it is also involved in producing those worlds and bringing them into existence. Discourses can be understood as structures that both define and exclude certain types of knowledge and subjects that are authorised to speak and act within a certain issue-area, for instance 'by limiting and restricting authorities and experts to some groups, but not others, [and/or] endorsing a certain common sense, but making other modes of categorizing and judging meaningless, impracticable, inadequate or otherwise disqualified' (Milliken, 1999, p.229). A discourse can also produce and define the relations between these subjects, how they see themselves and how they are seen by others. In this way, discourses can be seen as important in the construction of identities, and the relationship between self and other(s), both between individuals (who I am and you are) and collectives (who

'we' are and 'they' are). Discourses, furthermore, organise social space, producing places and groups, which is particularly relevant for this report in regard to how the online public sphere and power to impact it is produced in discourse around online disinformation. What is, furthermore, described as particularly significant in relation to legitimation of international practices 'is that discourses produce as subjects publics (audiences) for authorized actors, and their common sense of the existence and qualities of different phenomena and of how public officials should act for them and in their name' (Milliken, 1999, p.229). Thus, discourse productivity is relevant for this report, as the EU's policy on online disinformation produces the existence and qualities of disinformation and other phenomena, subjects and authorities of the policy and of the online sphere, as well as how different actors ought to act in regard to given issues, including the EU itself.

This report has already touched upon some of these features of discourse in regard to discourses around fake news and post-truth described in chapter two. For instance, it has highlighted how there are a number of related yet distinct definitions of fake news, characterising the phenomena differently and focusing on various aspects, where some have become more dominant in the contemporary discourse. The report has also outlined how post-truth discourses describe actors, such as journalists, social media platforms, politicians and citizens, constructing roles for these in relation to the phenomena. Fake news and post-truth are, furthermore, entangled in many different discursive structures at the same time, and this report does not produce a comprehensive analysis of each of these. One such discursive structure is the aforementioned medicalised discourse, which describes these phenomena in medical terms, within a broader positivist frame of causality and effect. Another, and one of the most prominent examples of insights gained through post-structural analyses within IR, is the theoretical framework and discourse of securitisation. In the study of international discourse and politics, securitisation theory seeks to understand how the security character of a public problem is established, how a phenomena is fixed and socially accepted as a threat, and, furthermore, how the possibility of a particular policy is created (Balzacq, Léonard, & Ruzicka, 2016). Fake news and post-truth have often been invoked and described with reference to security, and been cast as a threat to democratic society, and something society

(and/or specific actors) needs protection from (Farkas & Schou, 2020). This report will, however, not apply these theoretical frameworks directly, or specifically engage with these particular discursive frames. Rather, the objective of this report is to identify, more broadly, discursive constructions and understandings of the phenomena, as well as subjects and actors constructed in regard to these, focusing in particular on those constructions by the EU.

The report focuses on the dominant discursive constructions and understandings of these phenomena in the context of the EU's policy on online disinformation. The dominant discourses about fake news and post-truth also entail understandings and representations that could guide contemporary political actions, interventions and policies that produce the social world and international system. Discourses produce knowledge and practices for its subjects, rendering different kinds of actions and interventions logical or proper (Milliken, 1999, p.229). In regard to the focus of this report, the EU's policy on online disinformation can similarly be understood as an action that has been rendered logical or proper by certain dominant discourses or understandings. The EU's interpretation or understanding of the phenomena, issues around them and various actors defined by the discourse, is what this report seeks to elicit in the discourse analysis. Furthermore, it is interested in how the EU, in the construction of these policies, draws on other existing discourses and understandings around fake news and post-truth.

The report, furthermore, by highlighting these discursive practices, seeks to contribute to an enhanced awareness of the power of discourse and language in the construction of the online sphere, and its impacts from and on the contexts in which this discourse is situated. It aims to illustrate the EU's contributions to the production of certain acceptable actions and interventions, and the dismissal or exclusion of others. Diez (1999) argued that language and discursive practices play a crucial role in the change of institutions, and that 'no one can control language, but everyone contributes to it in each new articulation' (Diez, 1999, p.613). Following this, the definitions and discourses outlined above is understood to also play a part in forming norms and institutions for the online public sphere. Diez, furthermore, argued, in relation to the polity and identity construction of the EU, that 'speaking Europe' 'is always to participate in

a struggle, as much as is practised from within a discursive context' (Diez, 1999, p.612). Drawing on this, this report is understood as a contribution to the construction of both the phenomena and discourses of analysis, as well as an understanding and representation of the EU. Thus, it is necessary to be as explicit as possible, within the limits of a report such as this, in order to show, and reflect on, the choices made in this study. The next section will therefore lay out the methodological framework for the analysis.

Chapter 4

Methodology

This part of the report sets out to clarify the qualitative methodology used for the discourse analysis of the EU's policy on online disinformation. It elaborates on the methodological decisions made in this report, the selection of material and concepts, and the challenges and limitations of the discourse analysis approach. The section further clarifies how the discourse theory has been operationalised and applied to elicit the discursive constructions of relevant discursive signifiers in these texts, and how these are critically analysed to identify what these convey about the EU's understandings of democracy, other actors and the EU itself.

4.1 Methodology and analytical framework

How can knowledge of the EU's understanding of these phenomena be obtained? Research always involves making certain assumptions and decisions about what phenomena exist in the world, and how we can obtain knowledge of these. It is important to be explicit about these choices, as they will have an impact on the findings and conclusions of the study. This report takes a post-structural theoretical point of view and holds that all attempts to gain knowledge of the world involves interpretation. These interpretations of the world will always involve complexity reductions, and, thus, never be an objective account of how the world

'really is', but rather an abstraction of it. The methodological decisions made will also be based on the theoretical premise of the report. Thus, this report takes an interpretivist approach to the study of the international, and holds that observations and facts cannot be separated from subjective interpretation. Therefore, it does not try to evaluate whether the EU's discourse accurately describes the phenomena or make causal explanations for its existence, but rather focuses on the productive capacity of discourse, and how it may influence contemporary knowledge and understandings of these phenomena of study. Based on this theoretical premise, the report is considered an interpretative contribution of the EU's discourse on online disinformation and not an objective 'Truth' about it.

The methodology used in this report draws on distinctive features of discourse theory as it was set out above. Using selected analytical tools of discourse analysis, this part of the report will outline how certain discursive signifiers are constructed in these texts. Drawing on the discourse theory outlined above, this report assumes that discursive attempts to fix the meaning of what fake news and online disinformation is, are not just 'objective' analyses of a pre-given social reality. This does not make them false or insignificant, quite on the contrary, they are 'as essential for our knowledge as the zoologist's classification of her "beast"' (Diez, 1999, p.610). This report holds that definitions and descriptions of fake news and online disinformation, as well as the contemporary international political environment (post-truth), function as important signifiers within a simultaneous discourse about democracy and truth. In trying to establish the extent of their impact on public deliberation and decision-making, as well as questions surrounding the causes of their emergence, interpretations and representations are necessary. Abstractions and complexity reductions are made in order to make claims about the world, and, thus, any one representation is only one abstraction or reduction of many possible alternatives. In analysing these representations, the report seeks to uncover what abstractions and reductions have been made in the EU's discourse in order to legitimise these policies and actions.

Predicate analysis is, then, a suitable method for the study of discourse and language practices in texts (for instance policy documents). This is a method that focuses on the language practices of predication, such as the

verbs, adverbs or adjectives that are attached to nouns or objects in a discourse. These predications encircle the noun and 'construct the thing(s) named as a particular sort of thing, with particular features and capacities. Among the objects so constituted may be subjects, defined through being assigned capacities for and modes of acting and interacting' (Milliken, 1999, p.232). This report draws on this method in the analysis of identified discursive signifiers and subjects in the EU's policy on online disinformation. Though the policy is on online disinformation, the report holds that:

> [A] text never constructs only one thing. Instead, in implicit or explicit parallels and contrasts, other things (other subjects) will also be labelled and given meaningful attributes by their predicates. A set of predicate constructs defines a space of objects differentiated from, while being related to, one another.
>
> (Milliken, 1999, p.232)

It follows that the policy, either implicitly or explicitly, is understood as also constructing other subjects and objects, differentiated from, yet also related to one another. The report therefore also looks at the predications attached to space (i.e. the online sphere), actors (i.e. EU citizens), and the contemporary (i.e. post-truth era) as constructing particular understanddings of these.

