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Truth Politics and Social Media: Towards a Foucauldian Approach

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Summary

Social media platforms continue to struggle with the proliferation of falsehoods, despite years of fervent calls to address the issue and recent attempts at regulation. In social science literature this issue is mostly approached with the motive of identifying and suppressing false information, advocating for institutional action to restore truth. This article proposes approaching the matter through the notion of truth politics, derived from the works of Michel Foucault, with the focus on investigating the power dynamics that determine the possibilities of truth in the present. The article lays out the requisite theoretical and conceptual elements. First, by distinguishing between different uses of the term "truth" in Foucault's writings, the emphasis is shifted from epistemic evaluation of truth claims to the analysis of the conditions of possibility of truth. Second, the crucial concept – truth regime – is presented as it appears in Foucault's work. Third, the concept of truth regime is further developed to make it applicable to technical systems. Fourth, the paper provides an example of technological operation of truth regimes using the case of Facebook's News Feed algorithm.

Keywords: Truth Regimes, Social Media, Michel Foucault, Disinformation, Facebook

Introduction

It was an often-repeated phrase in the first days of the Israel-Hamas conflict which started in October 2023 that truth is the first casualty of war. This was mostly invoked in context of large social media platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), where people flocked to hear the latest news of the conflict. They were instead greeted with a flood of contradictory, dubious, or incorrect information, not to mention extremely graphic footage of violent acts and victims, some unrelated to that particular conflict (Ganguly & Farah, 2023). As expected, the war-

ring sides made extensive strategic use of these communication channels, but the havoc on the platforms went beyond informational operations. It embroiled swathes of social media users in what Byung-Chul Han calls a "shitstorm" – a complete breakdown of any communicational power, a domination of noise in all channels, which achieves truth effects at near random (Han, 2017, pp. 1-4). At this point, getting a clear picture of the event was entirely precluded. Some commentators took the situation as a sign of social media's imminent collapse, claiming that what once promised to be a unique window to the world, instantaneously providing the widest range of the most up-to-date information, was now irretrievably broken and descended into post-truth (Lee Myers, 2023; Warzel, 2023).

This was, of course, not the first such episode, nor was it the first armed conflict that produced such effects. The Syrian civil war was called the "first truly 'socially mediated' war", where reports and footage of the war (captured on mobile phones by activists and civilians) were circulated on social media platforms like YouTube and Twitter, also competing with official war propaganda by the Syrian regime and their Russian allies (Cosentino, 2020, pp. 87-92). The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was dubbed the "first TikTok war", with first-hand footage uploaded by soldiers on the front, the conflict also featuring intensive informational warfare efforts by both sides, still ongoing (Warzel, 2023). Wars are not the only events which cause social media shitstorms – other notable ones include the January 6 insurrection in the US, and the COVID-19 pandemic which was also called an "infodemic". Many democracies are also prone to surges of manipulative content during election campaigns (Nenadić, 2020, p. 91).

Through all these events, the reaction of platform companies (or lack thereof) has been heavily criticized. They've been repeatedly called upon to privilege authoritative sources and suppress false information[1]. Despite the ostensible efforts the results remain middling, partially due to the difficulty of the task, but partially due to companies' disinterest. The European Union, a vanguard in platform regulation, tried to direct platform companies towards self-regulation via the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation. In 2022 the Digital Services Act (DSA) was passed by the European Parliament, intended to regulate illegal content and false information in digital media and fully coming into power on 1 January 2024 (Nenadić, 2020). Yet already the European Commission, the appointed authority enforcing

[1] In this article the term 'false information' encompasses both disinformation (intentionally false) and misinformation (unintentionally false). This is done to preserve the distinction which is otherwise unclear when 'disinformation' is used to cover both these senses, e.g. the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation in its preamble indicates that the operative term 'Disinformation' (distinctly capitalized) also includes the notion of misinformation (Code of Practice on Disinformation, 2022, p. 1).

the DSA, sent out formal requests for information to Meta, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) to elaborate how they are complying with DSA's requirements for fighting false information in the context of the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict.[2] This resulted in the EC starting infringement proceedings against X in December 2023 (O'Caroll, 2023). How this will play out remains to be seen, as under the DSA the EC has the right to issue fines and even block access to infringing services after repeated infractions (Lomas, 2023; Maelen & Griffin, 2023).

This article proposes making sense of this situation through the lens of truth politics. It entails asking how social media platforms enact the conditions of possibility of truth, i.e. how they function as truth regimes. The phrase 'conditions of possibility of truth' denotes various enabling, constraining, and regulating factors that determine the possible ways truth can e.g. be uttered; how, by whom, to whom, and when can it be communicated; how it can be discovered and affirmed or denied, etc. Truth regimes are then specific political arrangements of these factors – political in the sense that they are a matter of power (and power struggles) to create, preserve, and modify the regime. Thus the term truth politics, which applies on two levels – from within a truth regime, denoting the power structure of conditions of possibility of truth, and from without, denoting a strategic field where multiple truth regimes vie for influence, sometimes clashing, sometimes allying. This approach is derived from the works of Michel Foucault and his longstanding interest in the intertwinement of truth and power (Deere, 2014, pp. 517, 521-522; Lorenzini, 2016, pp. 63-64; Petković, 2018b, p. 27; Rayner, 2010). The regulatory struggle between platform companies and the EU, the uneasy relation news media have with platforms, the platforms' reluctant response to challenges of false information, as well as their communicative infrastructure that not only enables but possibly incites false inforrmation, are all moments in the historic field of truth politics. These issues are immediately relevant in the present where platforms are deeply intertwined with societal structures (Dijck *et al*., 2018, p. 2), and the overall construction of social reality has become inextricable from technological processes of mediation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 2).

