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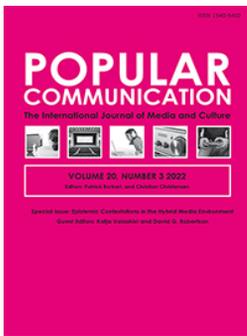
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Introduction: epistemic contestations in the hybrid media environment

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ABSTRACT

“Post-truth era” and “fake news” have been the talk of the day for around 10 years now. In our understanding, these terms are used to refer to the contestations of epistemic hierarchies in Western liberal democracies experiencing political shifts toward populist political style and polarization. The contestation takes many forms but is mainly expressed through digital media technologies and related social practices that contribute to the epistemic instability. In this introductory article for the special issue of *Epistemic contestations in the hybrid media environment*, we argue that the experienced “epistemic crisis” is not only a crisis of epistemic hierarchies and worldviews but also a crisis of knowledge production within epistemic institutions, including the academia. The aim of the special issue is to explore how a multiplicity of competing epistemologies interact and compete in the “post-truth” marketplace of ideas in online popular communication.

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If we do not have the capacity to distinguish what’s true from what’s false, then by definition the marketplace of ideas doesn’t work. And by definition our democracy doesn’t work. *We are entering into an epistemological crisis.*

Barack Obama’s statement on the role of the media in the political polarization of the United States, given to *The Atlantic* following the November 2020 Presidential election, seems to have come rather late. Heated debates on truth, knowledge, and power had been a steady staple of journalistic, academic, and political attention since the 2016 presidential campaign; but in fact, public concern over “fake news” and “the post-truth era” had been on the rise since the “birtherism” conspiracy theory that circulated in the right-wing media ecosystem after Obama’s election in 2008 (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). The timing, however, can be explained with the surge of mis- and disinformation and the intense public focus on conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020, and the role of the QAnon conspiracy theory in the Presidential election process. Searches for “conspiracy theory” in Google surged to a new high in March 2020, as high as it had in November 2010 during the swine flu pandemic.

Our approach in this special issue on *Epistemic contestations in the hybrid media environment* aligns with the mission of the *Popular Communication* with its focus on cultural phenomena from the perspective of communication, and with a multidisciplinary

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and multi-method approach (see Burkart et al., 2016 also Zelizer, 2000). At the same time, we recognize that divisions into, e.g., popular and political communication are growing more and more artificial and counterproductive. While we write this at the beginning of the second week of the unprovoked Russian attack on Ukraine, it is striking how the circulating imaginaries of the war tie together means of popular communication, popular cultural references, celebrity celebration and fandom with circulation of news, disinformation, and misinformation. If the COVID-19 pandemic made apparent how dependent our social imagination is on media technologies, the ongoing war in Europe underlines the urgent need for inter- and transdisciplinary research on epistemic hierarchies and the ways they are being maintained and contested.

Scholars of political science and political communication have been concerned with the relationship between politics and media in the digital age for quite a while. Perhaps, the most influential articulation of this relationship is by the British political scientist Andrew Chadwick, who coined the concept “hybrid media system” in 2013. His main argument was that the logics of the professional journalism and social media practices intertwine and interact in ways that generate a new type of hybrid media system for political communication with consequences to politics—for example, increased political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021) and the growth of populism (Manucci, 2019). Political communication, however, tends to ignore what it considers “popular culture.” It is then up to popular communication research to take into account both perspectives.

The growth of the internet into the dominant sphere of communication since the last decades of the twentieth century has undoubtedly changed human interaction in significant ways and transformed previous forms of mediated communication and their mutual relationship. The “leveling out” of communication possibilities has reduced the possibility for epistemic authorities, including established media institutions and journalism, to act as gatekeepers and define the agenda and tone of public debates (see, e.g., Peterson, 2003). The hybridization of the media environment with the intertwining logics and practices of professional journalism and algorithmic social media (Chadwick, 2013) and blurring of genre boundaries (Valaskivi, 2022) have all contributed to the sense of epistemic crisis, as well as provided new possibilities for disinformation and propaganda dissemination. The sense of crisis is felt most keenly in the United States and the English language internet, but epistemic contestations take place around the world and have contributed to the growth of populist and nationalist sentiments in many East European, Latin American, and Asian countries, and in the propaganda of the Russian attack. Through the hybrid media environment, trends and discourses circulate across borders developing translocal variations (Kraidy, 2005).

