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The Rise of Alternative Sources of Information and the Era of Post-Truth Politics

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1. Introduction

The media industry is undergoing a significant development, that is revolutionizing the spread of information and is set to deeply change political communication for years to come. The process of digitalization produced an unprecedented degree of accessibility to information, therefore posing a number of challenges to both the political and social spheres. The following dissertation aims at demonstrating how the evolution of the traditional media industry led to a significant shift in contemporary political narratives characterized by radicalism, polarization and an increasing disregard for the truth. Ultimately, this culminated in what is referred to as the era of post-truth politics, characterized by alternative sources of information and decentralized forms of political communication and thus new channels, through which factually inaccurate news and information are communicated for political gain. This phenomenon was especially apparent in the course of the epochal events of Brexit, the Trump presidency and the COVID-19 pandemic, three instances which were strongly influenced by fake news and conspiracy theories.

As a starting point in the historical analysis of the evolution of the media industry, one has to make a few considerations about the term „media". The media is an extremely vast and multifaceted concept. Although means of communication and rhetoric have been subject to theories and philosophical works for centuries, the term „media" was first coined and widely used in the 1920s and throughout the mid 20th century, with the advent of infrastructures of mass communication and groundbreaking new broadcasting devices. However, to view the media merely in terms of these modern devices of mass communication is a rather simplistic and narrow consideration. In order to better define this concept for the purpose of this argumentation, an abstraction has to be made between two main concepts, the individual medium and the media as a whole.

In this context, the „medium", stemming from the Latin „medius", is an intermediary device and therefore a technological tool for information communication and message transmission. These tools have been strongly influenced by technological innovations throughout history and have developed accordingly. The media, being the plural of medium, can be conceived as an environment which comprises all of these devices of communication, which are interconnected and influence each other. As evidenced by Peter Burke and Asa Briggs in their publication "A Social History of the Media" (2020) the significance of this environment goes far beyond the mere communication of single messages. In their view, the media taken as a whole represents an "omnipresent and pervasive force" (Burke & Briggs, 2020) and thus an environment in which the subjects are immersed in. What transpires from this definition is that the media, viewed in a wide sense, as a total entity, is a strongly impactful social force that both influences and is influenced by societal developments. Similarly, Marshall McLuhan, a philosopher and major contributor to the study of media theory, also underlined the social impactfulness of the media. In his work "Understanding Media: The extensions of man", first published in 1964, McLuhan famously centered one of his many theories around the phrase "The medium is the

message". The philosopher here sought to highlight the fact that the meaning or content of a given message is unimportant compared to the nature of the medium itself. The different media and technologies introduced throughout the course of history have therefore produced a "change of scale or pace or pattern" (McLuhan, 1964). that deeply affected human affairs and interactions. The new media technologies which appeared at different stages of human history thus brought about new dynamics and patterns of interactions within society, by providing new and evolving frameworks of human communication and message transmission.

As a consequence, when considering the history of the media and of political communication, these developments have to be contextualized within society. The aim of the following historic account is not merely to analyze the technological advancements that led to the rise of new communication devices, but primarily to highlight the profound changes and shifts within society that were both a cause and an effect of these developments. The focus will be on the channels of information distribution, the transmission of knowledge and the devices used to spread substantial ideas, that would profoundly impact society and have significant influence on world-historical events. A development that would increasingly enhance the cognitive and critical thinking ability of individuals, thus involving a steadily growing number of the population in the political processes. For the purpose of such an analysis, one can divide the worlds history into different eras, each strongly characterized by groundbreaking new inventions that shaped the evolution of the media and the development of society.

2. The Evolution of the Traditional Media Industry

2.1 The Oral Era

The roots of the development of the media can be traced back to Ancient times, a period which gave rise to a process which would deeply alter societal attitudes and human interactions. Initially, the civilizations of the classical antiquity were dominated by oral cultures and traditions. In mostly illiterate societies, visual and oral forms of conveying information were crucial.

This is especially true for Ancient Greece, where in the absence of widespread literacy and recording media, extreme importance was given to oral communication, in an effort to preserve the cultural history and communicate knowledge from one generation to the next. As evidenced by the classicist Eric Havelock, the availability of the Greek alphabet around the year 700 B.C did not alter the deeply rooted oral traditions of Greek society, but rather the domination of oral traditions "persisted long after the alphabet had theoretically made a reading culture possible" (Havelock, 1963). The ancient Greek civilization can therefore be said to have been a "reflection of the power of the spoken word" (Innis, 1950). Practically, this oral culture consisted in a variety of different traditions, such as primarily public speeches, recited poems, plays in amphitheaters,

as well as songs and storytelling, which had both entertainment and educational functions. Especially poems which were sung or communicated orally from memory had a central function in Greek culture for centuries, starting from Homers purely oral Iliad and Odyssey from the 8th century B.C. A key characteristic of these forms of communication was that "songs and stories came in fluid rather than fixed forms" (Burke & Briggs, 2020), thus creating dynamic works often subject to thematical and semantic adaptation by subsequent storytellers and singers.

Rhetoric and the spoken word have indeed been a central concept in Greek history and have as such been theorized about by the very founders of Western philosophy. In fact, in the course of the 5th century B.C Socrates strongly promoted the oral tradition by adopting a teaching technique that involved debates and discussions. The fact that Socrates never wrote down or documented any of his teachings was an inherent characteristic of the socratic method and therefore the philosophical works had to be kept alive by subsequent sources. His pupil Plato would later strongly draw on dialogues and thus dialectic teachings of philosophy. By means of these dialogues, in which his teacher Socrates was almost always a pivotal character, Plato sought to incorporate Socratic teachings and methods in a dramatic or narrative framework, thus keeping his teachers' philosophy alive for generations to come. As evidence to Plato's fierce dedication to the oral tradition one can also take his strong opposition to literacy and the widespread use of writing, expressed through the famous quote in one of his many dialogues: "If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks" (Hackforth, 1952). While it may seem rather ironic that Plato voiced his criticism against writing by means of a written text, the philosopher here indicated oral communication as the primary and only source of intergenerational teachings and remembrance of cultural history and knowledge. Nevertheless, it is understood that Plato wrote during a time of deep sociocultural change within Greek society and thus the platonic era can be described as one of "great transition" (Havelock, 1963) from the fully oral tradition toward the literary era, in which Plato's student Aristotle would then be the main exponent. In sum, one can observe a distinct process within the ancient Greek culture. Starting from Homers epic poems Iliad and Odyssey, to the socratic oral teachings and the transitionary platonic era up to the written treaties of Aristotle, Greece completed a shift toward a literary culture. This process is indicative of similar developments that occurred contemporarily in other ancient civilizations.

The rise of the literary tradition in Ancient Rome can be said to have been strongly influenced by Greek literary works especially in the Hellenistic period, as evidenced by the fact that the first instances of Latin literature were translations of Greek plays and poems. Literature and writing would then acquire increasing importance in the expanding Roman empire, thus gradually replacing the oral tradition. Accordingly, in order to administer the vast empire a centralized bureaucratic administration was necessary, based on written laws, decrees and orders. To this end, the accessibility of papyrus acquired from the domination of Egypt facilitated the rapid

rise of writing and a centralized administration, as well as deeply changing the entirety of Roman culture and politics (Innis, 1950).

What these accounts highlight is perhaps the first fundamental process in the development of the media and therefore a deeply rooted shift within society: the transition from orality to literacy. The start of a new era in the Western world, characterized by increased use of writing, primarily in manuscript form, and a steadily growing demand for reading material. Ultimately, this led to the invention of a technological tool which permanently revolutionized the media landscape.

2.2 The Print Revolution

Around the year 1450 Johannes Gutenberg invented a printing press which came to be known as the „Gutenberg press", an invention which would take medieval Europe by storm and commence the "print revolution". Drawing on already existing techniques, Gutenberg managed to combine personal groundbreaking innovations, such as new forms of type casting and the use of matrices, and modifications to previously existing methods, thus creating a mechanic printing process, capable of producing higher quality and more durable printed books. The revolutionary nature of this groundbreaking invention stemmed from the fact that the mechanization of the printing process strongly reduced the previous temporal constraints and consequently allowed the rapid mass production of printed literary works. This new technological tool soon reached several major European cities, commencing a massive campaign of printing books, which culminated in an estimated 13 million printed books by the year 1500 (Burke & Briggs, 2020).

The new ability to print information and document knowledge in a fixed form in an unprecedented short time paved the way for the development of a medium which would have extreme importance for centuries to come and up to this day, the daily newspaper. Whereas during the aforementioned era dominated by the oral tradition news travelled predominantly by word of mouth, often by means of designated messengers, one can detect some very early prototypes of the format of the modern newspaper. These commonly took the form of government issued newssheets covering issues of public interest, a practice which famously originated with the ancient Roman regularly appearing *Acta diurna* from the year 59 B.C.E. Furthermore, the media of handwritten newssheets, as well as newsletters in manuscript form would be essential and primary sources of news communication for centuries. A format perhaps most similar to traditional newspapers appeared in mid-sixteenth century Venice with the *gazzetta,* a weekly journal comprising multiple pages named after the Venetian coin. What distinguishes modern newspapers from these prior formats are the key characteristics of the regularity of its appearance, as well as the widespread availability to the entire public. This was made possible by the printing press, which enabled the mass production necessary to satisfy these requirements. What is commonly accepted to be the first newspaper would then be published in Strasbourg in 1605 by Johann Carolus (Dooley, 2015), with many major European countries and cities following soon. Throughout history

newspapers would acquire increasing importance and ultimately would not only become fundamental elements of daily life, but also among the most trusted information sources. In this time period one could therefore observe a constant multiplication and spread of reading material, caused by the emergence of a variety of different formats appearing at different intervals.

In light of the research question of this dissertation, a few considerations can be made about the impact of the printing press. Coupled with the significant societal shift provoked by the increasing literacy and education of the public, the printing press enabled an unprecedented degree of circulation and widespread availability of information, knowledge and most importantly new ideas. This permanently altered the communication of information and introduced a new dynamic into society. Consequently, this development broke what can be referred to as the "monopoly of knowledge" (Innis, 1951), enjoyed by a small elite up to that point, predominantly composed of governmental authorities and priests, which essentially told the public what to think and strongly influenced the minds of the people. As such, the invention of the printing press and its various implications can be considered the first significant instance of decentralization of information communication and the rise of new sources of information. The previous very limited conventional channels of information, dominated by a small group, were being strongly challenged by the introduction of these new media. A further consequence of the rise of printing was that it enhanced the cognitive and critical thinking abilities of individuals, which were now required to interpret information on their own, as well as confronting the different opinions which were available to them, therefore becoming more conscious of sociopolitical matters. The roots of a more participative and active public can thus be traced back to the era of the printing revolution and would then in subsequent centuries evolve into what Jürgen Habermas famously called the „public sphere".

As defined by Habermas himself the „public sphere" can be intended as a „a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 1964), open to any private individual that by coming together with others forms the public. As such, this social environment is strongly susceptible and influenced by the flow of information and literary works that nurture the substance of discussion in this „arena of debate" (Burke & Briggs, 2020). The growing involvement of the public and increasing importance of public opinion concerning sociopolitical issues, coupled with the widespread availability of information through literary works, had major consequences.

For one, these developments undoubtably had a decisive influence in world-historical events. The new technology allowed private individuals to print and mass distribute their ideas, predominantly in form of books, pamphlets or visual representations to also appeal to illiterate people. With the rise of the public sphere as a place of discussion on societal issues, these ideas would eventually gain momentum and increasing approval from the public. Whereas previously the voices of single individuals could be silenced or suppressed by the authorities in power, printing facilitated the spread of anti-establishment ideas, leading to the first instances of outright media campaigns to appeal to the wide public and gain followership. Perhaps the first

prime example of this phenomenon could be observed in the Reformation, a process which is said to have been made possible only due to the widespread printed circulation of Martin Luther's revolutionary ideas, as well as the divulgation of the translation of the bible. As evidence to the pivotal role of printing in this context one can take the word of Martin Luther himself, who famously said: "Printing is the ultimate gift of God and the greatest one" (Edwards, 1994). The German heretic expressed his criticism regarding the Churches practices through the media of pamphlets and images, presenting the public sphere with previously unknown controversial information and thus substance for debate and discussion. Ultimately, this would lead to the rise of Protestantism, which would challenge the up to that point unrivalled power and domination of the Roman Catholic Church. Similar developments would occur in countless subsequent events that would shape human history, from large-scale sociopolitical to ideological revolutions. In each of these events the dissatisfaction with the status quo and the desire for change led to the spreading of new ideas through printed material, which once they caught momentum were almost impossible to stop. The publishers of these literary works accompanied these events, strongly influenced their evolution and documented them for future generations.

Consequently, what the Reformation introduced was the first widespread use of propaganda, a term which can best be defined as the "dissemination of information—facts, arguments, rumours, half-truths, or lies—to influence public opinion" (Britannica, 1999). Although instances of propaganda can be traced back to Ancient times, for example with the glorification of emperors in Ancient Rome through statues or written works, the printing press enabled a new form of this practice. The propaganda of the Reformation was of a multidimensional nature and consisted in an interplay of a variety of media, transmitting a one-sided message, which greatly influenced the public.

The 1789 French Revolution is evidently another prime example to this regard, in that the different media not only evidenced and criticized the excesses of the authorities in power, but also highlighted the extremely unfair societal structure. Given the still widespread illiteracy especially in the lower classes, the media employed here were predominantly visual and oral in nature, but also newspapers started gaining increasing importance, with "at least 250 newspapers founded in the last 6 months of 1789" (Burke & Briggs, 2020). Through the availability of news and the spread of critical depictions to the whole population the political consciousness of the public was greatly increased. Ideas about a new political system and social structure in which the power lay in the hands of the people, especially of the lower classes, would spread rapidly and culminate in the overthrowing of the *Ancient Regime*. As a result of the French Revolution the "freedom of press" was introduced, a central concept of the media in a democratic system, which further highlights the importance of the different media in shaping this historic event.