The article is structured as follows. The second section explains how the approach of truth politics differs from other approaches to truth on social media. This difference hinges on making distinctions in the use of the term "truth", thus shifting the emphasis from epistemic evaluation to power analysis of the conditions of possibility of truth. The third section presents the concept of truth regime as it appears

[2] The DSA itself does not define the required measures for fighting false information. It does, however, provide the option of establishing codes of conduct which "contribute to the proper application of this regulation". This potentially means that the Code of Practice on Disinformation (updated in 2022) might become de facto obligatory instead of voluntary (Regulation 2022/2065; Maelen & Griffin, 2023).

in Foucault's work. The fourth section comments further on Foucault's concept of truth regime, showcases some recent usages of the concept, and extends its scope towards technical systems by combining it with the concept of the dispositive. The fifth section provides an example of technological operations of truth regimes in the case of Facebook's News Feed algorithm. In the conclusion, the truth-political dimension of the problem of false information is reiterated, using the findings of this article to conclude that platforms as truth regimes are structurally disinterested in arbitrating what is actually true and what is not, which also means they are disinterested in suppressing falsehoods.

Post-Truth and the Concept of Truth

This deployment of the concept of truth regime is partially conceived as a reaction and productive critique of the idea of post-truth. Post-truth is here understood as a form of discourse emerging in 2016. It rests on the central claim that truth has lost its power in shaping public opinion and that public opinion is instead influenced by emotional appeals and objectively false statements. This is made possible by specific historic conditions – a decline of democratic politics and the ascendance of populism, the spread and integration of social media in everyday lives, the development of mis-and-disinformation tactics, and the continuing decline of the influence wielded by traditional media institutions (Cvrtila, 2019). Originally conceived and developed by the news media, the term was soon appropriated as an analytic concept in social science research.[3] However, post-truth is not a salient concept and does not provide worthwhile insights because it is too general, makes unwarranted epochal cuts, and is politically overburdened (Cvrtila, 2019; 2021).

I do, however, agree with post-truth's assumption that something changed about the possibilities of truth in current times. But as noted, any approach based on the concept of post-truth will not produce satisfying and comprehensive explanations. The post-truth approach functions by first assuming for itself a position of truthfulness, anchoring it to the authors' professional standing as scientist, journalist, or some other form of expert (the most common self-identifications in post-truth discourse). Second, it interrogates the truthfulness of others in what it considers truth's privileged spaces (e.g. the public sphere). Truth claims which diverge from the assumed truthful position are considered a failure of reasoning or deliberate deception. Third, it engages in agnotological analysis, i.e. figuring out how the epistemic and moral failure occurred.[4] Finally, it calls to action – broken epistemic

[3] For recent examples, see Ahlstrom-Vij (2021) and Orlando (2023).

[4] In post-truth discourse epistemic failure is often equated to moral failure and morality is further conflated with politics, expressed in the opposition 'we, the true, against them, the untrue', fighting to preserve democracy endangered by the loss of truth. This stance emerged in post-truth

norms require intervention to be reestablished, ranging from individual self-subjectivation ("training oneself to distinguish true from false", "assuming responsibility when disseminating information" (Bernecker *et al*., 2021, p. 8)), to institutional action and regulation.[5] In other words, post-truth approaches are interested in conditions of *impossibility* of truth, and how to suppress their consequences or outright eliminate them. Such normative orientation significantly shapes any further analysis – if our goal is only to detect and qualify various errors, and then only up to the point it establishes demand for epistemic restitution, then we cannot fully understand how any divergent truth claim appeared. It does not matter why it appeared, but why it violates assumed truth.

A different research framework is needed, one that does not privilege the standpoint of particular truths (as epistemically warranted as they may be), but one that intuits the differing conditions of possibility of truth and their immanent relations of power. We find elements of such an approach in the works of Foucault – to quote Deere on Foucault's approach to truth: "The task is not to propose its falsification by referencing some greater truth but instead to expose its conditions of construction, thus demonstrating that truth never rests purely on its own foundations but is always bound... to a long institutional and political history" (Deere, 2014, pp. 520-521). For this reason, I choose the approach of truth politics and deploy its correlate concept of truth regime.