The hybrid media environment has an impact on how it is possible to perceive the world. In other words, communication technology alters our epistemic processes and perception of knowledge, but also affects how knowledge and understanding of the world is produced. While the development of communication technology has certainly empowered minority collective understandings of the world and undermined the hegemonic sense of belonging, as traditional ideologies and other thought regimes collapse and new ones arise, recent scholarship has also observed that the digitalization and datafication of popular communication have contributed to the destabilization of older communitarian worldviews (e.g., Fuller, 2020). Scholars have tended to see the internet as encouraging and supporting the production of new forms of hyperreal or postmodern belief and identity (e.g., Pancholi,

2021; Possamai, 2005); what if we assumed that it also gives us a new tool for seeing the hitherto hidden dynamics and complexity of knowledge-power that at least to some extent were already present?

Epistemic authorities, hierarchies, and contestations

The current epistemological crisis can also be seen as a crisis of epistemic institutions. Such a crisis was, in fact, described by Hannah Arendt in her essay *Truth and Politics*, in which she emphasized the need to keep “the existential modes of truth-telling” independent of each other—“the solitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist, the impartiality of the historian and the judge, and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness, and the reporter” (Arendt, 1967, p. 16.) What is different now compared to the 1960s, is the media environment. Epistemic authorities, including universities and journalism, governmental agencies, and religious institutions, are being openly contested and questioned, utilizing the affordances and commodified logics of communication (Dean, 2005, 2009) in the contemporary hybrid media environment. This is why the crisis, we argue, is not only a crisis of epistemic hierarchies and worldviews but also a crisis of knowledge production within epistemic institutions, including academia.

The aim of this special issue is to explore how a multiplicity of competing epistemologies interact and compete in the “post-Truth” marketplace of ideas in online popular communication. Rather than a focus on the informational content, however, here the focus is shifted to the epistemic justification thereof. How does popular communication challenge and even upend traditional and inherited belief systems and knowledge regimes in religion, politics, academia, and other institutions?

As the articles in this issue show, we can find epistemic contestations on two levels. First of all, there are the hierarchies of *whose* knowledge is to be legitimized and whose is to be questioned or shunned. In discussions on conspiracy theories, there is usually a clear-cut division between “the elites” and “the people.” The elites often, though not always, represent epistemic institutions, including science, media, and health officials. Yet conspiracy theory communities also construct their own elites that produce, remediate, and circulate the kind of knowledge that corresponds and strengthens the worldview in the groups in question (Valaskivi et al, [forthcoming](#)). Second, there are contestations over *what kinds of* knowledge are prioritized and legitimized in these discussions, which, following Robertson (2016, 2021), we refer to here as *epistemic modes*.

Clare Birchall makes a similar point on modes of knowledge in her pioneering study *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theories to Gossip* (2006, p. 2), in which she builds a four-field “knowledge-scape” which contrasts “official knowledge” with “popular knowledge,” and divides both into “legitimate” and “illegitimate” forms. Legitimate official knowledge includes “Justified True Belief, scientific rationalism, humanism, and ‘useful’ knowledge.” Illegitimate official knowledge she identifies as consisting of revolutionary knowledge and ideology. “Popular knowledges” are the illegitimate forms of popular knowledge, while legitimate forms of popular knowledge include “Grass roots know-how, tabloid sensibility, common sense and Vox Pop” (Birchall, *ibid*). While certainly more normative than the approach we propose here, Birchall’s knowledge-scape helps in perceiving the increasingly apparent biases of critical cultural studies that we come to shortly.

It is apparent that, in epistemic terms, *what can be said* and *who is allowed to speak* can be seen as interrelated. For instance, universities are the producers of science and the institutions that legitimate scientific knowledge. The most influential legitimate representatives of tradition have, at least in the European context, been the Christian churches, predominantly Protestant in Northern Europe and mainly Catholic in Southern Europe. Experiential knowledge, even when it is “official,” falls into a field of struggle, raising questions of whose experience is legitimate and worth recognizing. Following Birchall’s above four-field typology of knowledge, revolution, and ideology can be official, if illegitimate, knowledge. If channeling (understood broadly as knowledge seen as coming from an intelligence external to the individual(s) communicating it) is positioned in the four-field, it can also be seen as legitimate or illegitimate depending on *who* is doing the channeling, and what they are channeling. Within traditional and established religious institutions channeling is legitimate, but it is also legitimate in different fields of the arts. It becomes part of popular, illegitimate knowledge when it is in the context of new age religions or esoterism. Here, we also see the gendered aspects of the epistemic hierarchies; scientific and traditional knowledge are mostly governed by men and masculine practices, while popular knowledge and illegitimate types of channeling are seen as feminine modes of knowledge production.