Concluding, in consideration of the above-mentioned definition of the media as a social force, the printing press facilitated a process of deep societal change. Through the divulgation of literary works containing

information and knowledge the public was beginning to be more aware of sociopolitical issues and took a more active role in the political arena. In this environment the public could be mobilized in an unprecedented way in favor of revolutionary ideas, leading to events that shaped human history. Evidently, this strongly undermined the up to that point unchallenged authorities in power, be it the Church or governments, which were beginning to realize the importance of the public sphere and the power of the media. A variety of new sources of information were appearing and the process of decentralization of information was well underway.

2.3 The Broadcasting Era

The age of broadcasting initiated following a series of groundbreaking new inventions of the 18th and 19th centuries, which fundamentally changed society and the nature of the media. Of the countless inventions of the Industrial Revolution a few stand out for different reasons. New technologies in the field of transport, like primarily the widespread introduction of railways for steam powered trains and the use of steamships, conquered space and time, leading to major developments toward worldwide networks and globalization.

Concerning means of communication, the application of steam power to printing, as well as breakthroughs in the use of electricity proved to be revolutionary in the evolution of media history. The steam powered industrial printing press, ideated by the German Friedrich König and completed in collaboration with the engineer Andreas Bauer, was patented in 1810 in England, the center of the Industrial Revolution. The innovative new press, which relied on steam powering and rotating cylinders greatly enlarged the printing capacity and accelerated the process. In fact, König's press was capable of printing 1,100 sheets an hour (Lechêne, 2020), an unheard-of number up to that point. Obviously, the new press had major implications for the publishing of literary works of all sorts, but it primarily impacted the production of newspapers, with the first two models of the industrial press being installed in the headquarters of the British newspaper *The Times* in 1814. The increased capacity of the press allowed the rapid production of thousands of copies of newspapers, contemporarily making the printing process and therefore the newspapers themselves cheaper. The ability to mass produce newspapers and print several different editions a day, coupled with the lower cost, expanded the availability of the medium to the widespread public. The newspaper was consolidated as a fundamental part of daily life and would effectively become the primary mass media influencing public opinion for years to come.

While the industrial printing press allowed the mass production of printed literary media, the electric telegraph, invented in the 1840s, would serve as a fundamental precursor for the subsequent development of devices of telecommunication. The electric telegraph, a wire- based tool designed to transmit coded messages between two designated points using electrical pulses, rapidly spread around the world and fundamentally impacted and improved one-to-one communication, which would then be once again revolutionized by the invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876. Drawing on these innovations the Italian Guglielmo Marconi

invented the wireless telegraph in the late 19th century, a device that allowed the long-distance transmission of coded messages by means of a radio system without the use of wires. The transmission of speech and sound, however, was only achieved through further innovations in the early 20th century. Soon, the potential of the new medium was recognized, both for political and corporate gains. As a consequence, the function of the radio shifted from the point-to-point transmission of single messages to communication from a single source to a broad audience, effectively making the radio a broadcasting medium and later a household necessity. Throughout the 20th century the radio became a fundamental source of news and information communication, as well as having entertainment purposes, making it an extremely powerful mass medium, capable of reaching people in their very homes.

The television, which would appear in the early 1920s, had very similar functions and thus amplified the spectrum of telecommunication broadcasting devices used to transmit messages. The operators of the new device, which combined the visual with the auditory, would employ strategies to appeal to the vastest number of people possible, thus progressively captivating the masses. Specifically, during the early stages of television broadcasting, successful radio formats were recreated on television and served as basis for emerging television programs in order to reproduce the effect of the radio on the public (Campbell, et al., 1997). Later, programs would increasingly be geared toward entertainment and catching the attention of the audience, with a steadily rising number of viewers. Over time, the strongly appealing new medium, which would progressively become cheaper and therefore available to more people, would overtake the radio both in sales and popularity and consequently in the degree of influence on the general public. It must be stressed, however, that for a large part of the 20th century the choice of media was very limited, with few radio and television channels available, an aspect which would only change with further technological innovations and the introduction of cable and satellite televisions.

As hinted at in the introductory section, the term "media" would only be widely used in the mid-twentieth century with the advent of these means of mass communication. The analysis above highlights the fact that a number of inventions of the Industrial Revolution paved the way and provided the foundations for the development of these means of communication. From a societal perspective, seemingly unrelated inventions, both in the fields of transport and communication, strongly accelerated traditional processes and introduced strong tendencies toward globalization. The world was shrinking and people were being brought closer together not only by new transportation techniques but also by long-distance communication devices. Masses of people could now be reached both physically and through these new devices. These processes undoubtably had strong societal implications and effectively served as a basis for the interconnected system we know today. Coupled with the acceleration of production processes, the widespread divulgation of these mass media, such as primarily newspapers, the radio and televisions, was made possible. Accordingly, the broadcast media both fueled societal consumerism and was at the same time influenced by the increasingly consumerist tendencies of the early 20th century (Campbell, et al., 1997). Once again it has to be highlighted how societal changes

and the development of the media are two forces which are strongly connected and influence each other contemporarily.

Politically speaking, the rise of mass media would fundamentally change political communication and narratives. Politicians, who now had the possibility to have a more intimate and personal relationship with the electorate, were able to transmit their messages directly into the living rooms of the people. The new ability to significantly influence public perception through these massively popular broadcast media ultimately led to political advertisement assuming unprecedented importance. Throughout the 20th century, politicians would therefore increasingly utilize these channels both to communicate their political messages and to promote a favorable image of themselves to the public, in a society characterized by rising consumerism. The extreme power these new means of mass communication had over the broad public created a very delicate environment, as an excess of control over the mass media could prove to be very dangerous. Consequently, a comparative analysis can be made between the political use of the new mass media in Europe and the United States throughout the 20th century.

Starting from Europe, the history shaping events of the first decades of the 20th century highlighted a very distinct political use of these mass media. The ability to penetrate the personal spaces of the public and influence the minds of a vast number of people contemporarily would lead to large-scale propaganda campaigns, which would prove to be a fundamental element in the rise of dictators and totalitarian regimes. The most blatant example to this respect was Nazi Germany. In the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party, propaganda campaigns were elemental in both the seizure and consolidation of power. Through the combination of brute force exercised through paramilitary squads and the increasing control of media of communication to transmit messages and attack opponents, the Nazi Party gained a strong grip over the German public. Following the guidelines set by Hitler himself in "Mein Kampf" (1925), the Nazi propaganda in the early stages was characterized by the use of simple messages to appeal to the broadest portion of society possible, very precise themes and importantly a disregard for the objective truth. The one-sided messages transmitted to the masses revolved around central themes affecting the widespread public, such as primarily the sense of national humiliation, inflation, economic depression and mass unemployment following WWI (Welch, 2004). Practically, however, the media resources at the disposal of the Nazi party in the mid and late 1920s were fairly limited, with pieces of propaganda being distributed by specific propagandistic newspapers and public speeches. Nevertheless, in an environment of such turmoil, the ideology of the Nazi party advocating for the rebirth of strong and united Germany was strongly appealing to the masses. The exploitation of the widespread depression within society through these measures created a base of consensus which allowed Hitler to seize power and establish the totalitarian dictatorship with virtually no opposition in 1933. Following the establishment of the regime, Hitler proceeded to create the "Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment", with Joseph Goebbels at its head, who created what is widely referred to as the highly

organized Nazi "propaganda machine". Subsequently, in the consolidation phase, Hitler would gradually take control of mass media, either by directly spreading Nazi propaganda through the radio or newspapers, or by censoring opposing media, thus suppressing any form of opposition. For one, the propaganda would now strongly be geared toward the "Führerprinzip" and thus a glorification of Hitler, who through the total control of the media and his exceptional oratory ability in mass rallies managed to establish himself as a charismatic leader in the eyes of the German public. Furthermore, a central part of the Nazi propaganda was the identification of what they understood to be the enemies of the state, as well as the racial and community ideology. Through the widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories and outright lies about these enemies, which were primarily Jews and Bolsheviks, the masses were mobilized against them. The use of violence and destruction against these minority groups was legitimized by the lies fed to the public through radio broadcasts and propagandistic films, as well as printed material, depicting especially Jews as dangerous and a threat to Germany. The capacity to mobilize the masses in such a way led to events such as the "Kristallnacht", the night of shattered glass, where synagogues, Jewish homes and stores were destroyed, an event orchestrated by the leaders of the Nazi party through a media campaign.

Similar developments could be observed in the same time period in Italy and the Soviet Union. What the fascist regimes of central Europe and the eastern communist regime had in common was the use of propaganda based on misinformation and the carefully calculated manipulation of the masses and the abuse of the power of the mass media, which were made as widely available as possible. Especially popular legitimation and consensus were sought, by glorifying the regime and the system it had created and suppressing any form of opposition that could challenge its unequivocal sovereignty. The broad acceptance of the regimes' ideology was elemental to the widespread power of the totalitarian dictatorships, with the strongly opposing world views within the European sphere and the accumulated tension ultimately culminating in the outbreak of WWII. To this end, the total control over the mass media translated to the total control over the minds of the masses and was therefore fundamental.

The rise of mass media initiated a very different development in the United States, at the time the most advanced country both in the development of technology and use of new telecommunication devices. As evidenced by Michael X. Delli Carpini in "Radio's Political Past" (1995), in 1920 there was the first extended radio coverage of a presidential election by the Pittsburgh based channel KDKA, which could be seen as the beginning of politization of the newly emerging medium. The winner of said election, Warren G. Harding, would then be the first president to be heard worldwide, when his November 1921 international address was broadcast overseas, while his successor Calvin Coolidge would be known to employ radio-specific speeches to transmit his messages (Delli Carpini, 1995). In the golden age of radio, competing political parties raced to control and influence the ever-increasing broadcast channels, with the popularity of a given candidate strongly being influenced by his oratory ability and radio presence. In the early 1920s the Republican party recognized the political potential of the radio and was far ahead of the Democratic party concerning radio presence, thus

being represented three to four times more than the latter on radio channels, ultimately culminating in a very convincing victory of the Republican candidate Calvin Coolidge (Delli Carpini, 1995). This election victory was a testament to the rising importance of radio presence in political communication and effectively initiated an era dominated by electronic political campaigns. In subsequent years political coverage and recurring presidential addresses would become a fundamental part of the content broadcast by radio channels. The importance of this electronic medium was especially recognized by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who during his long time in office introduced the famous "fireside chats", a series of presidential radio addresses. As the name suggests, these addresses were intended to be informal and a way for the president to communicate directly with the broad public, with a fundamental characteristic being the very simple language used throughout these speeches (Rogers, et al., 2018). The speeches were therefore not only intimate and personal, but also highly educative in nature, with the president using his platform to explain major events and complex policies during times of deep crisis. These practices would continue in the golden age of television, an era in which the audiovisual medium dominated both entertainment and political communication. In addition to the oratory ability, the appearance of candidates now became of fundamental importance. Accordingly, while radio listeners of the 1960 presidential debate saw Dwight Eisenhower as the clear winner, television viewers attributed the victory to John F. Kennedy, given his cooler and more appealing appearance (Delli Carpini, 1995). Evidently this is a rather prominent example of the power of the different mass media in influencing public perception. Throughout the mid and late twentieth century television therefore became not only a fundamental source of information, but also the primary medium of political communication and coverage, through formats such as televised debates, speeches and addresses, which are still central in today's political sphere. The power of the mass media was undeniable. Large scale political advertisement and electronic campaigns, characterized by carefully calculated appearances and strategies, were now indispensable and only a small taste of what was to come.

As mentioned above, mass media created a very delicate environment. Those who recognized the political power behind these media gained an enormous advantage over the opposition. Especially radio and television channels would gradually become increasingly partisan, strongly influenced by certain political parties and thus transmitting only one-sided messages to the loyal viewership. For while the development of the relationship between political actors and mass media in the US can be said to have evolved rather democratically, to state that the parties used mass media in a benevolent quest to inform the public is rather naïve. The enormous platform provided by these means of communication gave rise to new political narratives, increasingly based on inaccurate or manipulated information and appealing to emotions rather than rationality. This would greatly influence the public and polarize society. Extreme forms of such polarization and radicalization, as demonstrated above, could be observed in the European sphere, highlighting the potential danger of an abuse of power over the media. Following WWII the media world began to prosper once again in Europe. The liberalization of the media industry was seen as a key process especially in the denazification

of Germany. In the aftermath of the Second World War one could thus gradually observe a liberalization of the different forms of media from state control and an increasing pluralization of media outlets, with a variety of different newspapers being created, radio channels multiplying and the golden age of television later providing new options. With the subsequent emergence of cable and satellite television, the channels on this medium increased exponentially, underlining the trend of ever-increasing forms of mass media. Deregulations concerning the audiovisual medium and the rise of huge privately owned media conglomerations introduced new dynamics into the media industry. Concluding this section on the broadcast age, one can say that means of mass communication permanently altered societal attitudes and political communication. Importantly, there was a very fine line between informing the public and manipulating information for political gain, a phenomenon which would prove to be central in the digital era.

2.4 Conclusion on the Evolution of Traditional Media

Considering this historic account, a few key summarizing observations can be made. Although the field of media history is incredibly vast, a distinct development can be observed. We've seen civilizations dominated by oral traditions slowly transitioning toward increasing literacy, ultimately leading to the invention of the printing press, the first tool of mass production, which permanently changed society. The now facilitated dissemination of literary works, information and ideas enacted a decentralization of information distribution. Consequently, private individuals were increasingly involved in the political processes, culminating in the rise of the public sphere, which would become even more central in subsequent centuries. Events that shaped human history were accompanied and contemporarily strongly influenced by the different media, which were constantly multiplying with new technological inventions and innovations. In the broadcast era, mass communication through electronic devices, made possible by the groundbreaking inventions of the Industrial Revolution, significantly altered the communication of information and most importantly political communication, introducing trends which can still be observed today.