Before continuing, it needs to be made clear how the notion of truth is used in this approach in order to counter the objection of relativism.[6] This requires highlighting an important distinction Filip Buekens finds to be present in Foucault's writings, but which is not made explicit. This is the distinction between "what passes for truth – what is taken to be true... and what is true" (Buekens, 2021, p. 12). The first element, "taken to be true" refers to subjective cognition – that which is affirmed as true (or denied as false) by human subjects (as individuals or as groups), regardless of whether the affirmed truth is "actually true". The "actually true" is referred to in the second element, "what is true", denoting an actual state of reality. The general aim of conceptions and theories of truth is to align the first element (human cognition) with the second element (the state of reality). The basic possibi-

discourse as opposition to Donald Trump's US presidency, and earlier, the Brexit referendum (Cvrtila, 2019; 2021). There is a deep political-historical background to the post-truth position, but elaborating it is beyond the confines of this article. See more in: Cvrtila, 2019; 2021; Farkas & Schou, 2019; Krstić, 2022.

[5] This stance is present e.g. in the literature on false information in digital media (e.g. Baptista & Gradim, 2021, pp. 1, 11-12; Gregor & Mlejnková, 2021, p. 258; Levak, 2020; McIntyre, 2018, p. 155).

[6] A common charge against Foucault (Vucetic, 2011, p. 1298; Buekens, 2021, p. 4).

lity of this alignment, Buekens claims, can be upheld by a minimalist conception of truth (*p* is true if and only if *p*), allowing for effective epistemic inquiry and consistent evaluation of whether some truth claim is actually true (*ibid*., p. 5).

A second distinction can be detected in Foucault's work – that between "epistemic reasons for believing that *p* and [non-epistemic] causal social or institutional explanations of why an agent came to believe or know that *p* or became a *p*-believer" (*ibid*., p. 15). Foucault, then, was primarily interested in the "what is taken to be true" element of the first distinction, i.e. what beliefs people hold, and then how people come to hold these beliefs and what are the effects of holding them. He was not interested in evaluating the truth of those beliefs. Furthermore, he shifted the focus from epistemic to non-epistemic factors influencing the "taking" of truth, i.e. the "social and cultural, non-epistemic factors [that] shape our conceptual framework and explain why we hold the beliefs we have" (*ibid*., p. 3). Following Foucault, the research interest then lies in "the powers that control the distribution of true and false beliefs", asking how these powers determine "how we come to know the truths, which truths we should be interested in, or who is going to decide what we should and shouldn't know" (*ibid*., p. 6). Whether some stated truth is actually true or not is of secondary importance – what is important is how a belief came to be affirmed as true, taken as truth. It is the question of conditions of possibility of any truth that is taken as such. This does not mean that the epistemic question of whether some belief actually is true is unimportant, rather that it is not always relevant in this type of inquiry.[7] As Foucault notes, the persuasiveness of truth is never purely epistemic, but always involves a non-epistemic compulsion, i.e. some form of power (Foucault, 2014, p. 99). These arrangements of power can be analysed using the concept of truth regime.

Foucault's Concept of Truth Regime

This section will explore the concept of truth regime as it appears in the place of its origin, the works of Michel Foucault. The concept appears twice in his opus, first in an interview from 1976, with the excerpt on truth regimes published a year later in English, titled "The political function of the intellectual". The second time it appears in a series of lectures titled "On the Government of the Living" ("Du gouvernement des vivants" in orig. French), given between 1979 and 1980 at the Collège de France. The theoretical emphases somewhat differ between the two, owing to Foucault's varying interests through several phases of his career. Nevertheless, both need to be appreciated in order to realize the full potential of the concept.

[7] This also entails (at least temporarily) setting aside the question of the ethics and value of truth. A worthwhile restatement and engagement with this question can be found in Petković (2018a).

In its first iteration, Foucault defines truth regimes as follows: "Truth is of the world: it is produced by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault, 1977, p. 13). Two things need to be pointed out here – the first is that Foucault conceives of truth regimes as general societal structures, i.e. operating at the macro-level, and the second is that this definition is focused on the discursive dimension – truth regimes as the production of statements taken as true.

Subsequently, Foucault adds an economic dimension: "In societies like ours the 'political economy' of truth is characterised by five historically important traits: 'truth' is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to a constant economic and political incitation (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of an immense diffusion and consumption (it circulates in apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively wide within the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media...); lastly, it is the stake of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles)" (*ibid*.).[8]

Several things need to be mentioned. First, Foucault puts science in the forefront, yet as he will elaborate later, scientific discourse and reasoning is not a necessary component of truth regimes – truth is and was produced through quite varying means. Second, the manifestation of truth now takes the form of a political economy, a cycle of production, distribution, and consumption structured by specific power relations. Later in the interview Foucault further emphasizes both the eco-