Discourse often includes interpretations and representations of actors, including non-state actors like citizens, the media (including both traditional, online and social media), and politicians and state-actors, like the EU-member states themselves and others, for example Russia. These contribute to understandings of identity, and how the EU situates itself as an actor amongst many others, both state and non-state, larger organisations and individuals. It helps provide an understanding of the EU's perspective on the international environment, its agency in it, and power relations between itself and other actors. However, as identity constructions are understood as unstable and contested, this report does not understand the identities found in these texts as fixed or definite, but as continuously contested and evolving. As such, this report will only aim to contribute an interpretation of how the EU constructs these identities in these texts, and not aim to make any generalisations on the basis of this.

Finally, these discursive constructions of the contemporary, actors and causality links also produce the contemporary, actors and visions for the future. There are infinite possible alternative 'futures', but there are also limitations on these possible scenarios due to dependency and historical contingency. The discourse analysed here is one contribution to understandings of the contemporary that also produces understandings of historical development and possible developments of the international for the future. The policies are in themselves responses to previous understandings that have legitimised the EU taking these actions. Similarly the discourse of these policies will enable some actions and restrict others. This report therefore also seeks to understand how these discourses may impact the future development of the online sphere, media, democracy and international relations and the international order. Temporal discursive constructions are therefore also analysed as important aspects of the discourse.

4.2 Data collection and text selection

The report understands the EU's official policy discourse on online disinformation, as the discourse through which its understandings of these phenomena are expressed and its actions legitimised. The primary focus of the analysis is on how the EU gives meaning to the phenomena. The data for the analysis has been collected from the EU's official webpages on the policy on tackling fake news and disinformation online. As a qualitative study, the report has chosen these texts using a purposive sampling approach, selecting texts relevant to the research questions posed (Bryman, 2016, p.408). As the official narrative represented by the EU is what is the focus of this report, the main texts of analysis consist of official communications, policy documents, and reports issued and published by the EU.[2] The texts have all been chosen following a screening of relevant material on the websites of the EU institutions, where they have been linked to the policy on tackling online disinformation. The main texts are selected from the European Commission's (EC's) website on

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[2] The websites used for data collection were all official websites of the EU, and all texts were retreived from the European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation, and the Eurobarometer https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/General/index.

online disinformation, as the EC was called upon by the European Parliament (EP) to form the policy (EC 2018a).

This report approaches these texts through a post-structural theory lense, and therefore views them as interpretations in themselves, and not as established facts of the contemporary. It does not seek to challenge the validity of statements made, however, but rather to understand how these representations of the EU's interpretations of the contemporary are constitutive and productive of the policy and further political action. These texts are, then, primarily used in order to analyse the definitions and operationalisations of discursive signifiers, as well as constructions of relevant actors and temporality. For instance, the report uses the Eurobarometer (2018) opinion poll report on fake news and online disinformation primarily for data on operationalisation of these concepts, as well as discursive signifiers, like democracy, related to the EU's discourse on these topics. The EU fact-checking website for online disinformation[3] is primarily studied as discourse practice, and a measure that illustrates the productive aspect of discourse. The Code of Practice (2018) and the Media Literacy Expert Group (MLEG) texts have similarly been used to study the cooperation between EU and other actors, as well as descriptions of these actors (and citizens), discursive signifiers and temporal expressions. The findings and conclusions made in these texts, such as the opinions of respondents to surveys, or the news articles and facts debunked as false, are therefore not the primary focus of the analysis.

The number of documents that have been selected is 11, in addition to descriptions of these texts made on the online website where they were found. This is not a high number, but as this report is qualitative, the aim is not to quantitatively calculate discursive signifiers in the texts, but rather to do an interpretive analysis of how these are defined, described and constructed contextually. This means understanding how these are interpreted and produced, in relation to what these are mentioned, and how they contribute to legitimising the EU's policy and action to tackle online disinformation.

This report uses selected statements from these texts in order to emphasise the general discourse of the texts and, furthermore, of the EU's policy on

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[3] See https://euvsdisinfo.eu/.

online disinformation itself. These decisions are made on the basis of an understanding that they represent the positions of the EU regarding online disinformation as well as related and relevant concepts and phenomena that are the focus of this study. It is important to note that the EU and its different bodies of governance have generated several related policies and policy papers, as well as taken other measures and actions, regarding the online sphere, democracy and its relationship to other actors. For instance, the EU has its own policies on media freedom and plurality,[4] cybersecurity,[5] data protection regulation,[6] and media literacy.[7] This report will, however, focus primarily on the texts specifically linked by the EU to the policy on tackling online disinformation. Some of these texts will refer to other policies and procedures, and there may, thus, be some overlap with other texts and measures taken by the EU. These other measures and texts are, however, only mentioned in this report in such circumstances. Although the selection of texts limits the analysis' possibility of pursuing a temporal analysis of discursive stability of the EU's discourse, the contemporary discourse is understood to draw upon broader and historical sets of representations and discourse. However, in this way, the report enables more focus on how these policies themselves produce meanings of the phenomena and actors, (online) space and the international, and our (current) time.

In terms of timeline, this report focuses on the period since 2016, as the political events of that year are considered to have prompted the increase in use of fake news and post-truth in public debate and discourse. The EU's policy on online disinformation was first formulated in a communication from the European Commission in 2018, after the Commission was called upon by the European Parliament in 2017 to develop such a policy paper (EC 2018a). However, EU politicians had been debating policy and laws to tackle fake news since 2016 (Schumacher, Dec. 18, 2016). The EU has

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[4] See https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/policies/media-freedom-and-pluralism

[5] See https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eu-cybersecurity-plan-protect-open-internet-and-online-freedom-and-opportunity-cyber-security

[6] See https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection/data-protection-eu_en

[7] See https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/media-literacy-background-documents

moreover had a focus on related concepts and phenomena for much longer. This report and research was approached, however, from an interest in the EU's engagement with fake news and post-truth, as concepts of great relevance to the contemporary international political environment. Therefore, it chooses to focus on the policy on online disinformation, considering this the most relevant policy in this regard.

4.3 Limitations to this approach

Through the research process, it is important that the report maintains a degree of logical consistency between the research questions posed, and the data collected and put forward to answer them. Not only must the research questions be answered, but the conclusions drawn must logically follow from the findings and argumentation. This report sets out to explore how the EU's policy on online disinformation contributes to current debates and public discourse about fake news and post-truth. Furthermore, the objective is to understand the EU's interpretation of and response to these phenomena, especially in regard to liberal democratic principles of freedom of expression. The research questions were constructed in an effort to clarify these objectives of the report and to guide the research process, and the main research question, thus, regards the EU's understanding of the phenomena in relation to democratic freedom of expression. This question, then, assumes that the EU's understanding of the phenomena in relation to freedom of expression is disclosed in this policy and that it can be revealed through analysis of these texts. This is further discussed in the discussion of the findings. There are, furthermore, other EU policies regarding the online sphere and freedom of expression, which could have been embedded in the study. This would, however, have been outside the scope of this report. This report is primarily interested in how the discourse of the EU's policy on online disinformation, specifically, contributes to these understandings.

In addition to this, the study also aims to address how the policy's discourse speaks to the identity of the EU, as questions regarding the meaning-making of the EU also raises questions regarding its identity and understanding of self. There is a large amount of literature available on the EU, its role as an international actor, and its understanding of self. The EU can be understood as representing a pillar of the liberal order, and its

role in the world as shaped by a self-understanding of being a liberal democratic area (Lucarelli, 2018). However, conceptualisations of the EU vary greatly within the discipline (Hill, Smith & Vanhoonacker, 2017, p.5). This report chooses to focus on the understanding of self found in the policy texts, and does not do a comprehensive analysis of the polity as such. Studying how the EU's representation of self in this policy fits into its historical development and context as an actor, could, however, be an interesting avenue for further research.