The history of the media is therefore one of constant evolution. In light of the underlying research, it can be argued that this evolution led to a significant process of decentralization of the means of information distribution and therefore a democratization both of the availability of information and of the political sphere. Throughout this development, new technologies not only influenced the media environment, but also introduced new dynamics into society, altering the interactions in human affairs and affecting the relationship between ordinary citizens and authorities. As evidenced above, it must however be stressed that the different media both influenced society and were at the same time influenced by societal trends, creating an interplay between these two forces which would prove to be strongly impactful. As such, a key takeaway is the fact that historical patterns in the media environment repeated themselves continuously throughout human history.

Each of the aforementioned groundbreaking new media were revolutionary in its time, creating trends and attitudes within society, which shaped subsequent developments. To some degree, the digital era can be seen as the logical consequence of the evolution of media, given the constant technologization, acceleration of information and multiplication of sources of information. On the other hand, however, it can also be argued that the digital era fundamentally revolutionized the very basis of the media environment which existed up to that point, introducing unprecedented possibilities, frameworks of interactions and dynamics. The extent to which the invention of the Internet changed both how information is communicated and received, as well as the communication in the political sphere, shall be the core of this next section.

3. Media and Politics in the Digital Age

3.1 The Digital Revolution: ARPANET, the World Wide Web and Web 2.0

In the height of the tensions of the Cold War in the 1960s United States, the government funded Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) developed and created the ARPANET. This network was originally intended for military use and was based on the idea of establishing a decentralized infrastructure of communication that could not be destroyed by a nuclear attack (Burke & Briggs, 2020). Specifically, the system was designed to connect a number of different academic and research centers, with different remote computers being able to access the network, thus sharing and transmitting information through a newly developed system of encoded information "packets". Unknowingly, the researchers and scientists that composed the ARPA had just laid the fundamental basis for a medium which would completely change the societal and media landscape: the Internet. With the first message sent over the ARPANET in 1969, the Digital Revolution was initiated.

In subsequent years a number of further technical innovations expanded the capabilities and reach of the network, which was however still mostly limited to the transmission of single messages, which were denominated electronic mail or "email" as it is known today (Burke & Briggs, 2020). Following the continuous development, the messages which were initially merely academic or military in nature, became increasingly personal, with private individuals using electronic mail to communicate. With the expansion of networks and its rising popularity, the commercial potential of the new tool was beginning to be recognized, with commercial service providers expanding the accessibility to the Internet. A fundamental milestone toward the Internet as we know it today was provided with Tim Berners Lee in 1989 with the invention of the "World Wide Web". Having understood the potential of the networks that had been appearing, Lees' idea thus stemmed from his "growing realisation that there was a power in arranging ideas in an unconstrained, weblike way" (Berners Lee, 1999). He therefore sought to create an open, universally accessible and worldwide forum, in which information, data, files and a variety of documents were connected through so-called "hyperlinks".

A collaborative space of widely accessible and continuously multiplying information was consequently made accessible by this groundbreaking idea, which was then put into practice with the emergence of web browsers. Interestingly, Tim Berners Lee saw his invention as a social creation, rather than technical one, highlighting the social effect of people working together within his creation as the actual goal of the web (Berners Lee, 1999). The social element would be crucial in the development of the subsequent stage of the evolution of the Internet and of the Web: the Web 2.0.

"Web 2.0" is the term widely used to describe the second phase in the evolution of the web which persists up to this day. The web in this second phase differs from the original conception in so far as it is now fundamentally characterized by social networks and thus user generated content and cloud computing (Brittannica, 2007). In line with the Berner Lees above mentioned intention of creating an environment of social collaboration, the social networking sites, as well as online blogs, web applications and encyclopedias, that appeared on the "World Wide Web" throughout the initial years of the 21st century effectively created platforms of social interaction, debate and virtual communities. As such, what the term "Web 2.0" describes is not a technological innovation that introduced new possibilities on the Internet, but rather an ideological shift regarding the purpose of the web itself, that was now to be an interactive and inclusive. The fundamental characteristic of this new conception is therefore, that the user, who previously engaged with the static web pages in a passive manner, is now encouraged to contribute to the content displayed on the Internet and thus actively participates in the content creation process. With the increasing accessibility and spread of the Internet the participation continuously grew, leading to a constant multiplication of sources of information ad an ever-increasing volume of data and content.

By definition, social media are the defining characteristic of this second phase of the web. In light of the new conception of the web, in the early 21st century a number of social media start-ups, utilizing the newly available automated technologies, created platforms based primarily on connectivity, participation, interactivity and the widespread sharing of content. Each of the most prominent social media sites individually were groundbreaking in their time and for their demographic targets: Facebook incorporated the fundamental principles of social networking and connectivity, Twitter offered innovative microblogging services, Youtube was the pioneer in video-sharing, LinkedIn provided an employment-oriented network for professionals, while various online Blogs and Encyclopedias brought together information and ideas provided by various content creators (Britannica, 2017). Over time, these platforms, which originated with very distinct characteristics, would expand their capabilities and the services offered to the user, thus assuming certain functions provided by competing platforms, consequently appealing to an even broader public. Further fueled by the emergence and development of smartphones, the mentioned social media sites would attract billions of members and users.

The rise of these infrastructures of worldwide communication and connectivity, which provided frameworks for social interaction, debates, exchanges and opinions, fundamentally revolutionized not only human

interaction, but also the communication of information. The various social media platforms here merely provide the frame, tools and guidelines for the interaction in this mediated environment, with any user being able to access and contribute to it at any time. Massively popular social media entered the traditional media industry and progressively assumed the functions of established media outlets and effectively came to dominate mediated environments. The full extent of the impact of digital technologies on both the media and society has to be analyzed from different perspectives.

3.2 Sociologic Perspective: The Public Sphere in the Digital Era

When Jürgen Habermas formulated his theory on the "public sphere" he envisioned an environment of public deliberation and debate, located in 18th century cafes, salons and distinct societal circles. Most probably he did not anticipate a worldwide forum of discussion, based around virtual communities, in which anyone with an access to the Internet could engage in a debate about any specific topic. With the advent of the Internet and social media subsequently, the concept of "public sphere" thus assumed an unprecedented dimension. In line with the foundational pillars of the Web 2.0, the "online" or "virtual public sphere" is characterized by its extremely high degree of inclusiveness. In fact, contrary to the traditional conception of the public sphere, which was effectively led by an exclusive group of highly educated opinion leaders, or better, the elite of the bourgeoisies, the online public sphere provides a platform to virtually anyone to voice opinions or to engage with different perspectives on a given topic, regardless of status or education. Accordingly, the "digital public sphere" can best be described as a "communicative sphere provided or supported by online or social, where participation is open and freely available to everybody who is interested, where matters of common concern can be discussed, and where proceedings are visible to all" (Schäfer, 2015).

This development comes after what can be conceived as a crisis of the public sphere, which had come to be dominated by mass or "mainstream" media, leading to a fairly limited degree of social interaction. The very notion of mass media suggests that there is a limited amount of channels of information that dominate the mediated environment and can therefore influence the masses. Mass media were therefore detrimental to public debate and did not further public deliberation (Habermas, 1989). Another aspect that has to be taken into consideration when referring to the "digital public sphere" is the widespread accessibility to information. With private individuals being able to actively contribute to the flow of information available on the different sites on the Internet, a number of different opinions and viewpoints are constantly being shared, thus providing the basis for debate in the "digital public sphere". It can therefore be argued, that the debate platforms provided by the Internet based sites revived the public sphere which had been strongly limited by the domination of the mass media. Consequently, what transpires is that the rise of social media and the widespread direct access to public platforms led to these mediated environments being increasingly dominated by "amateurism"

(Mahlouly, 2013). The main pillars of the "digital public sphere", compared to previous conceptions, are its inclusiveness and the widespread accessibility of information.

3.2.1 The role of social media in mobilizing the public in the "Arab Spring"

The "Arab Spring" was a wave of revolutionary anti-establishment uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East throughout the years 2010 and 2011, with the goal of replacing the authoritarian regimes with more democratic systems. Infamously, the first uprisings originated in Tunisia following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on the 17th of December 2010, an act of protest against governmental and local authorities. His death provoked a wave of protests that took the country by storm, with the movement soon being resistant to governmental oppression strategies and thus assuming a revolutionary character. Ultimately, the Tunisian revolution, commonly referred to as the "Jasmine Revolution", led to the then Tunisian President Zine Al-Abdin Ben Ali stepping down and fleeing the country on January 14th 2011, paving the way for a democratically elected government and the promulgation of a new constitution. With the success of the Tunisian revolution, pro-democracy uprisings spread to Egypt. On January 25 massive nation-wide protests ensued, which were met with governmental efforts to violently suppress the revolution, as well as attempts of governmental concessions to appease the masses. The uprisings could, however, not be stopped, with the turning point of the Egyptian revolution coming with the militaries announcement that they would not use force against the protestors, consequently calling for the removal of President Hosni Mubarak (Britannica, 2021). Mubarak resigned on February 11th 2011. During the period of the "Arab Spring" a number of additional countries in the region, namely Syria, Lybia, Yemen and Bahrain, experienced revolutionary uprisings, which however led to violent confrontations and no immediate results as in the case of Egypt and Tunisia. The causes for the success of the latter countries are manifold, yet the central role of social media in the mobilization of the public in Egypt and Tunisia has been widely recognized.

Social media influenced the revolutionary processes and outcomes in a variety of ways. When mapping the development of social media penetration in Tunisia and Egypt in December 2010, prior to the first uprisings, it can be observed that "Tunisia was among the emerging countries in terms of Facebook penetration, with 17.55% of the population having access to this social platform", while "Egypt was still considered as one of the developing users with only 5.49% of the population" (Mahlouly, 2013). Consequently, as evidence to the centrality of social media platforms in these civil movements, it was found that in the midst and aftermath of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, in the first three months of the year 2011, Facebook usage in the Arab region grew by 30%, while especially countries which experienced civil movements registering an "exponential growth during and after those civil movements" (Salem & Mourtada, 2011). In the evaluation of the development of social media in this region and its impact on the revolutionary uprisings, it can thus be argued that the rise of social media activity was both a cause and effect of the civil movements. Unsurprisingly,

in line with the general demographic characteristics of social media users worldwide, the vast majority of the users of these platforms in the Arab region in the time period in question were members of younger generations, with 70% of Facebook users being in the age range of 15-29 (Salem & Mourtada, 2011). It were therefore these technologically proficient "digital natives" that initiated, led and coordinated the revolutionary efforts on the social media platforms. With regards to   the specific role played by the major social media platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, the academics Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari and Mazaid, authors of the research paper titled "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring" (2011), identified three main findings evidencing the critical function of social media during the "Arab Spring". According to them, social media was highly influential in shaping public debates, with educated individuals of the above-mentioned demographic groups conducting political conversations on these forums, as well as using the platforms to distribute information and spread ideas. Secondly, the authors highlight the fact that these political conversations and the ideas of change spread among the online community and consequently the widespread public, were instrumental to the consequent protests on the ground, with these online activities therefore immediately preceding mass protests. Lastly, the academics underline the fact that the use of social media as a means of spreading democratic ideas transcended these revolutionary ideas over the national border, to neighboring countries which took inspiration from them, but also to the international community, to shed light on the events occurring. Recognizing the incoming danger and the fact that they no longer controlled the media and information flows, the authoritarian governments in power proceeded to censor and block Internet and social media sites, accounts and users, but were unable to stop the movements. Social media platforms, in their function as alternative information providers offered the possibility to the public to circumvent state-controlled media outlets.

The full extent to which the media can be considered the primary driving force behind the revolutionary uprisings is highly debated, mostly due to the fact that the social media driven uprisings only produced significant immediate results in two countries. However, the influential role of social media in giving organization and a direction to the increasing discontent in the successful civil movements in Egypt and Tunisia is undeniable. The above-mentioned events thus provide a primary example of the characteristics and immense power of the "digital public sphere", which has an unprecedented reach, capacity to influence a vast number of people, shape opinions and spread messages and ideas to the widespread public. With the increasing penetration of social media platforms in these countries, an ever-growing number of individuals gained access to this virtual public sphere, thus participating in conversations and consuming the information provided. Therefore, with regards to the research topic of this dissertation, especially the social medias' function as decentralized alternative source of information to the mainstream media, which in this case was controlled by the regimes, has to be highlighted. Ultimately, whereas previous revolutions had strong, recognizable leaders, the revolutionaries of the "digital era" are young activists, some anonymous, sat behind a computer or smartphone.

3.3 Information Communication and Reception in the Digital Sphere

The terms "Digital Age" and "Information age" are interchangeable and unsurprisingly so. The latter term describes how the use of digital and computer technologies facilitated the rapid divulgation of information, which led to an increased availability thereof. To return to a previous consideration, from a historical perspective, the developments regarding the volume of information and the multiplication of information sources can be seen as a logical consequence of the century long evolution of the media. As demonstrated above, the evolution of the media industry can best be described as one of continuous emergence of new, alternative sources of information, a decentralization of information communication and an ever-increasing amount of available and accessible information. In light of this development, the advent of the Internet as a dominating medium and the World Wide Web as the fundamental tool within this medium, further fueled this evolution to an unprecedented extent. It can therefore be argued that the effects of the Internet on the media environment are in line with the linear historic development of the media industry, in that it further accelerated the decentralization of information and the volume of available information.