[8] It is worth noting Foucault already set the foundations of this perspective in his inaugural lecture at Collège de France in 1970, titled "L'Ordre du discours" (sometimes mistranslated into English as "The Discourse on Language", e.g. Foucault, 1972). Here Foucault focuses on "systems for the control and delimitation of discourse" (Foucault, 1971, p. 12), present in "every society" (*ibid*., p. 8), which are "reliant upon institutional support and distribution", thus "exercising a sort of pressure, a power of constraint" (*ibid*., p. 11). He also speaks of the historical Western will-to-truth ("the great Platonic division" between truth and untruth), one of the basic (and increasingly predominant) "systems of exclusion governing discourse" (*ibid*.). This lecture can be taken as a transitional piece from Foucault's commitment to the ontology of discourse and the archaeological method, to the ontology of power and the genealogical method (Petković, 2018b, p. 81).

nomic aspect – "'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements", and the political aspect – "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'régime' of truth" (*ibid*., p. 14). Third, Foucault shifts the emphasis away from discursive conditions of truth regimes towards institutional ones. To quote: "The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses – or what's in their heads – but the political, economic, institutional régime of the production of truth" (*ibid*.). Fourth, Foucault speaks of truth regimes as an all-encompassing general societal system of truth, necessary for the functioning of certain power relations in a given society. Here, the societal truth regime is the field of truth politics itself (Lorenzini, 2016, p. 68). In his second deployment of truth regimes, Foucault tempers the scope and speaks of much more local and specific truth regimes, allowing us to recognize them as distinct entities on the broader field of truth politics.

Unlike the first deployment, which isn't much more than a brief outline, "On the Government of the Living" has Foucault deliver a refined and comprehensive account of truth regimes. An opening statement made by Foucault in the first lecture, which he seeks to explain and build upon for the next few lectures, reads: "The exercise of power is almost always accompanied by a manifestation of truth" (Foucault, 2014, p. 6). He specifically speaks of the exercise of power in the form of the governance of human subjects. In his words, he is interested in "the government of men through the manifestation of truth in the form of subjectivity" (*ibid*., p. 80). Foucault seeks to elaborate two interrelated aspects of subjectivity – being subject in relation to power and being subject in manifestation of truth. But first, he introduces a lower-order concept, a sub-unit of truth regimes – truth procedures, or as he calls them, alethurgies, are "verbal and non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light what is laid down as true as opposed to false, hidden, inexpressible, unforeseeable, or forgotten" (*ibid*., p. 6). In the second and third lectures, Foucault presents his reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, whereby he demonstrates how the tragedy contains depictions of several different truth procedures. Here, he emphasizes the importance of a specific kind of procedure – truth as manifesting in the form of subjectivity, the self who speaks the truth. Such procedure does not mean that the subject is made merely a conduit, a mouthpiece of truth. On the contrary, the subject is also affected by the truth they spoke; the truth transforming the subject in the act of avowal (*ibid*., pp. 49-50). It is an experience "both ethical ('I am a new subject') and epistemological ('I know something new')" (Petković, 2018a, p. 8). Here we have not just truth through subjectivity, but subjectivation by truth as well – a form of power.

Truth procedures are further defined by the subject's roles in performing them, or what Foucault calls "truth acts". There are three of these roles: (1) the operator of the alethurgy, (2) the spectator of it, and (3) the object itself of the alethurgy. A sub-

ject can assume more than one role in a single procedure of truth (Foucault, 2014, p. 81). To paraphrase Foucault, "the exercise of power as the government of men demands not only acts of obedience and submission, but also truth acts in which individuals who are subjects in the power relationship are also subjects as actors, spectator witnesses, or objects in manifestation of truth procedures" (*ibid*., p. 82). Of course, truth procedures are not necessarily successful in the sense of the operator convincing the spectators of some truth. There is always the possibility of the procedure failing or producing unintended truth effects. To diminish this risk, a certain aspect of power is needed, one found in truth regimes.

In the fifth lecture, Foucault fully turns his attention to truth regimes. Here, he defines them as such: "By regime of truth I mean that which constrains individuals to a certain number of truth acts, that which defines, determines the form of these acts and establishes their conditions of effectuation and specific effects. Roughly speaking, a regime of truth is that which determines the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestation of truth" (*ibid*., p. 93). As a question of constraints and obligations (but also permissions and incitements), truth regimes are then a matter of power. According to Foucault, this power is what bridges the gap between what manifests as truth and a subject who is transformed by this truth, as expressed in the formula – "if it is true, then I will submit; it is true, therefore I submit" (*ibid*., pp. 96-97). As Foucault notes, this "therefore" is "not a logical 'therefore', it cannot rest on any self-evidence, nor is it univocal moreover" and is a "historical-cultural problem" (*ibid*., p. 97). This power can appear, for example, in "a body of doctrine", or as "institutions and traditions" (*ibid*., p. 83), i.e. regulated practices, or it can be internalized within the subject as explicit reasons for acquiescing to some truth. But it can also remain backgrounded, unnoticed and unacknowledged (Lorenzini, 2016, pp. 68-69). Gesturing towards its more subtle forms, I contend that this power can be entirely extra-subjective and non-discursive.