The report has a focus on the official EU discourse and the analysis is based on documents found on the EU's own websites. It could, however, be interesting to study this topic from another point of view, for instance from the perspective of those actors that are subject to the EU's policies on fake news and online disinformation. It could be an interesting avenue of research in order to establish how the EU's operationalisations and conceptualisations relate to other actor's discourses. The online platforms and social media actors, for instance, that enable distribution of (dis-)information online could be such a case. It could also be the case that different actors within the EU have divergent concerns or frames with regard to online disinformation. Further research on the different political responses and discourses on a nation-state level could also further enhance an understanding of internal discursive struggles between the different member states of the EU. This report, however, has chosen to focus on the EU's official discourse in these policy texts and documents provided by the EU itself.

As previously mentioned, fake news and post-truth are, furthermore, entangled in many different discursive structures at the same time, and rather than looking specifically at either of these discursive frames, this report aims to map out and provide an overview of some of these. The medicalised (positivist) discourse and the discursive frame of security-sation are, thus, only briefly explored. However, exploring these in more detail and pursuing a more comprehensive analysis of each in regard to EU policies, could be an interesting avenue for further research. In that regard, this report could function as a good foundation, by laying out a broader view of discourse on these topics and discursive frames drawn upon in this policy.

The report, moreover, aims to address how the contemporary discourse struggles around these phenomena tie into (and/or define) the broader international context of 2020, as the study assumes that developments in the world contribute to the shaping of the EU. It could be the case that recent crises such as the financial (Eurozone) crisis, the refugee crisis, or the Brexit referendum have influenced the EU's understanding of the online public sphere and impacted the decision to take actions in regard to online disinformation. It has, furthermore, been argued that 'the multiple crises of the EU in recent times have functioned as a catalyst for change in the role and character of the European digital public spheres' (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017, p.15). However, a more comprehensive analysis of these subjects is not undertaken, even though some of these issues are highlighted as potential contributing factors to the EU's discourse and understanding. Likewise, no comprehensive analysis of the effects of the Brexit referendum on the EU's involvement in this policy area is undertaken, but the report understands that it may have encouraged the EU to explore this issue, as there have been concerns that fake news and online disinformation may have impacted voters' decisions in the Brexit referendum, and ultimately the UK's decision to leave the EU. These issues' impact on the EU's discourse is, however, not the main focus of the report, but these are briefly discussed in relation to how they may influence contemporary discourse struggles around these phenomena and the EU's understanding of these.

Lastly, in applying a post-structural theoretical framework, this report does not claim to tell the 'objective truth', but still argues that it can help navigate the contemporary international debate and various interpretations of these phenomena and issues. The argument that many of the prescribed features of these terms and phenomena are not new, but have been part of politics and public discourse for a long time, serve to illustrate the necessity for conducting research on how these have come to be important subjects of political debate and action now. The discursive struggles outlined in the previous chapters further highlight the contested nature of these concepts, and the way discursive attempts to fix these meanings only contribute new interpretations. As previously mentioned, some have also argued or implied that, by adhering to a post-structural methodological approach, researchers contribute to the 'relativism' that has led to the contemporary post-truth moment (Wight 2018, McNair,

2018). This report, however, argues that post-structural analysis can help make sense of these developments. The analytical and conceptual tools of post-structuralism are understood as helpful in uncovering the conditions of possibility that enable actions to be taken due to post-truth politics. It, furthermore, understands the post-structural framework as making an important contribution to research methodologies, in that it enables the tools to uncover, critique and destabilise representations, knowledge claims and identities that are embedded in contemporary discourse (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2019). This report chooses to use such a post-structural theory and discourse methodological framework arguing that this is highly suitable for an interpretive analysis of this kind, which seeks to elicit different understandings of these phenomena and provide a new perspective on the contemporary international debate and the EU's actions in this regard.

Chapter 5

The EU's Discourse on Disinformation

This chapter of the report presents the findings derived from the discourse analysis, using the methodological framework outlined above, on the EU's policy on online disinformation. The chapter is, therefore, divided into four subchapters that delve into the different topics. Firstly, findings related to the different discursive signifiers that have been identified, including fake news, online disinformation, and the contemporary political environment (post-truth) are presented. Then, the report goes on to look at causal explanations and actors identified by the EU as contributing to the proliferation of disinformation. Following this, it examines how the EU's understanding of these phenomena and causal links materialises in the EU's response to these phenomena. Finally, the findings on the EU's understanding of these phenomena in relation to democratic freedom of expression are presented.

5.1 Disinformation well beyond fake news

This first part of the analytical findings relates to the understanding of phenomena identified as part of the contemporary political environment. As such, it highlights important terms in the ontological repertoire of the EU. This section will outline the definitions and descriptions of the first

discursive signifiers mentioned above, including fake news, online disinformation and post-truth.

In June 2017, the European Parliament (EP) called upon the European Commission (EC) to give an in depth analysis of the current situation and legal framework with regard to fake news, in order to determine the possibility for legislative intervention to limit its spread (EC, 2018a). In April 2018, the EC published a Communication titled 'Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach'. The opening line declares that '[t]he exposure of citizens to large scale disinformation, including misleading or outright false information, is a major challenge for Europe' (EC, 2018a). The following December, the EC also published an 'Action plan against Disinformation' (EC, 2018d), answering to the European Council's call for measures to 'combat disinformation', and 'protect the Union's democratic systems', especially with regard to European elections in May 2019 (EUCO 2018a, EUCO 2018b, EC 2018d). The language practices of predication, the verbs, adverbs and adjectives that are attached to the noun disinformation, already illustrates here how this concept is constructed as being 'large scale', a 'challenge' that the EU's democratic systems needs 'protection' from, with a requirement for measures to 'combat' it. Furthermore, the fact that it was put under the headings 'security and defence' and 'internal security', respectively, in the European Council's Meeting Conclusions (EUCO 2018a, EUCO 2018b), shows how disinformation is presented as a threat to security and democracy in the EU. The citizens are represented as the ones exposed to this threat, and disinformation then becomes a problem for the EU through the democratic system.

In the time leading up to the development of a policy on tackling online disinformation, several public consultations were conducted. In a public opinion survey on 'fake news and disinformation online', the Eurobarometer broadly defined fake news as 'news or information that [respondents] believe misrepresents reality or is false' (Eurobarometer, 2018). It is worth noting how this definition does not frame the concept in a more categorical sense, for instance by asking whether the respondent is certain or knows that the news or information is false, but refers to the respondent's 'belief'. Survey questions using this definition are, then, also interesting, as it is difficult to tell what could have been the result of such

a survey in a different context or at a different time, for instance before 2016 or the popularisation of this concept. In the contemporary context, it is hardly surprising that the response is not close to zero. A certain amount of scepticism to news articles, constructions and articulations of newsworthy events could also be considered good or 'healthy', as the concept of media literacy also implies, as 'a key stone in all possible definitions of media literacy is the development of critical thinking' (MLEG, 2018). However, the synopsis report of the public consultation found that 'over 97% of citizens' claimed to have been exposed to fake news (EC, 2018b). The findings from these consultations also helped form a foundation and legitimation for the development of the policy framework.

The synopsis report of the public consultations (EC, 2018b) makes suggestions for how to define fake news, however, it also highlights disagreement over using the term fake news for the phenomena. The report notes a consensus between the organisations and journalists for three criteria for the definition, including '1) intent, the apparent objectives pursued by fake news; 2) the sources of such news and 3) the actual content of the news' (p.6). The report, furthermore, emphasises the necessity for 'a sufficiently objective definition of misinformation (or fake news)', describing it as a prerequisite to avoid the risk of any 'suboptimal outcome such as arbitrary censorship' (p.21). It further elaborates that '[t]he existence of a clear intention behind the fake news would set the difference with misinformation' (p.6). Misinformation, then, is referred to as unintentionally wrong information, 'provided owing for instance to good-faith mistakes or to non-respecting basic journalism standards (verification of sources, investigation of facts, etc.)' (p.6). Fake news, however, as a term, is described as being particularly criticised by civil society organisations and news media, for being 'misleading and with negative connotations', as it is 'used by those who criticise the work of media or opposing political views' (p.7). The term disinformation was suggested as 'a more appropriate expression, that would imply that the phenomena is a symptom of a wider problem of information disorder' (p.7).