However, from another perspective, the rise of the Internet and most importantly the new tendencies within the Web 2.0, can be said to have completely revolutionized the very foundational basis of the media. The fact that private individuals, or "amateurs", are able to directly contribute to the production of the widely available information is a concept which was previously unheard of. Although, as we have seen throughout history, ordinary citizens were able to disseminate information and their ideas, this involved a lengthy process and the use of different technologies to produce and distribute the pieces of information, which were than available to a comparably limited amount of people. The simplicity of contributing on an online platform, the reach of these platforms within the web and the low cost of contributing with user generated content are therefore unprecedented. The media environment consequently underwent a deep structural change. Specifically, the digital media is based on a "dialogic transmission system", meaning that there are many sources communicating to many receivers, while the traditional media is and was historically based on a "monologic transmission", meaning one source providing information to many receivers (Pavlik & Shawn, 2016). The fundamental principles which shaped the interaction between media outlets and the general public for centuries have consequently been significantly and permanently altered. To better understand the effects of this development, the individual user of the internet has to be analyzed according to his function as information producer and information consumer.

3.3.2 Individuals as Information Producers

The individual user of the Internet is strongly encouraged to participate in the production of information, as the interactive platforms in the digital sphere rely strongly on user generated content. This contribution occurs without any form of filter, with the individual being able express himself and provide information without any constraint on his liberty of speech. The only form of conceived constraint are the actual structure and framework of the social media, as well as the guidelines of conduct on these platforms. Whereas previously information was carefully filtered by professionals, amateurs have direct unfiltered access to widespread public platforms. The decline of professionalism in favor of amateurism in the dissemination of information, unsurprisingly led to a decline of the quality and reliability of information that is accessible.

The platform that perhaps best incorporates all of these elements, tendencies and characteristics is "Wikipedia". Founded in 2001, Wikipedia is, although very different to what is commonly perceived as a social network, by all means a social networking site. The concept of this encyclopedia relies on a collaborative "open-source production model" (Britannica, 2020), in which any voluntary users, which are mostly anonymous, can add information regarding a certain topic. Not only are users encouraged to provide the platform with content and additional information in the given area of expertise, but they are also entrusted with the fact-checking, surveillance, detection of manipulation and filtering of the information produced by fellow contributors. Nowadays, Wikipedia is the Internets' biggest encyclopedia, with an astonishing 50 Million articles produced and maintained by 2,5 million editors (Buchholz, 2020). With the enormous amount of information present on this platform and the continuous information flow, produced by anonymous sources, doubts about the reliability and credibility of the information provided inevitably arise. A number of studies have highlighted the inaccuracies present in the dynamic Wikipedia articles compared to smaller online encyclopedias. The academic journal "Reference Service Review" issued by "Emerald Publishing" in 2008 quantified this comparison by stating that with regards to the field of historical articles Wikipedia is 80% accurate compared to the 95-96% accuracy detected in the other sources (Holman Rector, 2008). Interestingly, Wikipedia articles on the topic of the reliability of the site itself acknowledges its own limitations. The fact that Wikipedia, the largest online encyclopedia and a major source of information for millions around the world, itself admits its own partial unreliability is indicative of the questionable credibility of user generated information on other Internet platforms. To return to the previous assessments about the "digital public sphere", the lower quality of the available content negatively affects public discourse, with the engagement with the public sphere being no longer dependent on ones' intellectual abilities, but merely requires an Internet access. What can therefore be observed is that the new movement within the Web 2.0 led to an increasing move away from professionally produced verified facts and information, towards a system strongly influenced by the production of amateurs, with the credibility of this type of user generated content mostly being rather questionable. The rise of user generated content translates to a rise of an almost illimited number of alternative sources of information.

3.3.2 Individuals as Information consumers

An important aspect to consider in the analysis of the Internet and social media as information sources is the actual usage of these platforms by its users, where the individuals assume the role of passive consumers of the content available. In the examination of the relationship between digital media and traditional media, new trends in the field of news communication and the impact of social media on news consumption deserve a special focus. Along with Television and online news websites, social media have progressively become the primary source of news about current affairs worldwide. This tendency is exemplified by the United States, in which, according to a survey conducted by "Pew Research Center" in the year 2020, 53% of adults stated that they use social media as a news source "often" or "sometimes", while the tendency to use social media as a news source was found to be especially widespread in younger generations, with 42% of individuals in the age range of 18-29 consuming news "often" from social media sites (Shearer, 2021). Undoubtably, this has greatly affected both the quality of the news and information provided. In line with the considerations above, the unprofessional and unfiltered nature of information production in the digital sphere, as well as the lack of any form of gatekeeping which had ensured the credibility of the dissemination of news of traditional media for centuries, greatly casts doubt on the credibility and reliability of online news production. Furthermore, due to the fact that social media encompass a variety of different functions on the same platform, such as entertainment, social interaction and information consumption, the lines between these functions have become increasingly blurred, with users being less alert with regards to the sources of the content they consume and thus being less likely to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources (Grabmeier, 2020). Due to the phenomenon of the merge of informative content and entertainment, information on social media is often formatted in a way as to catch the attention of the consumer, which is also why this content is commonly referred to as "infotainment".

The evolution of social media into a primary source of information and news inevitably strongly affected the traditional news media, which for centuries provided the substance for news consumption. Overwhelmed by the competition of non-traditional sources, traditional news media outlets capacity to respond to the new tendencies and opportunities was limited (Bowd, 2016). Especially printed media experienced a significant downfall in their popularity, with the immediacy and low-cost availability of online news being favored over traditional newspapers for instance. With the rapid evolution of social media, traditional news outlets were forced to adapt to the consumer trends of the digital sphere, progressively establishing their own Internet and social media presence in order to gain visibility for their contents. The fact that information and news, albeit often unreliable, were being communicated free of cost, put the entire business structure of traditional news outlets in question, forcing these companies to rethink their strategies. The social media presence of these news outlets are based on the strategy of posting links to articles on their official website, with the source of revenue then originating from advertisement on the website. Conversely, this represents a counter tendency to

the emergence of social media as primary news sources, as news outlets here try to pull consumers away from these platforms and onto their own sites, on which those who appreciate filtered and reliable news can pay for subscriptions and "exclusive" content. Accordingly, traditional journalism was rocked to its core by the advent of social media. The very principles that governed the selection of news and information that were to be communicated to the public were put into question, with traditional news media having to adapt and engage with the trends of social media platforms, thus actively contributing to their own demise (Burke & Briggs, 2020).

Whereas throughout large parts of the evolution of the traditional media industry information was a scarce commodity and a limited number of people were able to access and understand it, today one can observe the contrary, in that the consumer of Internet content is presented with an overwhelming amount of informative content, from an illimited number of sources. The amount of different views and perspectives available especially on social media could prompt the conclusion that this is a positive phenomenon which broadens the users horizons. However, when looking at the actual functionality of social media platforms, a different picture emerges. Social media sites are in fact designed for the individual to specifically choose the users, profiles and sources which provide the content on his personalized space or "feed". Due to the fact that the individual is primarily inclined to follow and engage with people and sources that reflect his own views, interests and opinions, the user forms a so-called "filter bubble" around his social media presence (Fletcher, 2020). The automated algorithmic systems, on which social media are strongly reliant, then use the specific users' data and provide further content that matches his preference. By virtue of this system, any unwanted information, news or influence cannot surpass the "filter bubble" or "echo chambers", thus creating a satisfactory social media experience for the consumer, who is further reinforced in his already existing opinions and viewpoints.

Overall, one can observe a clear shift in the communication and reception of information, compared to the traditional forms of mass media communication that persisted for centuries. This was mostly caused by the abundance of easily accessible information, compared to the scarcity thereof in previous centuries and the rise of a vast number of alternative sources of information. The developments of the digital era have thus produced a completely different perception of the value of information, with the reliability and credibility of a given source being insignificant for many consumers. The framework and formats of social media platforms completely eliminated the hierarchical structure of previous media environments, which had for centuries been based on the quality and credibility of a given source, thus giving the same level of importance to professional and amateur sources. Coupled with the decline of professionalism and the traditional gatekeeping model in the mediated environment, on which news communication relied on for centuries, this had significant implications, as will be portrayed at a later stage.

3.4 Politics in Cyberspace

At this point, it has become clear that the digital revolution has had a groundbreaking impact on a variety of different spheres, with the political sphere being no exception. Undoubtably, the potential of the internet in the political sphere is enormous. When mapping this potential, a differentiation has to be made between the potential of transferring democratic processes to cyberspace, compared to the emergence of completely new forms of political communication.

3.4.1 Digital Democratic Processes

If taken only by its raw characteristics, without making any qualitative evaluation, the digital public sphere, given its inherently democratic nature, potentially encompasses some of the core characteristics of any democratic system: inclusiveness, participation, accessibility to information and freedom of expression. Especially in the first decade of the 21st century the "possible upsides of the Internet for the public sphere dominated public discussions" (Burke & Briggs, 2020). It can therefore be argued that, politically, from a perhaps idealistic point of view, these characteristics had the potential to produce an informed public, engaging with the different points of view accessible to them and consequently participating in democratic processes. Yet, the epitome of the political potential on the Internet was the emergence of "web-democracies" and "e-democracy" platforms, tools designed to revitalize party affiliation and enhance democratic participation. These are multidimensional tools with a multitude of functions, ranging from online voting systems, debate platforms, information distribution systems and politically participatory interactive features.

Perhaps the most fitting and contemporary example of a political party relying on a "web-democratic" model is the "Movimento 5 Stelle" In Italy. Born out of the partnership of the popular comedian Beppe Grillo and the IT technician Gianroberto Casaleggio, the populist party "Movimento 5 Stelle" was based on an anti-establishment ideology. Since its inception, the party relied on an online blog to spread information, with the blog then being completed by an online voting platform. In 2016, the new platform "Piattaforma Rousseau", was inaugurated, as part of a dual project between the party and the private company "Associazione Rousseau", which owned and operated the platform. In the Italian general elections of 2018 subsequent to the establishment of this new platform, which was designed to be a tool of direct e-democracy, intra-party democracy, participation in writing laws and online information distribution, the party obtained an astonishing victory, reaching 32% of the vote in both chambers. In the following years, however, the reliability of the platform was strongly questioned, ultimately leading to the separation of the "Movimento 5 Stelle" and the "Associazione Rousseau". In fact, the very notion of an apparently transparent tool of online direct democracy, that is owned and operated by a private company, with no vote certification by an independent third party, is very contradictory. The company thus possesses the data of every single member of the movement and is aware of every vote cast by voters or their members of parliament on the website, which is extremely delicate

information to have for a private company. Furthermore, the legitimacy of election results was strongly questioned due to repeated cyber-attacks by hackers, who manipulated online elections and greatly endangered the data of the users of the platform. Lastly, the distribution of often inaccurate information, as well as the power of Grillo and Casaleggio to influence the decision making of the voters and arbitrarily expulse party members, further contributed to the loss of faith in the platform. Following the conflictual separation of the party and the platform, the central question remains, who the rightful owner of the politically extremely valuable data of the platform is.

The story of the "Movimento 5 Stelle" and the "Piattaforma Rousseau" is a testament to both the enormous potential of transferring democratic processes to cyberspace, evidenced by the voter turnout and victory in the 2018 Italian political elections, as well as the fragility of such a project. Due to the several issues concerning democratic processes in cyberspace, namely with regards to intransparencies, cybersecurity, data security and privacy, it is as of yet unfeasible for large scale democratic processes to be transferred entirely to cyberspace. To return to the previous statement, the idealistic view of the early 21st century, with regards to the Internet as a tool to enhance political participation, does not reflect the contemporary reality. As analyzed above, despite the foundational democratic characteristics of the Internet, it is rather naïve to assume that digital technologies improve public debate, broadens the horizons of individuals and lead to more informed political decision-making.

3.4.2 Political Communication in the Digital Sphere

Concerning political communication, the advent of the Internet introduced unprecedented possibilities and consequently completely new forms of political communication. Political communication can be described as a relatively new field of study in the political sphere. Although forms of political message transmission and persuasion have in some variations existed in any political setting for centuries, the field of political communication study emerged in the interwar period, in which the effects of propaganda campaigns were analyzed (Thummy, 2015). In order to better understand the impact of the Internet and especially social media on political rhetoric, the foundational principles and theoretical pillars of political communication in democracies have to be analyzed. As defined by Richard M. Perloff in "The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age" (2017), political communication "is the process by which language and symbols, employed by leaders, media, or citizens, exert intended or unintended effects on the political cognitions, attitudes, or behaviors of individuals or on outcomes that bear on the public policy of nation, state, or community." Consequent to this extensive definition the author goes further to highlight a few decisive aspects: political communication is a process, with the effect often being not directly recognizable, it is strongly reliant on the precise use of words and symbols, the effects of this communication can be intended and unintended and these effects can be at the micro or macro level. Most importantly for this analysis,

however, Perloff underlines that political communication has historically relied on three main actors or entities, namely the political elites, the media and the citizenry. Political communication is therefore a dynamic concept, relying strongly on societal trends and unsurprisingly on media technologies. In the evolution of modern political communication three distinct phases can be identified, as per Jay G. Blumer and Dennis Kavanagh in "The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features" (1999). According to them, in the two decades following the WWII, strong and stable political parties dominated the communication system, by employing substantive political messages, distributed by the mass media of the period. Secondly, the authors identify the period commencing roughly in the year 1960, in which the domination of limited channels of televisions and their new formats forced political parties, which progressively lost hold of their up to that point loyal electoral bases, to adapt their political communication to this relatively new medium. The third phase, which is still ongoing, fittingly denominated by Blumer and Kavangh as the "age of media abundance", is characterized by a multiplication and proliferation of all forms of media, with political communication being significantly reshaped. Interestingly for the underlying analysis, the authors argue that the new conception of political communication in this third age is characterized by anti-elitist populism, competitive pressure and significant changes in how politics is received.