Going back to Foucault's first deployment, we can appreciate specific political-economic factors, i.e. specific arrangements of production, distribution, and consumption, as well as the power relation which structures and drives them. For example, as an epistemic factor, Foucault notes the truth regime of science has an internalized presumption of only truth being able to produce more truth, and of truth being obligatory in itself (not requiring some external obligations) (Foucault, 2014, p. 96). But, as a non-epistemic factor, science is also driven by a constant demand for new truths, produced in both public and private research institutions. These truths are distributed internally through conferences, papers, speeches, etc., but also externally through large publishing complexes driven by commercial motives; by the media in the public sphere which seeks expert knowledge for deliberation on policy issues; or common problems, or even through the informal capillaries of the internet, where it is often highly decontextualized, if not outright distorted. These

truths are finally consumed by the interested public which recognizes scientific authority and seeks to better understand pertinent issues; by professionals who will apply them towards solving practical problems; or perhaps even by multi-layered communication channels of the internet which will perform several iterations of decontextualizing and recontextualizing the message until the original meaning is completely displaced by a seemingly unrelated one, e.g. a piece of scientific discourse becomes a piece of absurd humour in the form of a meme (Blommaert, 2019; Habermas, 2022; Peters, 2008).

These political-economic, non-epistemic factors influence truth outcomes, regulating which truths get affirmed, which get denied, and which get a chance to be perceived at all. Truth is not just a matter of discursive practices, but also material ones. Other than the moment of production, which regulates what statements are uttered/utterable in the first place, the moment of distribution regulates which statements (also where and how) get further disseminated, and the moment of consumption regulates the method, as well as the interest and susceptibility of subjects for perceiving truths. If we want a fuller picture of the possibilities of truth in the present, of the whole system which leads to the final particular outcome (or many equivalent outcomes) of some person/s believing some statement as true (or false), we need to attend to all of these moments.

Truth Regimes, Dispositives, and Technology

Through two episodes of Foucault's elaboration of truth regimes, the concept traversed the entire relation from a society-wide system to local mechanisms of individual subjectivation. If the scope is this wide, the question arises of the proper way to analyse truth regimes. This is a question of ontology – a question of what entities exist in the world and how they're available to inquiry. Truth regimes are not discrete, "already given objects" (Foucault, 2009, p. 118). They are best understood through a relational ontology, as suggested by Foucault himself: "regimes of truth, that is to say, the types of relations that link together manifestations of truth with their procedures and the subjects" (Foucault, 2014, p. 100). Truth regimes are a system of relations between diverse elements functionally bound towards establishing, regulating, and leveraging the possibilities of truth. They are mobilized networks which can be described at multiple scales of social analysis. As such, they can be productively linked to another one of Foucault's concepts – the dispositive.[9]

[9] The French original *dispositif* has an inconsistent history of English translations as e.g. "apparatus", "deployment", "system", etc. (Lemke, 2021, p. 90). Lemke (*ibid*., pp. 98-101) asserts the concept should be kept distinct from related terms such as 'apparatus' and 'assemblage', which justifies the English variant 'dispositive'.

A dispositive is defined as a network consisting of various discursive, practical and material elements; manifesting as a system of relations between these elements; and fulfilling a strategic role (Foucault, 1980, pp. 194-195; Lemke, 2021, p. 90).[10] "The relational web that binds together these elements, defining their positions and giving them a particular form and shape" (Lemke, 2021, p. 92). It is an "operationalization of governmentality" (Jackson & Carter, 1998, p. 60) which "enables a strategic capacity to arrange events" and puts the object of its governing "at one's disposal" (Whelan, 2019, p. 45). As such, a dispositive forms a truth regime when it adopts the function mentioned earlier – "the government of men through the manifestation of truth" (Foucault, 2014, p. 80). Truth regimes can be understood as a specific type of dispositive which governs the possibilities of truth. As the dispositive's usefulness in empirical research has already been demonstrated (e.g. Villadsen, 2021; Whelan, 2019; Slukan, 2021; Zajc, 2013; 2014), it can help us bridge the gap between the theory of truth regimes and its application in analysing their concrete instantiations. It also facilitates a critical moment, i.e. to ask questions how the dispositive is set within the strategic field of power relations – what purposes it serves, what objects it targets, and at whose "disposal" it places these objects and purposes (Whelan, 2019; Villadsen, 2021; Deleuze, 1992a).

Truth regimes as dispositives are not fully stable and closed systems. They are rather a "dynamic 'ensemble' characterized by 'shifts of position and modifications of function'" (Foucault, 1980, p. 195; Lemke, 2021, p. 93). They are prone to changes in configurations, operations, and purposes, "permanently being reworked and modified" (Lemke, 2021, p. 93). That is, they are meta-stable, always becoming (Stiegler, 2019, p. 334). This susceptibility to change also stems from their operating on wider strategic fields of power relations, conflicting or making alliances with other truth regimes or power systems, conducting tactical reconfigurations, and eventually gaining or losing influence (Foucault, 1977; 2014). Truth regimes are multiple and heterogeneous – diachronically and synchronically, qualitatively various. Foucault is explicit about this – "straightaway I put regimes of truth in the plural" (Foucault, 2014, p. 102), demanding we take the "multiplicity of regimes of truth into consideration" (*ibid.*, p. 100). Despite such versatility, for some time the concept didn't find much recognition among the rich anglophone appreciation and