This suggestion, then, draws on the conceptual framework developed by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017), in their report for the Council of Europe entitled 'Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking'. In this report,

two reasons were given for avoiding using the term fake news, with the first being that it was 'woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of information pollution' and the second, that it had been 'appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable. In this way, it's becoming a mechanism by which the powerful can clamp down upon, restrict, undermine and circumvent the free press' (p.5). Additionally, it is later emphasised that the term has allowed the debate to frame fake news as a textual problem, and, thus, that the solutions have been aimed at articles, neglecting 'the implications of misleading, manipulated or fabricated visual content, whether that's an image, a visualization, a graphic, or a video' (p.18). A picture is worth a thousand words, and according to this report, 'visuals can be far more persuasive than other forms of communication, which can make them much more powerful vehicles for mis- and disinformation' (p.18). Instead of 'fake news', the authors introduce a framework of three distinct concepts for examining information disorder: mis-, dis- and mal-information. Mis-information 'is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant', dis-information 'is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm', and mal-information 'is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere' (p.5). All of these phenomena are considered problematic, however, being 'most concerned about false information and content spreading', the primary focus of the report is on mis- and dis-information (p.21).

This conceptual framework, furthermore, seems to have become the basis for the policy. Claire Wardle is also a member of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (HLEG, 2018), which focuses on the concept of disinformation, understood as 'a phenomenon that goes well beyond the term "fake news"' (p.5). This, furthermore, excludes 'issues arising from the creation and dissemination online of illegal content (notably defamation, hate speech, incitement to violence), which are subject to regulatory remedies under EU or national laws', as well as 'other forms of deliberate but not misleading distortions of facts such a satire and parody' (p.5). In this report, disinformation 'includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit' (p.5). The EC (2018a) followed the HLEG in employing this term, however, defining

it somewhat differently, as 'verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm' [emphasis added] (pp.3-4). We note here that the EC's definition is slightly changed, using, for instance, 'verifiably false' and not 'inaccurate', and 'to intentionally deceive the public' not 'to intentionally cause public harm'. The EC's definition, then, focuses on deception of the public as the main offense, holding that it may cause public harm. 'Public harm' is furthermore understood to comprise 'threats to democratic political and policymaking processes as well as public goods such as the protection of EU citizens' health, the environment or security' (p.4).

Disinformation is, in this way, constructed as part of 'the complex phenomena of information pollution' (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and 'a symptom of a wider problem of information disorder' (EC, 2018b), whereby the public is intentionally deceived (EC, 2018a). In the EC's Communication (EC, 2018a), disinformation is, furthermore, described as eroding trust 'in institutions and in digital and traditional media', and harming 'our democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed decisions', and it, furthermore, 'often supports radical and extremist ideas and activities' and 'impairs freedom of expression' (p.1). This last point is especially highlighted in regard to citizens' right to receive and impart information and ideas 'without interference by public authorities' (p.1). Disinformation is also described as a 'powerful and inexpensive – and often economically profitable – tool of influence' (p.5) that can be used 'to manipulate policy and societal debates' (p.4). The phenomena comes to have great potential to deceive, influence and manipulate the public. The Communication declares that most known cases of the phenomenon are 'written articles, sometimes complemented by authentic pictures or audiovisual content taken out of context' (p.5). However, it also points out that 'new, affordable, and easy-to-use technology is now available to create false pictures and audiovisual content (so called 'deep fakes'), offering more potent means for manipulating public opinion' (p.5). In summary, this powerful and profitable tool of manipulation, that often supports radical and extremist ideas and activities, is now amplified and boosted by new technology, and will continue to deceive the public and erode trust, harming freedom of

expression and our democracies, unless something is done to remedy the current situation.

Finally, then, there is no direct reference to post-truth in any of these texts, however, the use of the present form conjugation and descriptions of the contemporary may well be understood as forming a similar meaning of the contemporary political environment. In addition to what has already been mentioned, the HLEG (2018) considers disinformation to be more of a threat in certain contexts, as 'highly polarized societies with low levels of trust provide a fertile ground for the production and circulation of ideologically motivated disinformation' (p.11). It further describes media literacy and critical thinking skills as 'crucial for the 21st century citizen', and all the more so as 'biased and polarising content' now 'increasingly splices truth and fiction and circulates in hard-to-track formats' (p.26). Keeping in mind that the HLEG report also draws on Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) report, it is also interesting to note that the latter highlights how the human mind and memory is vulnerable to both internal and external influences, that 'in the context of social networks that are bombarding us with information', is described as a 'challenge for the human brain today' (pp.44-45). This might imply that the current political environment is in a post-truth state, and these findings will be further considered and discussed in chapter six. The following turns to the actors identified and causal links made.

5.2 Causal explanations

This second section of the analytical findings relates to the understanding of causal explanations for the proliferation of disinformation, identified as part of the contemporary political environment. As such, it highlights important causes and actors identified by the EU. This section will outline the descriptions of the cause(s) and actors identified as involved in the proliferation of disinformation, including factors of the contemporary societal context, as well as actors such as digital and traditional media, political actors and public authorities.

The EC's Communication on tackling disinformation (EC, 2018a) lists several reasons for the proliferation of disinformation, describing it as the result of 'interrelated economic, technological, political, and ideological causes' (p.4). Firstly, in a context of 'societies facing rapid change', public

anxiety, caused by different factors, such as economic insecurity, rising extremism, and cultural shifts, is described as having provided 'a breeding ground for disinformation campaigns to foster societal tensions, polarisation, and distrust' (p.4). Secondly, the context is, furthermore, described as one in which the media sector is 'undergoing profound transformation', with the 'rise of platforms' having 'deeply affected journalists and professional news media outlets' (p.4). These platforms are not specified as online platforms, the report, however, understands them as such, as it states earlier that 'online platforms that distribute content, particularly social media, video-sharing services and search engines, play a key role in the spread and amplification of online disinformation' (p.2). These platforms, having 'taken on functions traditionally associated with media outlets', such as 'content aggregators and distributors without necessarily taking on the editorial frameworks and capabilities of such outlets', are particularly highlighted as a contributing cause to the proliferation of disinformation. It further elaborates that '[t]heir economic incentives lead them to capture a large users' base by exploiting network effects and to maximize the time users spend on their services by privileging quantity of information over quality, regardless of the impact' (pp.4-5). As a third point, it is further highlighted that 'social networking technologies are manipulated to spread disinformation through a series of sequential steps: (i) creation; (ii) amplification through social and other online media; and (iii) dissemination by users' (p.5). In this way, then, online platforms and social media are held responsible, as the lack of editorial frameworks and capabilities, the privileging of quantity over quality of information, and the regardlessness of impact, enables the creation, amplification and dissemination of disinformation. The current context of public anxiety, furthermore, facilitates the 'breeding' of disinformation, which further 'fosters' societal tensions.

These (infra-)structures, then, allow malicious actors to spread disinformation, but who is it that actually creates, amplifies and disseminates the disinformation? The HLEG (2018) states that '[s]ome forms of disinformation have clearly been enabled by the development of specific digital media, including platform products and services, but the problem also involves some political actors, news media, and civil society actors' (2018, p.11). The EC's Communication (EC, 2018a) sees disinformation as a tool

for '[o]rganisations and agencies of influence', whether they are 'under-takings, states, or non-governmental organisations with a stake in political and policy debates, including sources external to the EU' (p.4). This 'range of domestic and foreign actors' are, then, the creators and administrators of '[m]ass online disinformation campaigns' used 'to sow distrust and create societal tensions, with serious potential consequences for our security' (pp.1-2). In the following, the report examines further how these actors are described.

The HLEG (2018) report identifies political actors as potential 'purveyors of disinformation', suggesting that 'foreign governments or domestic groups could be working actively to undermine the integrity of European media systems and political processes' (p.11). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) note in their report that '[t]he shock of the Brexit referendum' and 'Le Pen reaching the run-off vote in the French election' have, amongst other political events, 'been used as examples of the potential power of systematic dis-information campaigns', but that 'empirical data about the exact influence of such campaigns does not exist' (p.14). This could be a reason for leaving specific political events or entities out of the official policy papers, as these texts have no reference to any specific event or internal political actors. The EC's Communication on online disinfor-mation (EC, 2018a), however, still recognises that domestic political actors can be potential purveyors of disinformation (p.15). The Communication draws on the HLEG (2018), which neither refers to any political actors, entities or events specifically, however, contends that 'not all European politicians and public authorities share the same level of respect for media freedom and independence'(p.11). It further holds that 'some actively seek to directly or indirectly control both private sector and public service news media, and some European citizens regard political actors and public authorities with considerable scepticism' (p.11). Some internal political actors and public authorities are, then, constructed as purveyors of disin-formation, and some citizens hold considerable scepticism towards politi-cal and public figures. Foreign political actors, however, seem to be of more serious concern.