Currently, the third phase of modern political communication is still in full development and represents an enormous shift. The abundance of media was further fueled to an extreme extent by the rise of the Internet. Importantly, it has to be noted that despite the prominence of the Internet, the proliferation of the different forms of media also comprise traditional media systems, which is why the current environment is commonly characterized as a "hybrid media system that exhibits a balance between the older logics of transmission and reception and the newer logics of circulation, recirculation and negotiation" (Schroeder, 2018). The impact of the Internet and especially social media on political rhetoric and the transmission and reception of political messages deserve a special focus. In fact, just as the advent of Web 2.0 revolutionized the foundations of the media, the rise of the Internet and social media revolutionized political communication.

The historic structure of the transmission of political messages, that involved the tripartite interaction between political elites, the media and the public, experienced a significant change in the digital era. The decentralized character of the Internet, as well as the very characteristics of social media platforms, allow political actors to circumvent traditional media systems, which has various consequences. Arguably the most significant of these consequences is that it enables political actors, parties and politicians to have direct and immediate access to the widespread public through their online channels of communication, giving them a platform to directly push their political messages. By circumventing the gatekeeping mechanisms of traditional media systems, political actors can transmit any unfiltered messages to an extremely wide audience, which could never be reached by traditional media. Ultimately, in light of the very principles and actual goals of political communication, namely to exert an influence over the electorate for political gain, which is commonly party followership and most importantly votes, the unfiltered and uncontrolled access of political actors to the widespread public

represents a very significant shift in how politics is conducted. For while during the golden ages of television and radio, politicians were able to directly penetrate the personal spaces of the public for the first time, they were still constrained by the formats and filters of those mass media. As such, the communication by means of digital technologies, the immediacy of online content, the fact that political entities can shape their political presence without any forms of constraint and the direct channel of communication between political actors and the public, is unprecedented. Given its inherently persuasive nature and due to the absolute lack of any form of gatekeeping or filter, the political communication in the digital sphere often strongly assumes propagandistic traits.

Consequent to this new phenomenon introduced by social media, that essentially to cut traditional media out of the process of political communication, political agenda setting mechanisms also experienced a significant shift. Traditional political "agenda-setting theory" highlights the importance of mass media in influencing public discussion by deciding on the hierarchical priority of issues of concern. According to the prominent advocate of the "agenda-setting theory" Maxwell McCombs, "the power of the news media to set a nation's agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence", as "not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news" (McCombs, 2011). What therefore transpires is that according to the traditional conception of political agenda setting, that has influenced public discourse for centuries, the mass news media decided on the hierarchical importance of given contemporary issues, with the coverage and visibility given to these topics of concern strongly influencing the direction of public discourse and consequently political policies. Given the developments of the digital era, this theory has to be rethought. In fact, the characteristics of social media platforms and the circumvention of traditional mass media by political actors through the use of these social media, opened up a variety of opportunities for diverse actors to have an influence on public discourse, therefore changing the dynamics behind the agenda-setting process. At the level of the general public, the issues of concern touched on by user generated content, which gain prominence and spread rapidly especially on microblogging platforms such as Twitter, "shift the political agenda away from the priorities of elites in traditional media" (Schroeder, 2018), with private individuals thus influencing the saliency of a given topic. However, perhaps the most significant consequence of these developments is the increasing power of politicians to influence the agenda-setting process. With a simple message posted on social media platforms, reaching millions of followers directly, politicians are able to provoke debate and give substance for further discussion, without involving traditional media systems in any way. Former US President Donald Trump is the most blatant example with regards to this phenomenon. Widely known for his use of the popular microblogging platform Twitter, Donald Trump, using only a maximum of 280 characters, managed to constantly dictate the topics that would dominate public discussion. The raw, unfiltered and controversial nature of the Trumps "tweets" was unprecedented for a US President, further fueling public debate. The role of social media in the agenda setting process must, however, not be exaggerated. In light of the fact that the

contemporary structure can still be considered a "hybrid system", traditional news media still have an influence on public perception. It can accordingly be said that with regards to agenda-setting, the new digital media have an impact on traditional news media and vice versa. Yet, what the evolution of political agenda-setting highlights is a further potential power for political actors in the digital sphere, gained by bypassing the traditional medias constraints and consequently a further possibility to influence public perception.

Political actors have without a doubt recognized social media as a decisive contemporary tool of political communication and persuasion. A social media presence is almost indispensable for a politician or a political party nowadays. In an age in which celebrities and online personalities are dubbed "influencers", only due to their popularity and their consequent ability to influence their vast follower base in a variety of ways, it is not hard to imagine how politicians can exert influence on their followers through carefully calculated political messages. Given the constant and never-ending flow of information in the online spheres and the abundance of informative content, political actors are conceived as reliable information sources within social media, another factor which can be exploited for political gain. The incredibly fast pace and immediate information production on these platforms require very rapid responsiveness by political actors, with those reacting first gaining an advantage over the political competition. Social media platforms further offer the possibility to monitor public concerns and major topics of public discussions, denominated "trending" topics, which are easily identifiable through the automated systems of these online platform. Addressing and precisely targeting major topics of concern, interacting with followers on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, creating a personal relationship with the follower base, also by posting personal content, potentially increases popularity, public perception and therefore visibility of the given politicians' content. As such, these platforms provide the possibility for political actors to both advertise themselves and advertise their political ideas contemporarily. One could therefore say, that the lines separating private and the public are becoming increasingly unclear and the trends in political communication, as well as the transforming relationship between political representatives and the electorate, evidently highlight this. The new possibilities offered by platforms in a digital sphere changed the format of political messaging and the infrastructure of interaction between political actors and the public, which can best be seen by the redefinition of the strategies of political campaigning.

Perhaps the first, successful, large scale transfer, of a political campaign to cyberspace occurred in the 2008 Presidential election in the US. Although previous presidential candidates had partially employed online campaigning strategies, Barack Obama can be said to have fully capitalized on the potential of social networking sites in the 2008 elections. The candidate of the Democratic party precisely and extensively utilized the channels of direct communication, by communicating with the 13 million member e-mail list, the 3 million mobile and SMS subscribers and by reaching far superior Web site trafficking, Youtube viewership and social networking contacts, compared to his adversaries campaign (Lutz, 2009). By directly engaging with the public, by using the enormous database at his disposal, and actively involving the public in the campaigning process, Obama thus managed to translate the online followership and support into donations and subsequently

votes, which significantly contributed to his victory. Obamas victory can be seen as a testament to the power of political communication by means of social networking sites in large scale political and democratic processes and effectively marked a period of transition toward an era dominated by online campaigns.

Another key aspect to consider is how political messages are received by the public. Undoubtably, the interactive character of social media platforms completely transformed the way in which political messages are received. Here, the receptor takes an active role in evaluating the message, discussing it and potentially further distributing it amongst his contacts, contrary to the passive role individuals played in the era dominated by traditional mass media systems. From a historical perspective, adopting the liberal democratic point of view, the political sphere was seen as an "intellectual marketplace", in which political ideas collide and compete with each other for the attention of the audience (Perloff, 2017). Nowadays the "intellectual marketplace" has reached an enormously vast dimension. In light of the abundance of media and the consequent abundance of political information, the way in which political messages are received by the public changed, in that a "pick and choose culture" emerges (Blumer & Kavanagh, 1999). Applied to the sphere of social media, this translates to the previously described "filter bubbles" with which users of these platforms surround themselves with. Reflecting on the competitive character of the metaphoric "intellectual marketplace", it is clear that although the Internet had the potential to enhance this competition, the "filter bubbles" on social media make it growingly hard for political actors to reach new followers. In this sense, it can be argued that the competitiveness in the political sphere has been reduced by the advent of social media. Individuals are able to precisely shape their political reality and the political influences affecting them, blocking out any political views which they don't agree with. While the constructions of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" represent an active decision by the individual user, the invisible algorithmic systems of social media platforms further fuel the one-sided political messages by drawing on data and preferences, with the user therefore being inadvertently further influenced. Coupled with the new possibility for political actors to directly communicate to the enormous user base, these two factors have the potential to increasingly affect public opinion, leading to polarization and radicalization.

3.5 The role of the Internet and social media in the rise of populist movements

In recent years, populist movements have gained enormous prominence all around the world, registering significant political success. Although populist movements or parties vary in their forms and political directions, the concept of populism can best be defined as "a belief that juxtaposes a virtuous populace with a corrupt elite and views the former as the sole legitimate source of political power" (Schroeder, 2018). Accordingly, the populist ideology is commonly based around distinct foundational pillars, namely "the existence of a 'bad' elite and the 'virtuous' people – two separate groups with competing interests, and the ultimate sovereignty of the will of the people" (Fletcher, 2019). The success of populist movements can be

ascribed to a variety of factors, yet the role of social media platforms in enabling the spread of anti-establishment populist ideology should not be neglected.

From an ideological point of view, the anti-establishment rhetoric employed by populist actors implies the opposition against any form of established "elite" within society and the political sphere, with the established media, or "media elites", being no exception. Consequently, populist leaders have been largely critical and hostile toward the established media. This is prominently exemplified by Donald Trumps' repeated conspiratorial accusations, which implied that the media was "rigged" against him in the 2016 presidential elections (Schroeder, 2018), as well as for instance the statement in a rally in 2018, in which he described the media as "the enemy of the people" (BBC, 2018). In the populist quest to return the political sovereignty to the "people", the traditional established media, which has historically mediated the communication between the "people" and the political elites, is seen as a part of the established political system it so vehemently opposes. Rather ironically, however, to a certain extent it can be said that the mainstream media has contributed to the rise of populism. Given the often controversial and unconventional nature of populist rhetoric, the coverage of the statements and ideas of populist leaders is very appealing for media outlets from a commercial point of view, in order to attract an audience, with the populist leaders being very adept at exploiting the "medias proclivity toward anything that 'breaks the routine' in political arenas" (Mazzoleni, 2008). By doing so, regardless of the evaluation and analysis of the populist content by the given media outlet, the established media gives visibility to the populist ideas, consequently also giving considerable agenda-setting power to populist actors.

Given the very foundation of populist ideology, social media, with its inherently decentralized and deregulated character, represents a very appealing instrument for populist movements to spread their ideas and gain followership. In light of the previously described hostility of populist actors toward the mainstream media, social media and the use thereof as a way to circumvent the filters and gatekeeping mechanisms of the "media elite", may seem like the perfect instrument for the populist cause. As such, the decentralization of political communication and the consequent shift toward new platforms and channels of information distribution facilitated the propagation of populist narratives in a variety of ways. Contrary to the traditional media, social media from a populist perspective is conceived as a neutral sphere, which gives populist actors the possibility to directly interact with the "people" and therefore construct the relationships with their target group from which they derive their credibility, with this interaction and communication occurring in a colloquial and informal way (Manucci, 2017). The direct access and direct communication channels to the "people" is enormously beneficial for populist parties to directly interact with the widespread public and strongly push their political messages without any form of constraint or regulation. The political ideas of populist actors, which might seem controversial to some, therefore roam freely within the extremely vast digital sphere. Coupled with the fact that the concerns of the general public can be closely monitored on social media, the

populist actors' ability to exploit the main issues concerning the "people" and address them in a rather opportunistic way, is a fundamental way in which populist actors manage to increase their popularity. Moreover, through the possibility of personal self-advertisement offered by the digital platforms, the given political actor is able to form a more intimate relationship with the follower base, thus facilitating the appeal to the emotions rather than the rationality of individuals, which is a further fundamental characteristic of the populist rhetoric. Through the populists' use of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter and perhaps more recently Instagram, these platforms consequently assume the role of amplifiers of the discontent of the public. As such, purely through the lense of the populist ideology, the amplification of popular discontent, although evidently for political gain, is by definition making the voice of the "people" heard. As one can clearly see, due to the fundamental characteristics of social media platforms, or more specifically the functions and possibilities that these offer, the new digital media seem like the ideal spheres in which populist actors can exert their influence for political gain, in exponentially spreading political messages and carefully calculated rhetoric. Although populism can by no means be considered a new phenomenon, populist movements and their political communication practices would prove to have a significant impact on political spheres all around the world.

Concluding this section, a few observations can be made. Returning to a historical perspective, the rise of the Internet, given its revolutionary impact, can best be compared to the advent of the printing press in the 15th century. Although evidently different in characteristics, the degree of widespread impact of these inventions on the societies of their specific time periods was enormous and comparable in its extent. The printing press, for one, enabled the rise of alternative sources of information in an environment of limited sources, while the invention of the Internet fueled the multiplication of alternative sources of information to an unprecedented extent. As evidenced, the invention of the Internet and the consequent evolution of social networks completely revolutionized both the traditional media industry, as well as the political sphere. The implications of this development are manifold. For the purpose of the research of this dissertation a special focus, within the evaluation of the impact of online platforms, was attributed to the shifting perception of the value of information, as well as the new trends in political communication. The full extent to which these developments facilitated the propagation and spread of fake news, misinformation, misleading narratives and conspiracy theories for political gain, especially in the digital spheres, shall be the subject of analysis in the following section. The ever-increasing alternative sources of information and the decentralized forms of political communication, produced by the digital revolution, can therefore be said to have inaugurated a new age in the political sphere: the era of "post-truth politics".