[10] In the same place, Foucault lists a series of variable elements that can be found in the dispositive – "a thoroughly heterogeneous network consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid" (Foucault, 1980, pp. 194-195). To quote Lemke: "It is a composite of things that seems to include virtually anything from discourses and institutions to bodies and buildings" (Lemke, 2021, p. 92).

appropriation of Foucault's oeuvre.[11] One could point out that even Foucault himself didn't use it much (compared to his other concepts), despite his constant and explicit interest in the question of truth. But the reception has started to increase in recent years (not least owing to concerns over "post-truth"), and we can find several productive deployments of the concept.[12]

Here are some examples of recent works. As the most general account there is Jayson Harsin's thesis of the shift towards an overall 'regime-of-post-truth' (containing many competing regimes of truth), a development parallel to the shift from the disciplinary society to the control society (Deleuze, 1992b), spurred by the globalization of media technology, the rise of political marketing, and political-economic and ideological changes (Harsin, 2015). For a more specific but still macro-level deployment, Timo Harjuniemi writes of historic changes in "liberal regimes of truth", regimes that since the 18th century adhered to the idea of the market as the site of emerging truth. According to Harjuniemi, the shifts in the regime occur through a Polanyian double movement between unregulated and regulated media markets, with a first shift towards regulation in the 1920s and a swing back to deregulation with the neoliberal movement in the 1980s (continuing to this day) (Harjuniemi, 2022). For a mid-range deployment (describing a common mode of truth production), there is Thomas Brante's concept of "professional truth regimes", i.e. the triangle between science, its correlate expert knowledge and practice, and the common ontology of their object of interest that binds science and expertise (Brante, 2010). For a deployment of particular cases of truth regimes, we can point to Bradford Vivian who, through a type of ideological analysis, diagnoses that so-called post-truth politics does not abandon truth – on the contrary, it "evinces an obdurate will-to-truth amenable to authoritarianism" (Vivian, 2018). Vivian touches on the operations of a specific truth regime by providing examples of discursive tactics deployed by conservatives in current U.S. politics.

While all of the listed examples can be considered appropriate uses of the concept of truth regime, two important criticisms need to be levied, showing how they all fall short of the concept's full potential. Firstly, they mostly undertheorize the

[11] I speculate the reason for this is that the concept of truth regime was initially available only as brief remarks in the 1977 publication, amounting to but a couple of paragraphs. The later, much more detailed elaboration in the 1979/80 lectures, was not published in written form until 2012, and only became available in English in 2014. With this in mind, it is understandable that the concept is only now gaining traction in the global English-speaking scientific community.

[12] Searching for the term "truth regime" in the Scopus database returns about 70 articles which note it as a keyword. Nearly 90% of those articles were published in the past ten years (while the term was first used by Foucault almost 50 years ago). While this is not a definite quantification of the term's historic use, it is certainly indicative of the general trend.

concept of truth regime, barely moving from Foucault's already austere elaboration in "The political function...". In fact, none of them even cite the second deployment in "On the Government of the Living". Second, despite not operating with the concept of the dispositive, most of the examples properly attend to both discursive and non-discursive aspects of truth regimes (except Vivian, who is fully discursive). But they all lack sensitivity for the third aspect of dispositives – materializations. An exception is Harsin, who rightly foregrounds the importance of media and computational technologies. However, as a brief six-and-a-half-page essay, Harsin's article merely nudges towards the issue. I contend the full appreciation of the contemporary field of truth regimes requires an understanding of their materiality, specifically in the form of technology. This is especially relevant for social media platforms if we understand them as technological media infrastructures (Bucher, 2018, p. 90; 2021; Dijck *et al*., 2018, pp. 12-13). As media theorist Tiziana Terranova notes, communicational power in the present is increasingly defined by dynamics of information, i.e. by the possibility of optimizing the ratio between signal and noise in a communicational channel. This is not a matter of "articulating successful signifiers", of the production of meaning, but of manipulating (technological) channel conditions themselves ("opening up channels, selective targeting, making transversal connections, using informational guerrilla tactics" (Terranova, 2004, p. 54)).

It is worth noting that Foucault himself paid little attention to technical materializations and media technology. He did often use the term 'technology' (and interchangeably, 'technique'), but which mostly referred to various forms of social practice. He was not interested in manipulation and mobilization of material things and especially not in devices and systems serving this role (Allen, 2010, pp. 150-151). It does not mean that Foucault's work is conceptually hostile to materiality and the appreciation for technological devices. We can e.g. refer to works of Friedrich Kittler, German media theorist strongly influenced by Foucault. Kittler focused on the material specificities of various media, which between them thus produced differing discursive effects, and even truth effects, even when messages remained the same (Kittler, 1999). In other words, the medium is not just a channel but is itself a specific condition of possibility of truth. Another source we can point to is Thomas Lemke, who faces off Foucault with the philosophy of new materialism, concluding that Foucault can still help us grapple with materiality especially when we understand his concept of governmentality as governing both humans and non-human things in conjunction, especially when taken through the concept of the dispositive (Lemke, 2021, p. 80).