The Communication (EC, 2018a) highlights that 'disinformation camp-aigns by third countries can be part of hybrid threats to internal security,

including election processes, in particular in combination with cyb-erattacks', exemplifying this by referring to Russia, as the 'Russian military doctrine explicitly recognises information warfare as one of its domains' (pp.1-2). Employed in this sense, disinformation attains a meaning similar to that of propaganda, becoming an external threat, a weapon for states or governmental actors, in attacks against European societies in an information war. It is also noted here, that, already in 2015, the European Council called upon the High Representative to develop an action plan specifically 'to address Russia's on-going disinformation campaigns', which led to the establishment of the East Stratcom Task Force within the European External Action Service, which took effect later the same year (p.2). One dimension of the Task Force's implementation is the EU fact-checking site 'EUvsDisinfo.eu'. This site focuses on Russian or 'pro-Kremlin' mis- and disinformation about the EU and claims to have collected (and debunked) over 8500 pro-Kremlin disinformation cases (EUvsDisinfo, 2020, May 29). The discourse on foreign political actors, specifically Russia, is notably more resolute, with disinformation, and in this way, foreign governmental actors are particularly highlighted as a threat in regard to disinformation.

The policy documents also identify civil society and citizens as having a role in the proliferation of disinformation, however, these are not assigned primary responsibility. The HLEG's (2018) report states that 'while civil society actors play an important watchdog role in many areas [...] it is also clear that some problems of disinformation are animated by citizens individually or collectively sharing false and misleading content' (p.11). The Communication, instead, refers to 'users' of online platforms and social media, stating that users:

> [A]re also playing a role in disseminating disinformation, which tends to travel more quickly on social media due to the propensity of users to share content without any prior verification. The ever-increasing volume and speed of content flowing online increases the risk of indiscriminate sharing of disinformation.
>
> (EC, 2018a, p.6)

Even though civil society and citizens are identified as involved in the proliferation of disinformation, due to a tendency to share content

indiscriminately without verification, the discourse does not describe these actions as intentional harm or malicious behaviour.

Having already outlined how the media sector is seen to be undergoing profound transformations, it is worth noting how (news) media organisations are also constructed as potential contributors to the spread of online disinformation. The HLEG (2018) notes that 'not all news media maintain the same standards of professionalism and editorial independence', arguing that 'some news media contribute to disinformation problems, thereby weakening European citizens' overall trust in media' (p.11). This critique of news media is, however, not mentioned in the EC's Communication (2018a). What is noted is that '[q]uality news media – including public media – and journalism play an important role in providing citizens high quality and diverse information', and that 'they can uncover, counterbalance, and dilute disinformation' (p.14). The Communication, thus, argues for the 'need to invest in high quality journalism, reinforce trust in the key societal and democratic role of quality journalism both offline and online, and encourage quality news media to explore innovative forms of journalism' (p.14). In this way, the policy argues for the importance of quality standards for news media, without criticising any journalists or outlets.

The primary focus of the EC's (2018a) Communication, however, seems to be on online platforms and social media, as these are seen to have a 'central role' and responsibility to ensure a safe online environment (p.7). Despite the internet being first and foremost highlighted as a positive technological development that 'has the potential to make democratic processes more participatory and inclusive', online platforms, and particularly social media, are emphasised as enablers of the amplification and dissemination of disinformation (p.1). These are, furthermore, criticised for having 'so far failed to act proportionately, falling short of the challenge posed by disinformation and the manipulative use of platforms' infrastructures' (p.2). The EC, furthermore, raises concerns about data protection, as 'there are serious doubts whether platforms are sufficiently protecting their users against unauthorised use of their personal data by third parties' (p.2). It refers to the European Council's Meeting Conclusions of March 2018, which stressed the necessity of guarantees of transparent practices and full protection of citizens' privacy and personal

data from social networks and digital platforms (EUCO 2018, p.2). Not only 'should' these online media and platforms:

> [C]omply with legal obligations under EU and national law, but also act with appropriate responsibility in views of their central role so as to ensure a safe online environment, to protect users from disinformation, and to offer users exposure to different political views.
>
> (EC, 2018a, p.7)

In this way, online platforms, such as social media, video-sharing services and search engines, are attributed a particular responsibility to take action against the threat of disinformation. The following takes a closer look at the proposed response and solutions to the identified issues of disinformation.

5.3 A coordinated response

This third section of findings further explores how the EU's understanding of the phenomena of online disinformation guides the response and the policy, as well as it's suggested solutions to the issues raised. In this way, it also illustrates the productivity of discourse, and how discourse produces the very worlds they intend to describe, in that the discourse of the EU's policy on online disinformation, also materialises in the actions taken to limit its spread. Thus, it highlights some of the proposed actions and measures taken to address these issues. In doing so, it also explores how the EU relates to the different actors identified above. This section, then, takes a closer look at the Action Plan against disinformation (EC, 2018d), the self-regulatory Code of Practice (the Code) for stakeholders and the measures taken to increase the media literacy of the public.

The Action Plan against disinformation (EC, 2018d) states that:

> Addressing disinformation requires political determination and unified action, mobilising all parts of governments (including counter-hybrid, cybersecurity, intelligence and strategic communication communities, data protection, electoral, law enforcement and media authorities). This should be done in close cooperation with like-minded partners across the globe. It requires close

cooperation between Union institutions, Member States, civil society and the private sector, especially online platforms.

(EC, 2018d, p.5)

The Action Plan builds on the Communication and the previous policy developments, with a discourse that has become more certain, clear and specific in its performative measures. Several of the sentences are highlighted in bold script, calling for urgent action towards disinformation, especially in view of the (then) upcoming 2019 European Parliament elections and more than 50 presidential, national or local/regional elections within Member States by 2020 (p.2). The EC's Communication (2018a) also stated that 'inaction is not an option' (p.6). It further argued that (1) improving transparency of the online ecosystem, (2) promoting diversity of information and quality journalism, and (3) fostering credibility through indication of the trustworthiness of information, as well as (4) fashioning inclusive solutions with broad stakeholder involvement and awareness-raising amongst the public, were principles and objectives that 'should guide action to tackle disinformation' (p.6). Online platforms were, furthermore, specifically called upon 'to act swiftly and effectively to protect users from disinformation' (EC, 2018a, p.7). The Action Plan, similarly, bases its response to disinformation on four core pillars: '(i) improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation; (ii) strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation; (iii) mobilising private sector to tackle disinformation; (iv) raising awareness and improving societal resilience' (EC, 2018d, p.5). These are, then, more clearly directed at specific actors, with the first two regarding the Union institutions and Member States, and the last two being in regard to private sector's (online platforms') response and citizens' receptivity.

The first two pillars (i, ii), furthermore, specifically address the international dimension and understanding of disinformation as an external threat. Specifically the Action Plan (EC, 2018d) considers it 'necessary to reinforce the Strategic Communication Task Forces of the European External Action Service, the Union Delegations and the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell', promising to provide these 'with additional specialised staff, such as experts in data mining and analysis to process the relevant data' (p.5). It also encourages Member States to, where

appropriate, 'upgrade their national capacity in this area, and support the necessary increase in resources for the Strategic Communication Task Forces and Union delegations' (p.6). In regard to the second pillar (ii), the Plan declares that the Commission will set up a Rapid Alert System 'to provide alerts on disinformation campaigns in real-time through a dedicated technological infrastructure', as 'prompt reaction' is viewed as 'essential to counter and deter disinformation' (p.7). With this system, the Commission and the High Representative will be 'working closely with existing networks, the European Parliament as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and G7's Rapid Response Mechanism' (p.8). With a view to the election(s), 'communication efforts on Union values and policies' are also stepped up, reporting that it 'will strengthen strategic communications in the Union's neighbourhood', calling upon Member States to 'significantly strengthen their own communication efforts on Union values and policies' (p.8). These measures are described as 'important to foster an open, democratic debate free from manipulation' (p.7). In this way, the understanding of a common external threat builds up to efforts taken to improve 'strategic communication' and the rapid alert system to 'counter and deter' disinformation, in the name of 'an open, democratic debate, free from manipulation' by external actors, notably Russia.