4. Post-Truth Politics

The terms "truth" or "post-truth" are first and foremost philosophical in nature. A precise determination of the concept of "truth" is essential for the analytical basis and conceptualization of the political phenomenon under consideration. Whether a given proposition, claim or statement is objectively "true" and the criteria for the determination of truthfulness have been subject to a number of theoretical works, which apply a variety of different approaches to the terminology. According to Brahms (2020), in order to best understand the developments and contemporary phenomena within the political sphere, the "correspondence theory" provides the most apt philosophical basis: the theory "maintains that the key to truth is a relation between a proposition and the world – a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact in the world" and further "maintains that reality and facts are objective, i.e., they exist independent of human consciousness, of our thoughts about or our perceptions of this reality and these facts ". Yet, the author also highlights that the correspondence theory relies on the satisfaction of two main criteria, namely that the truthfulness of a proposition can be verified with a factual reality and that the individual making the assertion is in direct contact with this factual reality. This second criterion refers to the importance of the reliability and credibility of the source making the proposition. This represents somewhat of a problematic in present times, as the determination of reliability of a source is becoming increasingly difficult, as already evidenced in the previous section. Nevertheless, the "truth" within the theoretical framework of the "correspondence theory" derives its value from the coherence between a given proposition and an observable objective fact. The decisive element is the presence of a factual reality, which forms the basis for a given claim, leaving no room for interpretations or opinions with regards to the objective truth thereof.

According to the widely accepted definition by the Oxford dictionary, which elected the term in question as the word of the year 2016, "post-truth" can be defined as "a term relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". The definition explicitly implies the disregard of the fundamental criteria that determine the "truth" of a given proposition. Contrary to the actual philosophical characteristics of the concept, the "truth" has become flexible, subject to interpretations, opinions and modifications. As we have seen, emotions and "truth" are inherently incompatible, as the latter exists regardless of human perception or consciousness.

At this point, a decisive distinction has to be made, between two concepts relating to the philosophical "truth": lying and "post-truth". According to Bufacchi (2020), whereas paradoxically, by telling a lie, the existence of the truth is recognized yet deliberately avoided, post-truth "aims to undermine the theoretical framework that makes it possible to have a conversation about the truth". In this sense, post-truth intentionally disregards the factual reality in order to establish an alternative reality devoid of any factually truthful basis. Applied to the political sphere, the prominent feature of "post-truth politics" is consequently "the primacy of emotions over

facts and substantive, hard information", where "the main objective of this kind of political communication is to convey credible interpretations of reality, not necessarily facts" (Salgado, 2018). In this environment, reality can be shaped in any way necessary to achieve political gain. Consequent to these considerations, the truthfulness of a piece of information or a message is no longer judged by evidence, but by the coherence of the proposition with the already existing beliefs and values of the listener (Lockie, 2017). As a result, the decision-making in democratic processes such as political election or referenda is strongly based on emotions and ideological impulses, where superficial impressions substitute the rational evaluation of political or economic policy, with the decline of rationality contributing to the influenceability of individuals (Giusti & Piras, 2021). In the field of political communication, this translated to the distribution of messages, information and narratives, which do not have a factual basis, designed to mislead the public and shape public opinion in a politically favorable way. Throughout recent years, the widespread divulgation of "fake news" and conspiracy theories in the political realm have been the defining characteristics of what can be conceived to be the "post-truth era".

In the analysis the concept of "post-truth politics", a term which has only started to be widely used as of the year 2016, it has extensively been questioned, whether untruthfulness or misleading the public to shape public opinion for political gain, is really a new phenomenon. The role of lies, deception and misleading narratives in the political sphere have, in fact, been analyzed by some of the most influential political theorists and commentators of the 20th century. For one, in "Politics and the English Language" (1946), George Orwell famously remarked: "Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind". At a later stage, the renowned political theorist Hannah Arendt reflected on the historical relationship, or better the conflict, between truth and politics, by adopting a political perspective rather than a philosophical one. Of the many conclusions drawn by Arendt, a few stand out for this analysis. According to her, "truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings" (Arendt, 1971). A further, extremely important conclusion, in line with the considerations about the philosophical characteristics of the "truth", is her assertion that that the primary antagonist of the truth is opinion, as "opinion, and not truth, belongs among the indispensable prerequisites of all power" (Arendt, 1967). In light of the contemporary conception of "truth" in politics, this assertion is evidently very fitting. Both Orwell and Arendt wrote in a time period marked by the experiences of propaganda campaigns by authoritarian regimes, which had devastating consequences. What transpires from the analyses of the two authors is that deception, manipulation of information and misleading political communication have historically been inherently part of political processes. Their observations are as timely as ever. Hence, inevitably the question arises, what distinguishes the historical instances of political deception and propaganda from the contemporary "post-truth" phenomena in the political sphere.

The advent of the Internet and social networks, have had an enormous impact in the emergence of "post-truth politics", in that they enabled and greatly facilitated the dissemination of factually inaccurate and false information in a variety of ways. As evidenced, deception in politics is by no means a new phenomenon, yet the possibilities offered by digital technologies fueled these tendencies to an unprecedented extent. The fundamental distinguishing characteristic of the "post-truth" era is therefore first and foremost the comparably enormous extent and degree of divulgation factually baseless information. The two decisive developments of the digital revolution that led to favorable conditions for the emergence of a "post-truth" culture can be identified as the proliferation of alternative sources of information and consequently informative content, as well as the possibility for political actors to circumvent traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and have direct access to the widespread public.

Here, it makes sense to return to the previous analysis concerning individuals as information producers and consumers of informative content in the digital environment, to evaluate how these developments led to an environment of "post-truth". Following the emergence of the Web 2.0 and subsequently social media, the value of reliable information and credible sources were greatly reduced in favor of content of dubious quality. The credibility of sources in an environment dominated by user generated content and "amateurism" is increasingly neglected, giving any individual user the possibility to spread unfiltered information to enormous platforms, thus enhancing the possibility for factually inaccurate or false information freely circulating within the digital sphere. The lines between verifiable facts and mere opinions, two completely opposed concepts, are becoming increasingly blurred. In light of the fact that social networks are emerging as primary news and information sources for a vast number of people, the decline of the reliability of sources makes users of these platforms strongly susceptible to believing false information. The enormous abundance of information available further prompts individuals to specifically choose the information they consume and personalize digital spaces according to their interests, by forming "filter bubbles", as observed previously. Paradoxically, in an environment with an unprecedented amount of information, individuals consume less diverse information (Salgado, 2018). Another consequence of the ascendence of social networks as information and news sources is the crisis and decline of traditional news media. Traditional media systems, along with their gatekeeping mechanisms and filters, which for centuries mediated the relationship between political elites and the citizenry can be easily bypassed both by amateurs and political actors. Although it is naïve to assume that traditional news outlets were historically unbiased, these media systems derived their credibility from the accurate reporting of facts, events and information, gained from sources in direct contact with the factual reality. Independent traditional media, in democratic settings, were historically the custodians of the information flow and the entities which held the political actors in power accountable. In authoritarian regimes, where the media was state-controlled, the propaganda was unstoppable and highly influential in the mobilization of the masses, with catastrophic consequences. Importantly, traditional media outlets provided a

context and analytical framework to the information and political messaging provided, which could resonate with the consumers political ideology or not. Yet, in the digital sphere, a piece of information is presented without any form of context, apart from the one the information producer provides. The avoidance of any form of filter of the entities which historically governed the information flow, further contributes to the circulation of unfiltered, potentially false or inaccurate information. What can therefore be argued is that the forces and dynamics of social networks further enhanced the distance between information and the factual reality (Brahms, 2020). Consequent to this development, a fundamental criterion of what we have determined to be the theoretical framework of the concept of "truth", namely the direct contact between the individual making a proposition with the factual reality, is not satisfied. Ultimately, it can be observed that digital media created an environment of information chaos, in which the widespread public is easily accessible and influenceable and in which false information freely circulates, is accepted and consumed. In such conditions, individuals turn to the trusted political actors within their "filter bubbles" to provide them with reliable information.

The direct access to the "people", the possibility to transmit political messages instantly without any cost and to precisely target certain groups, provided political actors with opportunities to reinforce their narratives and influence public opinion, or simply said to conduct propaganda campaigns. In this context, the automated algorithmic systems operating the "filter bubbles" of social networks further promote trending political information or messages, fueling the polarization and fragmentation of the public and providing an optimal basis for propaganda campaigns. Through the use of automated "bots" on digital platforms, a misleading message can be widely disseminated and expand the visibility of the false information, making it more likely for individuals to further share it. Especially populist actors, who gained prominence in recent years, have recognized this potential. Populists, who in the appeal to the electorates' emotions find one of the main pillars of their ideology and political communication, have fully exploited the redefinition of the boundaries between the "truth" and emotions. Free of any form of constraint or control, populist actors have been very adept at spreading alternative facts and establishing alternative realities, which were in line with the emotions, beliefs and values of their followership. Due to the decentralized and deregulated nature of social networks, these have proven to be instrumental in influencing a vast number of people through carefully calculated anti-elitist political communication. By targeting established elites and questioning the credibility of established media, populists promote themselves as reliable information sources, making their followers increasingly susceptible to their influence. Facts are being replaced by opinions and reliable information sources are being replaced by a vast amount of new actors, which can be private or political, who have a variety of different interests and are able to access the enormous number of channels to exert their influence. What we observe today is not merely lying, but the questioning of the very foundations of factual realities, by establishing alternative realities in line with the given political ideology and the beliefs of the electorate. Once uttered, the alternative reality proposed by a political actor antagonizes the factual reality. The dynamics of information consumption and distribution, the proliferation of alternative sources of information and multiplication of actors involved,

the decline of traditional news media, coupled with new political forces and an increasing hostility in the political arena, have proven to be a powerful constellation for political actors.

Considering this analysis, it can be argued that deception is no new concept in politics, yet the digital media fueled the divulgation of misleading narratives based on false claims to an unmeasurable and uncontrollable extent. The speed and reach of digital communication technologies thus amplified the already existing tendency to deceive the public to an enormous degree. Although a precise temporal delineation of the start of the "post-truth era" can prove to be rather difficult, a turning point in the political sphere can be considered to be the year 2016, in which the first large-scale successes of campaigns based on misinformation and fake news, namely Brexit and the US Presidential elections, occurred. Especially the role of "fake news" and conspiracy theories in recent political and societal events, as well as their impact on democratic values, deserve a special focus.

4.1 Fake news and its Impact on the Outcome of the Brexit Referendum

Fake news and the recent prominence thereof, are a distinctive characteristic of "post-truth politics". Although it might seem to be a broad concept, a contextualization reveals a few defining characteristics that determine whether a statement or proposition can be considered to be "fake news". By drawing on the concept of misinformation, which refers to a "incomplete, vague, misleading, or ambiguous piece of information", fake news can best be defined as an "advanced and technological version of misinformation, which appear on the Internet and in social media especially" (Giusti & Piras, 2021). As such, distinctive features regarding this concept can be identified. For one, fake news refers to the deliberate manipulation of a piece of information, where the content of the fabricated misleading message does not correspond to a factual reality. Whether the piece of information is fully or only partly inaccurate is irrelevant, due to the fact that the information, which is passed off as "true" or factual by the communicator, has been deliberately manipulated and formulated in a misleading way, in an attempt to influence the receptors stances and derive a benefit from it. In the era of "post-truth politics", in line with the foundational characteristics of this age, the misleading or false political information communicated is strongly emotionally charged. The appeal to emotions has come to dominate consensus-driven political communication, to the detriment of rationality in political choices. Consequently, Loveless (2021) describes fake news as an "emotional weapon", designed to manipulate the feelings and intellect of the receptor, dividing public opinion and benefitting from the resulting chaos or confusion, thus deriving political or financial gain from the manipulated information communicated. In such an environment, the exposure to false or inaccurate information that reinforces already existing beliefs and values is widely accepted as the truth. As such, the political utilization of fake news represents a "disruptive force", which may have different objectives, namely for instance to promote narratives, discredit media, as well as targeting political opponents (Giusti & Piras, 2021). Considering these characteristics, social media have undoubtably

created a fertile ground for fake news to circulate and be widely spread. The appeal to emotions rather than rationality and factual realities has been facilitated by online platforms, on which fake news are distributed by a number of actors. Through "filter bubbles" and thus the selective exposure of individuals in the political sphere, inaccurate emotionally charged political information significantly contributes to the fragmentation, polarization and radicalization of public opinion. Additionally, given the frameworks and formulations through which fake news are presented, detecting misleading information is no easy task. In fact, a recent study conducted by the "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences" found that three in four Americans overestimated their ability to detect fake news and as a consequence are more likely to further share the misleading content (Prior, 2021). One of the most evident examples of the use of misleading narratives, based on fake news, can be considered to be the 2016 Brexit referendum.