Most importantly, Lemke notes how Foucault's idea of technology already "operates across the dividing line between the human and the nonhuman" (*ibid*., p. 103). Foucault provided four distinct meanings of the term technology: "(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) tech-

nologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect... a certain number of operations on their own bodies and... way of being, so as to transform themselves" (Foucault, 1997, p. 225). These different types of technologies, according to Foucault, are always mutually integrated in operations of power (Foucault, 2000, p. 338; Lemke, 2021, p. 105). Even though, according to Lemke, "the concrete role of objects, devices, and infrastructures in governmental practices often remains obscure in Foucault's historical work", Foucault still leaves room to introduce technologies as a factor in systems of governance, and therefore truth regimes (Lemke, 2021, p. 103).

Algorithmic Ordering of Truth

This section gives a brief example of a social media platform functioning as a truth regime. It does so by drawing attention to a specific technology and its truth effects – algorithms. Algorithms have already been noted as exercising a position of governance upon platform users (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013; Musiani, 2013). Taina Bucher's analysis of Facebook's algorithm shows how it governs the selection of content to be displayed in users' News Feeds. Combining Bucher's analysis and the concept of truth regime, it is outlined how Facebook's algorithmic system produces truth effects. To quote Bucher: "If Facebook is an architectural model for communication, then the News Feed is the actualization of this model as a communication channel, a designed space in which communicative action can take place." But it's in no way a neutral field of communication – "it is political insofar as it is exercising a position of governance" (Bucher, 2018, p. 67).

Bucher argues for "the importance of revisiting the idea of the technical and architectural organization of power as proposed in the writings of Foucault, by highlighting an analytics of visibility. Becoming visible, or being granted visibility, is a highly contested game of power in which the medium plays a crucial role." This architectural model that Bucher refers to is none other than the panopticon (*ibid*., p. 73). Except, in this case, there is a sort of inverse panopticon, inverted in the sense that visibility is not equally distributed, but only selectively distributed, becoming a sort of scarce resource and thereby desired by the subjects. The immediate object of visibility is the content provided by Facebook's users, both end-users and professional users. This content, whichever form it takes, contains truth claims. Whether this be an image, video, or textual posts, unless it is specifically intended as fictional, it makes some claims about the state of the world and aspires towards being taken as "actually true". Which content becomes visible, and which content does not, is decided by Facebook's News Feed algorithm (*ibid*., p. 67).

The algorithm works by considering every object that could possibly appear on some news feed (text, image, video), and decides whether a particular object will appear on a particular user's News Feed. EdgeRank makes this decision on the basis of three main components: the type of object, the time the object was posted, and the affinity of the particular user. Affinity is the most complex factor because it considers, based on the user's previous behaviour, which content they are most likely to consume and interact with (*ibid*., pp. 78-79). This previous behaviour is gathered through Facebook's surveillance complex, which gathers data on user behaviour both on Facebook and, through tracking cookies, other websites and apps. It gathers over 10,000 particular indicators of a particular user's behaviour, in order to calculate their affinity, and through this, their likely future behaviour (Bucher, 2021, pp. 117-120). Through the algorithm, the News Feed presents users what it deems the most interesting content which makes the user most likely to engage. This is an anticipatory system whose predictions are used to increase future user interactions and engagement (*ibid*., p. 81; Kaluža, 2022, pp. 268-269). This has a subjectivising effect – the algorithm calculates a model of the subject's interests, the News Feed delivers that content, the subject-user consumes it, signalling it wants more, and is then given more. In this way, the subject gets recursively subjectivized by the algorithm.

But there is another mode of subjectivation, beside the recursive algorithmic subjectivation. Bucher points out that if users want their own content to be seen on the News Feed, they need to, so to speak, play the algorithm, meaning they need to adopt specific subject traits that are attuned to the algorithm. Unlike Foucault's panopticon, the problem is not the threat of visibility, but rather the threat of invisibility. "The problem is not the possibility of constantly being observed but the possibility of constantly disappearing, of not being considered important enough. In order to appear, to become visible, one needs to follow a certain platform logic embedded in the architecture of Facebook" (Bucher, 2018, p. 84). Bucher notes that this is not unlike Foucault's disciplinary mode of power – users are trained through their continuous interactions with Facebook, interactions which are either rewarded with visibility or punished by invisibility (*ibid*., pp. 88-89).