The second two pillars (iii, iv) emphasise the key roles played by the private sector (notably social media platforms) and civil society in tackling the problem of disinformation. Following the issues addressed in the EC's Communication, especially in regard to avoiding arbitrary censorship, the Code of Practice (the Code) was put forward in September 2018 (EC, 2018d, p.8). The Code is a self-regulatory measure for different stake-holders, including online platforms, 'leading social networks', advertisers and advertising industry, that 'aims at achieving the objectives set out by the Commission's Communication', by 'setting a wide range of com-mitments, from transparency in political advertising to the closure of fake accounts and demonetization of purveyors of disinformation' ('Code of Practice on Disinformation', 2018, September 26). The Code encourages measures that focus on scrutiny of ad placement, political and issue-based advertising, the integrity of services (inauthentic accounts and behaviour), as well as empowering consumers and researchers. Signatories to the Code include Facebook, Google, Mozilla, Twitter, and Microsoft, as well as trade associations and advertisement actors ('Code of Practice on

Disinformation', 2018, September 26). Online platforms and the advertising industry are described as having 'a crucial role to play in tackling the disinformation problem, as its scale is directly related to the platforms' ability to amplify, target and spread disinformation messages of malicious actors' (EC, 2018d, p.8). The Action Plan also describes it as 'essential that these actors deliver on the objectives' and 'fully comply with the Code of Practice', as this is seen as key in order to tackle the problem of disinformation (EC, 2018d, p.2).

The summary of the First Annual Reports on the implementation of the Code of Practice (EC, 2019, October 29) indicates that these actors' self-regulation is helping to limit the proliferation of disinformation, but that there are some limits to this self-regulatory approach. Firstly, it states that the reports indicate comprehensive efforts by the signatories to implement their commitments, and 'some intensification of joint efforts between the platforms and other stakeholders, including fact-checkers, researchers, civil society and national authorities' (pp.1-2). However, it also highlights some limitations to these efforts. For instance, it notes that there have been 'efforts by the platforms to disrupt advertising and monetization incentives that contribute to the dissemination of online disinformation in the EU', yet also states that 'the policies reported on pursue a range of objectives that are not necessarily related to the dissemination of disinformation' (p.5). Furthermore, 'there are notable differences in scope' with regard to political and issue-based advertising, and despite all platforms having made efforts to ensure transparency, 'including a requirement that all political ads be clearly labelled as sponsored content and include a "paid for by" disclaimer', this still seems to be an issue (p.7). It refers to the EU elections, during which not all political ads were correctly labelled, as diminishing the reliability of the established archives, 'as well as the reporting provided on amounts spent on political advertising' (p.7). Incomplete disclosures of targeting criteria 'and data about the reach of individual ads' is, furthermore, criticised as it reduces the tools' utility (p.7).

The summary of the self-assessment reports, furthermore, states that the reporting would generally 'benefit from more detail and qualitative insights in some areas and from further big-picture context, such as trends' (EC, 2019, p.2). This is requested, as, in general, the self-assessment

reporting has mainly been quantitative, providing metrics such as 'output indicators (e.g. number of accounts closed or ads rejected)' (EC, 2019, p.2). For instance, in regard to the integrity of services, all platforms reported actions taken 'to address coordinated inauthentic behaviour, fake accounts and malicious, bot-driven activity as well as terms of service enforcement data', yet, the summary report stresses that 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour is still prevalent and further efforts are needed' (EC, 2019, pp.8-9). Specifically, it calls for more qualitative data and detailed information on 'the actors behind automated or humandriven malicious and inauthentic behaviour as well as companies providing artificially amplified engagement such as trading in likes, followers and shares' (p.9). In this way, the summary both appreciates the measures taken and encourages further efforts, including more detailed reporting by the signatories. This can be seen to indicate that the EU understands the self-regulating measures as helpful to limit the proliferation of disinformation, but that this approach also provides some challenges, especially with supervision of the implementation.

The Code also encourages efforts to raise awareness and empower consumers and researchers, in order to make the public more resilient against disinformation. The summary of the self-assessment reports (EC, 2019), however, indicates that the platforms have focused more on advertisement and integrity of services, than on empowerment of consumers and researchers. It declares that 'all platforms provide some tools that enable consumers to understand why they are seeing particular advertisements' and 'are supporting efforts to improve media literacy skills' (p.10). However, it also states that 'in general, the platforms' reporting is not detailed enough to assess the relevance and impact of the consumer empowerment tools in place; in particular, information on the uptake and actual use of these tools is lacking' (pp.10-11). Furthermore, 'the provision of data and search tools to the research community is still episodic and arbitrary' and 'cooperation with fact-checkers across the EU is still sporadic' (p.2). As awareness-raising and increasing public resilience to disinformation are important to the policy, however, the EU has also taken some additional efforts in this regard.

Additional efforts to tackle online disinformation include the establish-ment of 'an independent network of fact-checkers', in order to 'increase

the ability to detect and expose disinformation', and 'sustained efforts' to support media literacy (EC, 2018d, p.2). As civil society and citizens are also identified as having a role in the proliferation of disinformation, the Action Plan (EC, 2018d) states that '[g]reater public awareness is essential for improving societal resilience against the threat that disinformation poses' (p.9). A starting point for building resilience is described as not only to understand disinformation, but also 'our own vulnerabilities' (p.9). It, thus, encourages the provision of more 'specialised trainings, public conferences and debates as well as other forms of common learning for the media' and empowerment of 'all sectors of society and, in particular, improving citizens' media literacy' (p.10). Media literacy is described as an umbrella expression including 'all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it' (MLEG, 2018). Improvement of citizens' media literacy is repeatedly emphasised by the EC, which also brings stakeholders together in an Expert Group on Media Literacy (MLEG), and holds annual meetings to facilitate networking and 'identify, document and extend good practices' ('Media Literacy', 2019, April 5). The Commission also organised a Media Literacy Week in March 2019, with a view to the European elections, as well as 'targeted campaigns for the public and trainings for media' (EC, 2018d, p.11). Media literacy is considered important for democracy, and is described as allowing 'the citizen to participate in the economic, social and cultural aspects of society as well as to play an active role in the democratic process' (MLEG, 2018). In this way, the EC aims to engage citizens in tackling online disinformation and limit its spread.

5.4 Disinformation and freedom of expression in the EU

The main research question of this report relates to how the EU understands disinformation in relation to the democratic principle of freedom of expression. Drawing on the findings above, this section will further present and discuss findings relating to the EU's understanding of the phenomena in relation to freedom of expression, and provide an answer to this question.

The EU's policy on online disinformation is largely based on its understanding of the phenomena as representing a threat to democracy and

democratic decision-making, particularly, in relation to the principle of freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is described as 'a core value of the European Union', as it is enshrined in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights (EC, 2018d, p.1). Disinformation is, as previously mentioned, presented as a phenomenon that 'impairs freedom of expression', by violating citizens' right to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authorities (EC, 2018a, p.1). The understanding of disinformation as a tool for malicious actors, including public authorities, whether external actors, such as Russia, or internal European politicians and public authorities, then, produces the argument for tackling disinformation, as a way of protecting citizens' right to freedom of expression.

However, the EU also recognises that measures taken in order to tackle disinformation, could also be seen as violating rights to freedom of expression, as this would also be interference in information exchange by a public authority. Although disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that 'may' cause public harm, it is not the same as illegal content, such as hate speech or incitement to violence. Legal content, including disinformation, then, is also protected by rights to freedom of expression, 'and needs to be addressed differently than illegal content, where removal of the content itself may be justified' EC, 2018a, p.1). Based on this, the policy is largely an encouragement for other actors to take actions, to online platforms for taking self-regulatory measures, to media, civil society and citizens for increasing their awareness and resilience towards disinformation. The self-regulatory approach is also described as preferred by citizens, civil society and media, if the synopsis report of the public consultations is to be understood as representing these, as '[r]espondents clearly preferred a multi-stakeholder, multi-dimensional, self-regulatory approach' (EC, 2018b, p.21). In this way, the principle of freedom of expression is also used in order to defend the EU's inaction, in the sense of not taking legal regulatory measures to tackle online disinformation.