On the 23rd of June 2016 a referendum was held in the United Kingdom and Gibraltar, a vote which decided whether the United Kingdom was to remain a member of the European Union or withdraw from it. Although the sociopolitical and economic roots of the desire to withdraw from the EU could be extensively traced back, the focus of this analysis shall be on the campaigning strategies prior to the day in which the vote took place. In light of an electoral promise made consequent to increasing political pressure and amidst the rise of the UKIP party, then prime minister David Cameron announced a date in which the referendum was to be held in a speech in the House of Commons on the 22nd of February 2016. What ensued in the months leading up to the Referendum day was a polarizing political campaign. The nature of the subject of the Referendum inevitably divided the country, creating a strong contraposition between the "Leave" and "Remain" options. In the analysis of the political campaigns of the two polar opposite sides, Moore and Ramsey (2017) evidenced that "the campaign leading up to the vote to remain or leave the EU on 23 June 2016 was the UK's most divisive, hostile, negative and fear-provoking of the 21st century". This assertion stems from the political campaigning strategies and the narrative created by the "Leave" side, prominently led by the populists Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. Early on, the "Leave" campaign set out to discredit and target the leaders, narratives, competences and motivations of the opposing campaign, by promoting these messages through news outlets which supported their campaign (Moore & Ramsay, 2017). However, the hostile and divisive character of the "Leave" campaign cannot merely be attributed to the targeting of the opposing campaign, but primarily to the misleading narrative employed to shape public opinion and challenge the odds, which saw them at a clear disadvantage prior to the vote. As evidenced by Jennifer Cassidy (2021) there were two fundamental pillars, or better statements that shaped the political communication of the "Leave" campaign: "The UK sends £350 m per week to the EU" and "Net migration to the UK had hit 330,000". Both of these recurring and strongly pushed themes have to be dissected in order to find the misleading nature of the "Leave" campaign. For one, as stated by Cassidy, the narrative for the first statement was expanded and famously printed on a bus poster, which read: "We send the EU £350 m a week, lets fund the NHS". The author underlines that it has not only been proven that the explicit monetary amount stated did not take into account

a variety of different factors which greatly reduced the actual number, but the assertion also falsely implied that the money would then be necessarily destined to the National Health Service. As such, this statement can be considered a primary example of a narrative based on fake news, given its inherently misleading nature and the deliberate disregard of objective and verifiable facts to create an alternative truth, that a vast number of people would find appealing. Yet, the rational thought process necessary to identify such a statement as false was clouded by the emotionally charged message strongly and repeatedly promoted by the "Leave" campaign, regardless of anyone claiming the assertion to be false. The second recurring theme concerned migration, a topic which at the time in which the Referendum was held dominated the political sphere. In such an environment, the anti-migration rhetoric extensively promoted especially by Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage found fertile ground, evolving into "the ambiguous Vote Leave slogan 'Taking back control'", which was further amplified by the supportive traditional news outlets' mostly negative coverage of migrants, through the use of specific metaphors depicting "migrants as water ('floodgates', 'waves'), as animals or insects ('flocking', 'swarming') or as an invading force" (Moore & Ramsay, 2017). Cassidy remarks that not only was the narrative strongly nationalist in character, but also strongly appealed to the emotions of the receptors, by playing on the peoples' fears, thus creating a misleading image of migrants designed to depict them as a threat. Lastly, the resources destined to digital media campaigning for the "Leave" option were extensive. According to the director of the campaign Dominic Cummings, "nearly a billion targeted digital adverts" (Cummings, 2017) were employed. The social media traffic of pro-leave campaigners and supporters was far superior to the their oppositions', with the former reaching 45 times more shares of their content on the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook, while the content by Nigel Farages' party UKIP accounted for 51% of the shares on these platforms during the campaign (Savage, 2019).

According to this analysis and the findings of the above-mentioned authors, it can be argued that the Referendum itself was highly divisive and polarizing, with the "Leave" campaign contributing to the hostile environment by aggressively promoting emotionally misleading narratives. As such, this can be considered a primary case of "post-truth politics", in that the fundamental characteristics of this concept can all be observed here: the disregard of the objective truth and rationality in favor of emotionally charged messages, pushed by populist actors and further amplified by digital media. Although the themes recurringly repeated by the pro-leave campaigners might have been partially true, the narrative was formulated in a way as to provoke a misleading interpretation by the public, therefore changing the factual basis of the statements themselves. As highlighted, traditional media outlets also played a significant role, thus once again underlining the fact that the contemporary media environment can be characterized as a "hybrid system". On the 23rd of June 2016 "Leave" won with 51,9%. Although this cannot be merely attributed to the misleading narratives, as a number of other sociopolitical and economic factors have to be taken into account, it can rightfully be argued that the strategy of the "Leave" campaign was instrumental in reinforcing already existing opinions and strengthening

support, as well as swinging undecided voters in their favor, which ultimately led to their unexpected and astonishing victory.

4.2 Conspiracy theories and "Post-Truth" in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Conspiracy theories come in a myriad of different forms, are distributed by different sources and believed for different reasons. Throughout history widespread conspiracy theories were omnipresent, ranging from theories regarding the "real" assassin of John F. Kennedy, to theories questioning whether the 9/11 attacks were orchestrated by the US government, to the widespread belief in a secret society composed of intellectuals and powerful individuals known as the "Illuminati", just to name a few prominent ones. As such, an all-encompassing definition of this concept might prove to be rather difficult. By drawing on the definitions of the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines the term as "the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties" and the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, which expands the definition by stating that the concept refers to "a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as a result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators", Rob Brotherton (2015) makes some conclusive adjustments to the conceptualization of the term. The author expands the definition of conspiracy theories by providing a precise portrait of the key characteristics of both conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists. Consequently, he finds that the prototypical conspiracy theory is an "unanswered question; it assumes nothing is as it seems; it portrays the conspirators as preternaturally competent; and unusually evil; it is founded on anomaly hunting; and it is ultimately irrefutable". Conspiracy theories, remarks Brotherton, are a product of someone's imagination and are widely accepted as they resonate with other peoples' imagination. Hence, the underlying concept and the belief in these theories have to be analyzed primarily from a psychological perspective.

By referring to the relatively new literature with regard to the psychological analysis of the factors that fuel the acceptance of conspiracy theories, Douglas, Sutton and Chichoka (2017) identify three main psychological motives, which are epistemic, existential and social in nature. Accordingly, the authors remarked that individuals accept conspiracy theories to be true in order to understand a concept or event, on which there is limited or conflicting information and which may have provoked uncertainty, distress, fear and bewilderment, to actively regain autonomy and control over an uncertain environment and to maintain a positive personal and in-group image, by blaming others for a negative outcome. Consequent to the characteristic and psychological conceptualization of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists, it can be said that by definition conspiratorial claims reflect some of the key features of "post-truth". The central aspect of the concept, which is most evidently relevant for the underlying analysis, is the fact that conspiracy theories stem from the imagination of one or more individuals and appeals to receptors of the message due to emotional and psychological factors. Whether these theories subsequently reveal themselves to be true is irrelevant, given the fact that a conspiracy theory, which stemmed solely from an opinion or interpretation, is presented as

truthful although the factual reality not only doesn't correspond to it, but also presents overwhelming evidence against it. The decisive difference between conspiracy theories and fake news can considered to be the fact, that whereas fake news might contain a partially truthful piece of information which has been manipulated to induce a misleading interpretation, conspiracy theories do not refer to any factual reality whatsoever. Furthermore, by implying that any evidence against the given theory is product of the conspiracy itself not only disregards rational facts, but also discredits any source presenting evidence against it, making it near to impossible to convince a conspiracy theorist of the falsehood of the claim.

In the spread of conspiracy theories social media have been instrumental. For one, the democratization of knowledge and information distribution inevitably gave conspiracy theorists an enormous platform, with individual users being increasingly exposed to these baseless ideas. Almost by definition, conspiracy theories are mostly ideas and interpretations held by a few, with their exponents wanting to uncover what had been kept hidden by powerful elites (Fallon, 2019). Platforms of distribution, such as social networks, are thus instrumental in the spread of these theories. Secondly, as evidenced, conspiracy theories are likely to be accepted in an environment of chaos and uncertainty, in which information is conflicting. As such, the abundance of information and contradicting viewpoints on digital media and the resulting confusion, increase the probability of conspiracy theories being accepted as truthful. While such theories were historically rather harmless, those involving medical or public health concerns can prove to be very dangerous for the individual and the collective (Stein, 2021). The impact of these theories has been significant in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic was devastating on many levels. The pandemic took the whole world by surprise and a chaotic situation ensued, in which fear and uncertainty dominated societies worldwide. In such an environment of widespread crisis, inevitably conspiracy theories started to circulate. The theories which spread especially on social media were manifold and sometimes even contradictory among themselves. According to Stein (2021), the conspiratorial statements argued that the virus was a hoax, that the virus was spread deliberately as a biological weapon or for a political purpose, that 5G antennas accelerated the spread of the virus and that the vaccines contained microchips designed to monitor people. Absurdly, as evidenced by the author, during the pandemic a vaccine was being attacked and discredited which had not even been completed yet. The immediate response to the various theories at a micro-level were increasing hostility against healthcare workers, political actors, as well as engineers and 5G masts. At a macro-level, negative consequences of the consumption of conspiratorial ideas have been found to associate to the perception of the health threat that the virus poses, the willingness to adopt preventive action and the intentions to vaccinate (Douglas, 2020). Furthermore, the differing measures adopted by countries worldwide and the successes or failures of these preventative actions, further fueled the hostility against political actors in power, facilitating the targeting of "powerful elites" through conspiratorial claims. Most certainly, the fact that the actual origin of the virus has not yet been precisely determined and officially communicated and the initial widespread

uncertainty, even by experts and scientists, represents a further factor which would possibly prompt suspicion. As a consequence of these considerations, it has to be argued that, in a pandemic, which inherently requires solidarity and social cohesion against an invisible enemy, conspiracy theories divide society and prove to be dangerous to the collective. While historically the impact of conspiracy theories were mostly negligible, conspiratorial claims against experts, scientists, medical workers and political actors in the midst of an ongoing pandemic can be extremely harmful to the efforts of controlling the emergency and adopting measures to find a way out of it. Given the characteristics of a pandemic, the uncertainty, fear, powerlessness and the complex scientific concepts which are at the center of the public debate, such a situation provides an optimal environment for the spread and acceptance of conspiracy theories, which are mostly believed to make sense of the events occurring. Ultimately it has to be mentioned, however, that the research regarding the impact of conspiracy theories on the COVID-19 pandemic is still limited, due to the fact that the subject of discussion is still ongoing, and as a consequence the degree of impactfulness of such theories can best be determined at a later date. Yet, the proven preliminary findings are not promising.

A variety of "post-truth" elements can be detected in the media environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. While in the analysis of the impact of "post-truth" a strong focus is given to its political consequences, the misinformation spread during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights its societal impact. It is therefore not hard to see why Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, pronounced the phrase "We're not just fighting a pandemic, we're fighting an infodemic", when referring to the enormous amount of misinformation, which according to him "spreads faster and more easily than the virus" (Hazelton, 2020). Communication and accurate information distribution is essential in a pandemic. However, accurate information on such complex themes is time consuming and costly, which is why false information can fill the gap quickly and cost-free (Giusti & Piras, 2021). Social media have accelerated the dissemination of misinformation, with research showing that despite the efforts of independent fact-checkers on these platforms, which labeled 225 pieces of information as misleading, "58% of false posts remained on Twitter, 27% on Youtube, and 24% on Facebook" (Hazelton, 2020). False information widely spread on digital platforms, regarding themes of high concern to the public, increasingly fueled the spread of conspiracy theories.

As somewhat of a counter-tendency to the dynamics observed over the last decade, in the "Reuters Institute Digital News Report" (2020), consisting of a survey involving more than 80,000 people in 40 markets, it was been demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic reminded the public of the importance of traditional news sources, with mainstream media, namely television and online sources, which especially in the early stages of the pandemic provided a platform for politicians and experts to announce preventative measures and explain the complex events, experiencing significant upticks in popularity. It was further evidenced by the research, that at the heights of the pandemic, trust in news organizations providing information about COVID-19 "was

running at almost twice that of social media" (Newman, et al., 2020). More specifically, doctors and health organizations ranked highest in trustworthiness, followed by national news organizations, individual politicians and ordinary people. It can thus be observed that in such a complicated situation, a significant number of people returned to the consumption of trusted news sources for a deeper understanding of the events, conscious of the unreliability of social media as an information source. However, it has to be mentioned that, conversely, the spread misinformation and miscommunication, predominantly by populist leaders, such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, are not only accelerated by digital media, but are also amplified by the sensationalist reporting of mass media (The Lancet Infectious Diseases, 2020). In the midst of a health emergency, in which politicians assume a crucial role in communicating to the powerless public, Donald Trumps' suggestion, for instance, to inject disinfectant into the body to combat the virus, is not only a dangerous message without a scientific base, but also poses a threat to the health of individuals who might follow his suggestion. Ultimately, the dynamics of misinformation distribution witnesses during the historic event of the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as the continuation of the ongoing trend, pushed by certain political actors, to disregard and oppose scientific findings. Inherently, opposing science, the epitome of rationality, is going against any verifiable and precisely measurable factual reality.

4.3 Does "Post-Truth Politics" Pose a Threat to Democracy? The Trump Presidency

On January 6th 2021, pro-Trump supporters stormed the Capitol Building and attacked the United States Congress in Washington D.C, in an effort to disrupt the joint session of Congress which would formalize Joe Bidens' victory of the 2020 Presidential election. Metaphorically, perhaps no event could better summarize the Trump presidency. The four- year term was marked by polarization, radicalization and a complete disregard for the objective truth by what is conceived to be the most powerful man in the world himself. Donald Trump, who during his time in office deliberately disseminated false information, primarily through digital platforms, fueled conspiracy theories and strongly targeted the mainstream media, can be considered to be the primary exponent of the "post-truth politics era".

From the onset, Donald Trump was no stranger to conspiracy theories and false claims. Famously, he rose to prominence in the political sphere with the repeated claim during the 2008 Presidential campaigns that former President Barack Obama was not born in the United States and could consequently not serve as President, insisting on his claim even when evidence was presented against it. The political campaign prior to the US Presidential elections of 2016 was highly divisive and polarizing, in the already strongly partisan American political sphere. Trumps' use of digital platforms and his deliberate divulgation of false information were unprecedented. In line with the populist ideology, Trumps campaign, led under the slogan "Make America Great Again", in itself an emotional appeal, relied on simple messages which strongly touched on the most widespread problematics affecting the people, sensitive topics and fears of the American public, most prominently immigration policy and border security. The republican candidates' campaign was unprecedented

not only in his use of social media platforms in disseminating his unfiltered ideas, but also in his disregard of political correctness, leading to what could be considered to be offensive, hateful, racist and misogynistic remarks. Accordingly, in the very first campaign speech, Trump referred to Mexicans as problematic, criminals and rapists, a statement which has been deemed racist and which paints a misleading picture of immigrants. As a solution, Trump proposed what would be a cornerstone of his campaign, a border wall to Mexico, which he erroneously claimed that the neighboring country itself would pay for, despite the denial of the then Mexican President. Consequently, the very first remarks and political messages were already indicative of the nature of his campaign and later the presidency. In the continuation of the campaign, almost countless false claims targeting political opponents, the media, immigrants or misleading exaggerated claims about himself and his achievements would be the characterizing features of Trumps' run for office.