The impetus for this issue came in part from both Guest Editors having one foot in the critical study of religion and one foot in another field (media studies and conspiracy theories, respectively). There has been a quiet revolution in religious studies over the last twenty years, which has destabilized many of the categories previously considered central to the field—from “religion” itself, to the sacred, ritual, myth, etc. (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2011; Masuzawa, 2005; McCutcheon, 1997). It is fair to call this a revolution of disciplinary thought, as this deconstruction comes not only from post-structural theorists but from anthropologists seeking to integrate indigenous and marginalized worldviews, historians wrestling with the decline of traditional religious identification in Europe, and sociologists focused on the “lived realities” of religion (and “non-religion”) in the modern world. All of these have, for different reasons, concluded that religion is not a unique and self-contained thing-in-itself but a word we use to describe certain aspects of how people act out their lives and understand their place in society. “Certain aspects” is not an evasion—rather, these aspects are constantly changing and subject to perspective. What scholars mean by religion is not the same when talking about classical Greece as when talking about nineteenth-century Berlin as when talking about sub-Saharan Africa today. It might be a set of practices, or it might be a set of doctrines, or it might be a cultural or ethnic identification, or some combination of those things. What religion *is*, however, is a central aspect of how today’s world is discursively constructed—in law, in academia, and in the popular media.

This role revolves, in the main, around the relationship between “belief” and “knowledge.” The distinction between “belief” and “knowledge,” inherited from the colonial project, functions to demarcate “irrational” and “illegitimate” knowledge. Some kinds of belief can be incorporated into the system in the form of “faith” (often defined legally as “*sincere* belief”) and afforded protections in law, while other, presumably equally sincerely held beliefs are stigmatized as irrational or “extremist” and sometimes subject to legal censure. This belief/knowledge dichotomy separates the dominant Us, possessing pure and objective knowledge, distinct from the material world, from the colonized *Them* who possess mere “belief,” which at best might refer to reality only mystified allegory. As Latour puts it: “We believe that we know. We know that the others believe” (2013, p. 173). In addition to the

aforementioned gender distinctions, there are also clear racial and class elements to this distinction (Mignolo, 2000; Wynter, 2003). The whiteness, patriarchy, capitalism, and Protestantism of the modern episteme (Foucault, 1966/1970/1970) is so ingrained that we can struggle to think around it.

Yet, decolonization requires us to acknowledge subaltern knowledges—and so the acknowledgment of other truth regimes. But what if those we are arguing against or trying to convince do not accept the truth criteria of the arguments we are making? We cannot both decolonize and at the same time maintain “our” epistemic superiority. The implications for “misinformation” and “post-truth” should be clear: what if you do not accede to the same truth criteria? Post *whose* truth? While “post-truth” is typically presented as a breakdown of reason or the apotheosis of disinformation, it is more accurate to see post-truth as a popularized version of the tradition of critique that dominated scholarship through the second half of the twentieth century—a deconstruction of master narratives, including epistemologies. The monopoly of any one group over knowledge claims is collapsing: decolonization and “post-Truth” are in this respect two sides of the same coin—what Fuller has recently argued is a reconfiguration of our knowledge cultures as seismic as the Reformation (2020).

Decolonization of knowledge production also demands that we address how scholarly categories legitimize and mystify the colonial episteme. We cannot be decolonized if we are also expecting it to happen within the system of categories with which colonialism organizes the world. From this position, many social categories— culture, nation, religion, ideology— can be seen as mystifying hierarchies of knowledge—that is, obscuring how different forms of epistemic capital are mobilized in reproducing social power hierarchies. These hierarchies can consciously be contested by questioning epistemic authorities and forms of epistemic capital in their possession. Rather than using such categories as natural, settled and universal, we instead suggest that there is a need to focus on how the boundaries of these different forms of knowledge are maintained in different systems.

The project of empowerment and decolonization of critical cultural studies with the focus on everyday experiences and popular culture of the of the working class was inspired among others by the work of the Italian leftist thinker Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci has later become an important influence in the European right-wing theorizing (Steinmetz-Jenkins 2018; Van Kranenburg, 1999). Studying discourses as a way to uncover hegemonies and to provide empowerment to people through critical knowledge can apparently be used for quite different political aims. Even more importantly, the understanding that change happens in cultural undercurrents that are ingrained in language, discourses, and representations can be utilized for both advancing progressive empowerment of the oppressed and strengthening colonialist and patriarchal political projects.

During the last ten years, it has become apparent that good intentions are not enough to guarantee a positive outcome and inhibit unintended consequences. The study of popular communication with its legacy of cultural studies tends to celebrate “the popular.” Fan culture, participation, collective knowledge production, and the utopian possibilities of media technology are mainly focused as possibilities to generate voice, recognition, emancipation, and solidarity. Without undermining the importance of these perspectives, it is necessary to acknowledge that utopian perceptions have been aligning well with the interests of the social media companies currently inducing algorithmic harm by prioritizing affective contents and harvesting user data for profit and profiling and thus have

contributed to the epistemic crisis. The utopian emphasis has also resulted into gaps of knowledge. As Freelon et al. demonstrate with their literature review in *Science* (2020), we know much more of the (celebrated) mediatized political participation practices and knowledge production of the left than of the right, and much more of the usage of manipulation, propaganda, and disinformation by the right than the left.