The findings above, however, also illustrate some issues and limitations of this approach. The summary of the First Annual Reports on the implementation of the Code of Practice (EC, 2019, October 29) indicates this. Despite its appreciation for measures taken, it also highlights limited

detail in reporting, 'notable differences in scope', incomplete disclosures of targeting criteria for political advertisement, and incorrect labelling of political ads during the 2019 European elections. It also calls for more qualitative insight and big-picture context for the measures taken, and stresses that 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour is still prevalent and further efforts are needed' (EC, 2019, pp.8-9). It also encourages further efforts to empower citizens and researchers, by the provision of data and clarification on the exact functioning of the platforms and their ad-driven business-models. This can be seen to indicate that the EU understands the self-regulating measures as helpful to limit the proliferation of disinformation, but that this approach also provides some challenges, especially with regard to the administration of these efforts and ensuring the implementation of measures.

Encouraging self-regulatory measures from online platforms and efforts from media and citizens to avoid the proliferation of disinformation, however, seems to be the preferred approach, given that legal measures may be considered censorship, and a violation of democratic freedom of expression. Thus, it is stated on the first page of the Communication from the EC that '[t]he primary obligation of state actors in relation to freedom of expression and media freedom is to refrain from interference and censorship and to ensure a favourable environment for inclusive and pluralistic public debate' (EC, 2018a, p.1). If we consider the EU's reputation as a pillar of liberal democracy, this policy choice could also be considered a choice for the protection of this reputation. How would it look if the EU took legal measures to remove disinformation, which is legal content, albeit incorrect or contrary to established facts? What would it mean for understandings of liberal democracy? Based on these findings, the report argues that the discourse of the policy also speaks to the identity of the EU.

How does this policy 'speak Europe' in the age of disinformation? The policy does this in several ways. In relation to democratic freedom of expression, the policy makes it clear that liberal democratic values are core principles and foundations for the EU. This is in line with the understanding of the EU as representing a pillar of the liberal order, as well as having an understanding of self as a liberal democratic area (Lucarelli,

2018). The EU's role internationally in relation to disinformation, further-more seems to be shaped around its self-understanding as a protector of liberal democratic principles, such as freedom of expression. By con-structing the EU as a protector of freedom of expression, the discourse contributes to an understanding of the EU as a pillar of liberal democratic governance. The discourse, furthermore, represents the EU as a bene-volent protector of established liberal principles and values, in the face of domestic and foreign actors of disinformation and disruption. Following this, the report sees the EU's discourse, including language, behaviour and practices, as having potential to influence international understandings of disinformation as a threat to democratic freedom of expression. These findings are further discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

A Discussion on the EU, Disinformation and Democracy

This section further discusses the findings from the analysis above in relation to the theoretical framework, as well as the public discourse and understanding of these phenomena outlined in previous chapters. In doing so, this section will further address how the struggle to define fake news illustrates that discourse matters, as well as how these findings speak to the identity of the EU, as an actor, in contemporary international politics.

6.1 The productivity of discourse

This report is based on an understanding that discourse is productive, meaning that not only does discourse reflect interpretations and under-standings of the world, it is also involved in producing those worlds and bringing them into existence. The EU's efforts to tackle online dis-information is viewed as both an outcome of public discourse, and contemporary understandings of the international environment, and a contribution to these. This report argues that the findings from the analysis of the EU's policy on online disinformation illustrates this. This section, furthermore, explores the interconnectedness of discourse and power, particularly in relation to the struggle to define the phenomena and issues related to it. As such, the findings from the analysis are

discussed in relation to discourse theory, and in relation to contemporary public discourse around these phenomena.

This report draws on post-structural theory, which emphasises the importance of representation, the relationship between power and knowledge, and the politics of identity. This 'critical attitude', furthermore, holds that all social actors continuously engage in interpretations of 'the world', and that all interpretations depend on abstractions, meaning that even 'objective' descriptions or representations do not escape the need for interpretation. However, there is a social component to all interpretations and perspectives, and through the socialisation process, some understandings and interpretations become dominant, whereas others stay on the margins (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016). In this way, discourse is also linked to power, as certain perspectives, discourses or agents have more power to influence public discourse, perceptions and understandings. Applying this to the findings above, who has the power to define concepts such as fake news, disinformation, and post-truth?

The findings of this report illustrate how the EU, and the different stakeholders, struggled to define these phenomena, and considered the choice of concepts and terms important for the wider understanding and awareness of the issues related to it. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) stressed that it is 'important that we recognise the importance of shared definitions' (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p.17), referring to Jack (2017) who emphasises how the different terms carry distinct 'baggage' having 'each accrued different cultural associations and historical meanings', and taking on 'different shades of meaning in different contexts' (Jack, 2017, p.1). Definitions of the phenomena, then, matter because the concepts chosen and the words used to describe the phenomena 'can lead to assumptions about how information spreads, who spreads it, and who receives it' (Jack, 2017, p.1). In regard to such concerns, the EU's policy on disinformation, specifically avoided using the term fake news, both due to it being considered inadequate to capture the complex problem of disinformation, and due to an understanding that it had gained negative connotations in the contemporary public discourse (EC, 2018b, p.7). In this conceptual choice, it also took into account the concerns raised by journalists, and other members of the public, about employing this term.

In relation to this, it is particularly interesting to note how the HLEG described the term as having been 'appropriated' (HLEG, 2018, p.10). This can be understood as a reference to the inherent link between discourse and power. The meanings of terms and concepts can change over time, and can, through the process of socialisation, be 'appropriated', and/or gain a distinct new meaning. The history and evolution of fake news, as described in chapter two, shows that it is not new but has been redefined in contemporary discourse. Furthermore, it is clear that the concept is contested and subject to much public debate. For the EU, the current dominant definitions and understandings of the term was deemed incompatible with their understanding of the phenomena and issues related to it. Fake news seems to have come to be understood, in these texts, as an instrumental term used to dismiss disagreeable coverage or opposing views. Here, the actors who are described as having appropriated it are politicians and some of their supporters, suggesting that these actors had the power to re-define it. By using disinformation, then, the EU circumvents the struggle to define fake news, while simultaneously engaging with and contributing to understandings of the phenomena it has been used to describe. Interestingly, the EU does not try to reappropriate the term, but rather chooses a different concept. This might suggest that the EU does not understand itself as having the power to control the meaning of fake news. It is, furthermore, an interesting thought-experiment to think about the possibility of disinformation being 'appropriated' or attaining a different meaning than the one assigned to it in the EU's policy. What could potential effects of this be?

The findings are further seen to illustrate the co-construction of discourse, as there is considerable overlap between the discourse of the EU, and public discourse around the phenomena and issues related to it, discussed in chapter two. The contemporary definitions of fake news often focus on intention to mislead and the fabrication or falsehood of the content. Similarly, disinformation is specifically defined as 'verifiably false' or misleading information, with an emphasis on intent to deceive the public, thus having potential to cause public harm (EC, 2018a, pp.3-4). The difference is that disinformation encompasses all forms of verifiably false or misleading information, not necessarily presented as news reports. Furthermore, fake news and post-truth have often been discussed with reference to security, and cast as a threat to democratic society (Farkas &

Schou, 2020). Similarly, disinformation is in the policy papers constructed as a threat, both external and internal, to democracy and freedom of expression, providing a clear example of discourse of securitisation. It is constructed as a public problem, with the phenomena being largely fixed and understood as a threat. Furthermore, this understanding of the phenomena forms the possibility for this particular policy, taking action against external actors as well as addressing both online platforms, media, civil society and citizens (Balzacq, Léonard, & Ruzicka, 2016, EC, 2018a).