The goal of the training is to create an useful subject, and for Facebook, a useful subject is the one who "participates, communicates, and interacts" (*ibid*., p. 88). As a truth regime, Facebook conducts and incites subject-users to participate in all truth procedures enabled by the platform – they want them to create and annunciate truths by creating content; to spectate and observe truths by consuming content, possibly reevaluate and recontextualize truths (Blommaert, 2019) and recycle them in the truth economy. It also invites them to objectify themselves – e.g. through the public commitment of truth acts, build up and perform a persona of an adherent to particular truths (a "digital effigy" (Kalpokas, 2019, p. 52), thus signalling affinity,

both algorithmic and otherwise) to similar social media users, forming networks of interaction and engagement. Through performing these truth acts, the subject-users are captured by the algorithmic system which governs users towards participating as much as possible. This is how Meta, Facebook's parent company, achieves profit – the more users participate, the more time they spend on the platform and the more information is gathered about them. The platform is finally monetized when users' time and information are used for efficient advertisement delivery, i.e. showing users the most "relevant" advertisements (most likely to influence opinion and sentiment or result in a purchase). As 97% of Meta's revenue comes from advertising (Statista, 2023), it is imperative to optimize the above-described relation.

Conclusion

While the described example is particular to Facebook, many other platforms deploy similar algorithms with similar goals (data extraction and advertising) (Zuboff, 2019). These algorithmic systems, by themselves, have no capacity for truth. Nor do social media platform companies care much to arbitrate what is actually true on the platform – in fact, doing so would be against their main interest – growing the volume and circulation of "what is taken to be true", in order to extract the most profit from the economic cycle of truth on the platform (Prodnik, 2021, p. 207). Whether any of the cycled content is actually true is entirely beside the point for platform companies – all content is equally exploitable either way. Under the justification that thereby they protect free speech, platform companies claim they do not wish to be arbiters of truth (e.g. as explicitly stated by Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg (McCarthy, 2020)).

But they're not entirely laissez-faire in this regard. As mass proliferation of demonstrable untruths on platforms became apparent, along with the ensuing social and political toll, the platform companies have been repeatedly called to responsibility by various actors: international organizations, states, NGOs, etc. A wave of regulation followed, as mentioned, most notably the EU with its Code of Practice on Disinformation and the DSA (but also e.g. national legislation in Germany, Australia, Singapore, etc. (Tan, 2022)). While platform companies do not wish to be arbiters of truth, it is now their interest to become so. They choose to comply in order to avoid more stringent regulations and oversight in the future (Nenadić, 2020, p. 83). Still, consistent categorization and removal of false information proved far from dependable, and new measures bore middling results (CCDH, 2020). The current Israel-Hamas conflict is a case in point of platforms being unprepared (or unwilling) to govern the overwhelming information flow of global events.

One reason for unsatisfying results is that dependable moderation is immensely technically and organizationally difficult, prone to false positives. But another

reason is that it clashes with platform companies' main interest. Structurally, platforms as truth regimes prefer maximizing incitement and cycling of truth, ensuring full horizontal participation in truth procedures (no privileged authorities), and practicing truth agnosticism (leaving to the users to decide). How exactly platform companies will choose to balance these preferences against increasing pressure from regulators and other actors remains to be seen.

Another way to understand this situation is to look at it through the lens of truth politics. The strategic field of truth politics contains many truth regimes, some overlapping and supporting, other distinct and conflicting. The 21st century brought about entirely new kinds of large truth regimes, embedded in social media platforms, which rapidly gained a significant portion of relative influence in the field of truth politics. Older forms of large truth regimes, like traditional media systems, public spheres, and state authorities, felt threatened by this development. Their power of influencing particular truth effects (deemed epistemically and even ethically warranted) was overridden by systems which push for maximisation of entirely non-particular truth effects, systems in which now participates a large majority of the population in many countries. The perceived threat of losing influence over truth soon extended to fear of losing political power in general (expectedly, if we remember Foucault's dictum that there is no exercise of power without a manifestation of truth). Post-truth discourse's foretelling of the loss of democracy is an exemplar of this fear.

How exactly the current clash will continue to play out remains to be seen. Any predictions are complicated by numerous confounding factors. For instance, the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), was as of very recently one of the most influential platforms among political and media elites. Yet after Elon Musk's acquisition last year, Twitter lost this status in record time and is on track to become a marginal contender in the field of truth politics, especially with competing copycat platforms like Bluesky, Threads, and even the open-source Mastodon, eager to replace it. Similar unpredicted shifts in the market of digital services, only marginally related to truth politics, can significantly influence the field.[13] Another important, currently developing factor is the public release of generative artificial intelligences already capable (albeit clumsily) of autonomously producing text, image and sound that is indistinguishable from human-made content.[14] In other words, the production (and even distribution) of truth claims is soon to be fully automated and divorced from human subjects, which nevertheless remain intended consumers. But

[13] Elon Musk's governance of the platform showcases a highly personalized form of truth politics, with Musk's personal beliefs (and immediate participation) directly influencing the structuring of the truth regime.

[14] Notably, platform companies are at the forefront of developing these new forms of AI (e.g. Alphabet, Meta, Microsoft), and intend to integrate them within their platforms.

as has been repeatedly demonstrated, generative AI has no capacity at all to discern between what is true and what is taken as true – it is a statistical model, committed to producing material that is most likely to be convincing, i.e. taken as true. And it does so at unprecedented rates. We are at the threshold of yet another significant evolution of novel forms of truth regimes which is poised to again shake up the global field of truth politics.

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