If we expand our critical view to our own practices, however, critical research has potential for analyzing both the epistemic harms and the emancipatory possibilities of media technologies. Highlighting the commodification of our communication environment, as well as intertextuality and self-referentiality, and able to grasp features of simulacra and hyperreality, media convergence and interdependency in the contemporary hybrid media environment, popular communication can offer insights that expand understanding of epistemic contestations from various perspectives (see, e.g., Brennan, Dhaenens, & Krijnen, 2021). The articles in this issue—each starting from the common position that, first, worldviews (beliefs, knowledges) are complex, dynamic, and often messy, and, second, that the means through which people come to think things are as important as what they think—begin to sketch out some possibilities of what such an analysis might look like.

Valaskivi's "Circulation of conspiracy theories in the attention factory" explores how conspiracy theories have become a useful commodity in today's algorithm-driven hybrid media economy. She uses the concept of the attention factory to show how internet platforms are able to direct users to emotionally engaging material to more effectively provoke a reaction—and so further engagement. Yet she argues that the technology is not responsible for the resulting "content confusion"; rather, this confusion is useful to the attention factory, given the increasing undermining of the hegemonic discourse.

Shane et al. argue that increasing use of the term "gaslighting" in a political context on social media can be seen as a lens through which to understand post-truth politics. They argue that it can serve equally to contest dominant epistemic positions, and conversely to seal a position off from critique, by framing contrary statements as part of the deception. Accusations of gaslighting are therefore ambivalent and can contribute to a community's (in)ability to establish the truth, so contributing to polarization and epistemic contestation. They conclude by asking if non-dominant groups need supporting environments to challenge hegemony, what kind of echo chambers do we want, and how do we create them?

Robertson and Amarasingam analyze QAnon-related Telegram groups in the US using six different epistemic modes, to understand how epistemic capital is used to justify arguments in support for the conspiracy theory. Their analysis reveals that the QAnon episteme is less driven by counter-hegemonic modes than might be expected; nevertheless, these modes reveal the epistemic fault-lines within the movement. Focusing in on channeled knowledge—here typified as "Gnosis"—they show that the contestations between different groups within QAnon show that the epistemic crisis is not merely an issue between the powerful and the disenfranchised.

Nawratek et al. focus on families (WhatsApp groups of members) of the Brazilian Pentecostal *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, to examine how their popular appeal relies on multiple epistemic modes. A central tension is the primarily social media-based platform but heavy reliance upon emotional affect. It demonstrates that the personal charisma of church leaders is produced in the interface of the leaders' channeled knowledge and the individual members' experience—a dynamic which is entirely suited to the hybrid media environment.

Affective epistemic capital is the focus of Polynczuk-Alenius's analysis of conspiratorial rhetoric surrounding the protests against the Polish abortion ban in 2020, known as the "Women's Strike." Discourse analysis of a YouTube video of a speech by Jarosław Kaczyński, the de facto leader of Poland, and some engagement with it from mainstream media and activists are analyzed through Foucault's notion of biopower. What her analysis shows clearly is that the combination of factual and affective capital employed by both Kaczyński and the activists was far more effective in communicating a message than the fact-based debunking of the traditional media was.

Finally, in "Everyone is a Diplomat of his Country: Popular Communication, Epistemic Contestations and Violent Conflict in Ethiopia," Pohjonen examines the social media dynamics of the ongoing Ethiopian Tigray War. He argues that epistemic contestations on social media need to be analyzed on two levels: as a site for researching specific contestations, but also as a reminder of our own epistemic positionality withing the elite Western episteme. Only if we are able to suspend our epistemic judgment (something which scholars of religion refer to as "methodological agnosticism") will we be fully able to grasp the global implications of the emerging post-truth world.

*A note on "postmodern relativism": the articles in this issue will talk plurally of "knowledges" and "truths" in a way that some will object to. It is not the case, however, that the contributors to this issue take a relativist position, which is to say, they do not assume that all knowledge claims are of equal validity. In fact, the editors have quite deliberately bracketed this question off, both because it is beyond the scope of the journal and the space available, but mostly because it is irrelevant to the central argument. Our task is to understand how people come to think particular things, not to make judgments on whether they are justified in doing so. One does not have to adopt a relativistic position to acknowledge that individuals and groups do not necessarily have the same epistemic position—something that religious studies scholars have long understood. Indeed, if one cannot do so, we argue, they cannot hope to understand the epistemic contestations of the post-truth knowledge economy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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