The policy on online disinformation, in and of itself, illustrates the link between information and politics, knowledge and power. There is power in providing information to the public, depending on spread and reach, as well as legitimacy and authority of the 'speaker'. In doing so, one can influence others' understanding of current state of affairs, or of historical events, and thereby shape their understanding of the world, if not the world itself. Furthermore, the particular framings of phenomena and actors can impact what actions are taken. This policy is, therefore, also understood as an illustration of how discourse around online disinformation has a material aspect, affecting the structures of online platforms, and the extent to which we scrutinise or trust different sources and content, possibly impacting what sources we choose to get our information from. This would then again impact the information we encounter, our understandings of the world, and our actions in it. In this way, the materialisation of the EU's discourse on online disinformation into policy and protective measures, also illustrates the productivity of discourse.

6.2 The EU and the contemporary international environment

This section will, furthermore, look at what the understandings of the phenomena, as well as causal links and actors, reveal about the EU's understanding of self. It also considers the policy discourse in relation to the broader contemporary international context.

Even though there is no direct reference to post-truth in any of these policy texts, this report considers the EU's view of the contemporary international environment to form a similar meaning to that of post-truth discourses. Disinformation is considered to be more of a threat in the

current day and age, as 'highly polarized societies with low levels of trust provide a fertile ground for the production and circulation of ideologically motivated disinformation' (HLEG, 2018, p.11). Media literacy skills are described as 'crucial for the 21st century citizen', and all the more so as 'biased and polarising content' now 'increasingly splices truth and fiction' (HLEG, 2018, p.26). Such constructions of the contemporary seem to imply that the current political environment is in a post-truth state, where lack of trust in public authorities causes citizens to rely on personal beliefs or 'gut feelings', and disregard truth, fact and rationality.

However, these findings also illustrate that the concept of truth is still important in the contemporary debate, and that it is not as irrelevant as claimed by some in debates about post-truth. The prefix 'post' in the compound term post-truth is described as referring to a time in which truth has become unimportant or irrelevant and that, in our current era, the value of or interest in truth has declined (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). However, it seems that in these debates the topic of truth is still very relevant, rather it is the distinct claims to it that are contested. Farkas and Schou (2020) note how:

> Trump also sees democracy as being in a critical state of crisis, although traditional media and liberals are the enemy of the people in this narrative. In this sense, while different arguments clearly diverge, their premises often seem to converge. What seems to work as the unquestioned premise is that democracy is about truth and truthfulness.
>
> (Farkas & Schou, 2020, p.81)

All definitions of these phenomena refer to what is and what is not true, factual or accurate, resting on claims to truthfulness, in order to define the opposite. The EU's policy on disinformation similarly rests on definitions of what counts as 'verifiably false or misleading'. The contemporary debate, then, rather concerns how the truth can be known, or what counts as information, versus fake news, mis-, or disinformation. Arguably, if anything, people seem more interested in the concept of truth, its meaning and relation to power, and its relevance in contemporary democratic societies.

This is also illustrated in the academic debates over the existence or significance of post-truth as a concept defining the contemporary. This has

also been part of epistemological and ontological debates within IR that have endured since the dawn of the discipline, and is not novel as such (Michelsen, 2018). In adhering to a post-structural theoretical approach, it could be argued that this report further contributes to the 'relativism' that has been constructed (and at least partly blamed) as a contributing cause to the rise of 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. This report, however, holds that the post-structural theoretical approach and discourse analytical framework helps to illuminate how the constructions of these phenomena impact our understanding of them and of our social reality. They have clearly become part of international relations in that they inspire public debate internationally, and have informed the construction of the EU's understanding of and response to online disinformation. That actors, such as those involved in the shaping of this policy, cooperate in order to tackle disinformation, might be considered more novel than established facts being questioned.

Finally, the findings show that the EU contributes to an understanding of contemporary European democracy as in a state of crisis. In this, it joins the range of actors described in chapter two, of journalists, politicians, intellectuals and commentators that have described the current state of Western democracies in a similar way. Concepts and phenomena such as fake news, post-truth, online disinformation, information war and 'strategic narratives' are constructed as manifestations of a decline of truth, fact, and rationality. According to the EU's discourse, the foundations that secure a liberal democracy are waning, as the capacity of citizens to make decisions based on rational debate, reason and evidence is targeted by producers of disinformation. This suggests that the representation of democracy contained in these discourses (re-)produces a very particular understanding of democracy as a model of governance. This is a model of democracy that values rationality over emotionality. Truth, fact and rationality then become the pillars of the democratic system, and not freedom of expression as such. The EU's discourse on online disinformation, understood in this way, understands online disinformation as a threat to a particular form of democracy and freedom of expression, and encourages the protection of established norms of authority and legitimacy in provision of information.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Since 2016, the terms fake news and post-truth have become buzzwords and important discursive signifiers of international political debate. Concerns that citizens base their understanding of current affairs and cast their political votes based on false information, or even consciously disregard hard scientific facts and objective research has encouraged both academics, politicians and the wider public to debates about the links between information and politics, and disinformation and democracy. The EU's policy on tackling online disinformation was presented in 2018, as a response to such concerns, and specifically in regard to how online disinformation might impact democratic elections within the EU. This report set out to examine how the EU's policy contributes to contemporary understandings of these phenomena, especially in relation to the democratic principle of freedom of expression.

The report finds that the discourse of the EU's policy on online disinformation portrays it as a threat to democracy and security, with both internal and external causes. The understanding of causes for the proliferation of disinformation, furthermore contribute to the EU's preferred measures and solutions in order to tackle it. The report explored how the EU engages with different stakeholders to find solutions to the problem, and highlights important causes and actors identified by the EU

as involved in the proliferation of disinformation. In particular the role of online platforms in enabling the proliferation of disinformation is emphasised. In doing so, the discourse of the EU aligns with dominant contemporary understandings of online and social media as facilitating the spread of fake news and contributing to causing post-truth.

Drawing on the analytical tools of discourse theory, this report has examined how the EU's policy can be understood as both an outcome of public debates and a contribution to these. In encouraging media literacy, and describing critical thinking skills as 'crucial for the 21st century citizen', due to increased dissemination of 'biased and polarising content', it contributes to an understanding of the contemporary as defined by post-truth. The report has, furthermore, provided an outline of contemporary discourse around these phenomena, and how the EU engages in this broader public debate about 'fake news'. The report has illustrated how the EU both draws on contemporary understandings of the phenomena defined as fake news, as well as contribute to it. It has also highlighted how the meaning of fake news has recently attained distinct meanings, leading to the EU opting for the term disinformation instead. Studying how the EU came to choose disinformation instead of the seemingly more contested concept of fake news, this report has argued that the EU simultaneously avoids getting into the discursive struggle to define the latter, while also contributing to public understandings of the phenomena it describes.

This report has examined what the EU's policy on online disinformation reveals about its understanding of freedom of expression. The report has also argued that the policy speaks to the identity of the EU. The report finds that the EU's policy on online disinformation is largely based on an understanding of the phenomena as representing a threat to democracy and democratic decision-making, particularly, in relation to the principle of freedom of expression. The policy represents the EU as a benevolent protector of established liberal values and norms, in the face of domestic and foreign actors of disinformation and disruption. By constructing the EU as a protector of freedom of expression, the discourse contributes to an understanding of the EU as a pillar of liberal democratic governance. However, the principle of freedom of expression is also an underlying argument for the EU's choice to not take legal measures to tackle online

disinformation, opting instead for a coordinated, multi-stakeholder, self-regulatory approach. The findings also illustrate some challenges with this approach. It is, furthermore, problematic, as the enablers of disinformation also become the regulators. The report has argued that the principle of freedom of expression is, in this way, used as both an argument for the EU's actions and inaction at the same time.

With these findings, the report contributes to our understanding of the EU's policy on online disinformation, and the phenomena of fake news, disinformation and post-truth in relation to the democratic principle of freedom of expression. In taking a broader approach to the study of this policy, the report also provides some interesting avenues for further research. For instance, the report does not do a comprehensive analysis of the polity itself or of its furtther policies in regard to freedom of expression of the (online) public sphere. Further studies of how the EU's representation of self, in regard to freedom of expression, and how this policy fits into its broader policy framework, could, thus, be an interesting avenue for further research. It could also be interesting to study this policy from other actors' perspectives, for instance the perspectives of those actors that are subject to the EU's policy on online disinformation.

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Texts for analysis

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Contact

EU3D scientific coordinator: Prof. John Erik Fossum
EU3D project manager: Geir Kværk

ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo

www.eu3d.uio.no   info@eu3d.uio.no   @EU3Dh2020