Following the burst onto the political scene, Trump immediately dominated the media environment. Perhaps given his past in television, the populist candidate was particularly adept at placing himself at the center of media attention and mass media coverage. Already during the Republican primaries, Trump disposed over more media time than his opponents, with campaign appearances and debates turning into media spectacles centred around him, with his affirmations subsequently being heavily discussed by the media (Kellner, 2018). During the 2016 Presidential campaign the dynamics were no different, with the mass media extensively covering Trumps' every statement and act, thus giving an even bigger platform to the mostly misleading claims by the candidate through the sensationalist reporting. Trump himself heavily contributed to his media presence through his extensive use of social media platforms, most prominently Twitter. Through the use of the microblogging platform to conduct his own personal form of political communication, Trump significantly impacted the agenda-setting mechanisms and shut down any ongoing discussions, by promoting his own personal, unfiltered, ideas as the truth (Gounari, 2018). As such, Twitter, being a decentralized communication system, which could be used as a tool to circumvent the mainstream media and speak directly to voters, and which can be characterized as rather superficial, as a "tweet" is constrained to a length of maximum 280 characters, proved to be the optimal platform for Donald Trump. His daily "tweets", packed with misleading information, would dominate the discussions in traditional and prosper in the deregulated digital media systems. Yet, in the 2016 campaign, the spread of misinformation did not solely stem from Trump, as a number of secondary actors were found to have distributed false information throughout the period leading up to the election day. Most prominently, it was demonstrated that Russia had significantly interfered in the elections, as outlined in the "Mueller Report" (2019). The Russian interference consisted primarily in accessing voter databases, hacking the Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee, attacking Trumps' opponents and spreading propaganda on social media, by distributing false and misleading messages, in an effort to conduct a systematic campaign of "information warfare", designed to undermine Hillary Clinton and favor Donald Trump in the run for office (Mueller, 2019). It was further found that a group of Macedonian teenagers from the small town of Veles had created approximately 140 fake news websites during the 2016

election campaign, producing a vast number of false sensationalist news, from which they then derived substantial financial gain through the advertisements on their web pages (Kirby, 2016). Throughout the election campaign, false information on social networks thus thrived like never before. For instance, the website "WTOE 5 News", which itself disclaimed that it was a "fantasy news website", spread the erroneous claim that pope Francis had endorsed Trump, which was then shared more than one million times on Facebook in a short period of time (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This specific example is a testament to the enormous reach of false information on digital platforms and the incapability of a vast amount of users to distinguish between credible and unreliable sources. Misinformation thus stemmed from Trump himself, from false news websites, private individuals and from foreign interference both from state and non-state actors. The spread of fake news was not only facilitated by the rise of the Internet and social media as political news and information sources, but also by the war waged by Trump against mainstream media, by constantly discrediting journalists and attacking news outlets, thus promoting himself as credible information source by referring to mainstream media as "fake news". Although the full extent to which the distribution of false information ultimately helped Trump win the 2016 election is hardly precisely measurable, the anti-establishment rhetoric, polarizing populist narratives, unprecedented form of digital political communication and misinformation campaigns were significant in his astonishing electoral college victory in 2016.

The Presidency, similar to the campaign, started with a number of false claims. In referring to the inauguration ceremony Trump not only falsely claimed that it didn't rain, but also overexaggerated the crowd present at the inauguration, accusing the media of manipulating the images of the crowd. In response to the questions on the issue, Trumps' senior adviser Kellyanne Conway infamously claimed that they had "alternative facts" (Badner, 2017). Perhaps no statement could better summarize "post-truth politics" and Trumps' interpretation thereof. Throughout the presidency Trump persisted in using Twitter to expose his "truths", launch conspiratorial accusations against the media and opponents. He did so predominantly through his personal account, mentioning the words "fake news" in 150 different tweets in his first year in office, regardless of the truthfulness of the story he was referring to (Fallon, 2019). Trumps' long-standing misinformation campaign ultimately culminated in his widespread propagation of the conspiracy theory, the last of a long list, according to which the 2020 election was rigged against him. The false claims about the legitimacy of the election started before the vote itself, when Trump stated, in the 2020 Republican National Convention, hat the "only way they can take this election away from us is if this is a rigged election" (Dale, 2020), further casting doubt on the mail-in votes and thus setting the base for the subsequent conspiratorial attack. The vast number of erroneous statements about the legitimacy of the vote, following the election results which saw Joe Biden claim the popular vote and the electoral college votes, led to enormous tension, culminating in the attack of pro-Trump supporters on one of the major symbols of American democracy. For Trump, the presidency came to an end with an impeachment trial for inciting an insurrection, a ban from Twitter for the glorification of

violence and an accumulation of 30,573 untruths stated (Kessler, et al., 2021). The Trump presidency can be seen as the primary example of the challenge and threat that "post-truth politics" poses do democracy.

For any democracy, an accurate distribution of information and a factual news coverage is essential, as these form the basis for the political and electoral decision-making of the public. Yet, "post-truth politics" introduced a dangerous dynamic. Political actors can now present factually inaccurate propagandistic information and political messages, designed to influence the electorate, especially on digital platforms, with no consequences. Given the fact that individuals on social networks form "filter bubbles" around their digital presence, thus including only sources which resonate with their already existing beliefs, the influence of one-sided transmission of political messages, ideas and propaganda increasingly polarizes and radicalizes the public. Through the use of social network platforms, political actors to a certain extent become among the primary political information sources for a vast number of people. Traditional media systems, which in democracies have had the role of holding governments accountable, are being circumvented and attacked by "post-truth" actors. The propagation of false information to this extent by politicians in high-ranking positions, such as President of the United States, is unprecedented in a democratic setting. For instance, Trumps' statement "network news has become so partisan, distorted, and fake that licenses must be challenged and if appropriate, revoked" is an extremely dangerous insinuation, almost of authoritarian nature, threatening the freedom of press, a fundamental pillar of democracy (Gounari, 2018). Democracy relies on a framework of common, rational and objective truths, which form the basis for democratic discourse. "Post-truth" makes a democratic discourse impossible. Although political actors have historically shaped reality in a politically favorable way, yet still acknowledging the underlying objective truth, today what can be observed is a complete disregard of the factual reality itself. "Post-truth" anti-establishment rhetoric delegitimizes democratic institutions which form the basis for any democratic system. Consequent to these considerations, it can be argued that "post-truth politics" poses a significant threat to the very foundations of democracy.

5. Conclusion

Following this analysis a few conclusive considerations can be made. The aim of the thesis was to explore the link between the evolution of the traditional media industry and the contemporary political narratives. The rise of alternative sources of information and the decentralization of political communication ushered in an era characterized by polarization, radicalism and a disregard for the objective truth, which came to be called the era of "post-truth politics".

As demonstrated, the evolution of the traditional media industry can best be described as one of decentralization of information distribution, multiplication of alternative information sources and

democratization of information. The invention of the Internet and subsequently social media fueled these processes to an unprecedented extent, as well as revolutionizing the basic structures of the media environment, the dynamics of information accessibility, distribution and consumption, human interaction and political communication. Unsurprisingly, the fact that anyone could contribute to the information present in the digital sphere negatively impacted the reliability of the information provided, thus reducing the value of information and credible sources, to the detriment of traditional news outlets. With the Internet progressively becoming among the primary information and news sources, individuals were therefore increasingly exposed to inaccurate information. Recognizing the political potential of digital technologies, political communication experienced a significant decentralization and shift toward the digital sphere. From a political perspective, the direct accessibility to the broad public, the ability to circumvent the filters and gatekeeping mechanisms of traditional media systems, the possibility to monitor popular concerns and address them, represented enormous opportunities. Ultimately, the combination of these developments in the media and political spheres were the fundamental forces that enabled the inauguration of the era of "post-truth politics".

Considering these observations, what transpires is that the advent of digital technologies and especially social media, which contain a vast number of alternative sources of information, have enabled and facilitated the widespread dissemination of misleading narratives, "fake news" and conspiracy theories. Yet, this claim has to be expanded. Throughout the course of this dissertation, it has been highlighted how the different media technologies were both influenced by society and were in turn shaped by it. As a consequence, in the case of digital technologies, it can be argued that social media have introduced a societal dynamic in which the lines between factual realities and emotions are increasingly blurred. An environment thus emerged, in which false information is widely spread and easily accepted and in which established information sources are disregarded in favor of questionable alternative sources. False political information, which previously was a marginal phenomenon, has now become a dominant feature in the political sphere. This undoubtably poses a threat to democracy.

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Riassunto

Introduzione

La seguente tesi mira a dimostrare come l'evoluzione dell'industria dei media tradizionali abbia portato a un cambiamento significativo nelle retoriche politiche contemporanee, caratterizzate da radicalismo, polarizzazione e un crescente disprezzo per la verità. Alla fine, ciò culminò in quella che viene definita l'era della "politica post-verità", caratterizzata da fonti alternative di informazione e forme decentralizzate di comunicazione politica e quindi nuovi canali, attraverso i quali notizie e informazioni inesatte vengono comunicate a scopo di guadagno politico. Questo fenomeno è stato particolarmente evidente nel corso degli eventi epocali della "Brexit", della presidenza Trump e della pandemia COVID-19, tre istanze fortemente influenzate da "fake news" e teorie complottiste.

Capitolo 1: L'evoluzione dell'industria dei media tradizionali

Partendo dall'era orale, in cui le civiltà dell'antichità classica, per lo più analfabete, erano dominate da culture e tradizioni orali, quindi la comunicazione di informazione e conoscenze tramite discorsi pubblici, poesie recitate, commedie negli anfiteatri, nonché canzoni e narrazioni, si può osservare il primo processo fondamentale nello sviluppo dei media e quindi un cambiamento profondamente radicato all'interno della società: il passaggio dall'oralità all'alfabetizzazione. Successivamente, intorno all'anno 1450 Johannes Gutenberg inventò una macchina da stampa meccanica che divenne nota come la "stampa di Gutenberg", dando via alla "rivoluzione della stampa". Insieme al significativo cambiamento sociale provocato dalla crescente alfabetizzazione e istruzione del pubblico, la stampa ha così consentito un livello di circolazione di informazioni, conoscenze e nuove idee, senza precedenti, aumentando la consapevolezza del pubblico per questioni sociopolitiche, un passo fondamentale verso quella che Jürgen Habermas chiamava notoriamente la "sfera pubblica". Con l'ascesa della sfera pubblica come luogo di discussione su questioni sociali, insieme alla nuova capacità di diffondere le proprie idee in diversi formati stampati, queste idee alla fine avrebbero guadagnato slancio e crescente approvazione. Ad esempio, eventi come la Riforma Protestante e la Rivoluzione Francese sono stati fortemente influenzati dalla diffusa divulgazione di materiale stampato contenente idee rivoluzionarie e critiche allo status quo, che hanno promosso il desiderio di cambiamento. L'era delle trasmissioni iniziò in seguito a una serie di nuove invenzioni rivoluzionarie del XVIII e XIX secolo. Nell'ambito dei media, questi erano principalmente la macchina da stampa industriale a vapore, che ha notevolmente accelerato il processo di stampa, consentendo la rapida produzione di massa di opere scritte, e il telegrafo elettrico e successivamente il telegrafo senza fili, che crearono le basi per lo sviluppo della radiodiffusione e dei dispositivi di telecomunicazione. Nel XX secolo, la radio e la televisione divennero una fonte fondamentale di comunicazione di notizie e informazioni, oltre ad avere scopi di intrattenimento. Politicamente parlando, l'ascesa di questi mass media ha cambiato radicalmente la comunicazione politica. I politici, che ora avevano la possibilità di avere un rapporto più intimo e personale con l'elettorato, potevano

trasmettere i loro messaggi direttamente nei salotti della gente, così influenzando in modo significativo la percezione pubblica. Tuttavia, dato l'enorme potere di questi mass media, un eccesso di controllo su di essi si è rivelato piuttosto pericoloso, come evidenziato dagli eventi in Europa, in cui regimi fascisti presero gradualmente il totale controllo dei mass media, conducendo così campagne di propaganda su larga scala, con conseguenze catastrofiche. D'altra parte, il rapporto tra attori politici e mass media negli Stati Uniti si è evoluto in modo piuttosto democratico, poiché i nuovi mezzi di telecomunicazione diedero una piattaforma per comunicati presidenziali, dibattiti e la comunicazione politica da parte dei partiti.

I media sono quindi storicamente in continua evoluzione e devono essere intesi come una potente forza sociale. Alla luce della ricerca sottostante, si può affermare che questa evoluzione ha portato ad un significativo processo di decentramento dei mezzi di distribuzione delle informazioni, l'aumento di fonti di informazione alternative e quindi ad una democratizzazione sia della disponibilità delle informazioni, che della sfera politica. Un aspetto chiave è il fatto che i modelli storici nell'ambiente dei media si sono ripetuti continuamente nel corso della storia umana, dato che ciascuno dei suddetti nuovi media innovativi è stato rivoluzionario a suo tempo, creando nuove tendenze e atteggiamenti all'interno della società, che hanno modellato gli sviluppi successivi.

Capitolo 2: I Media e la Politica nell'Era Digitale

La rivoluzione digitale avvenne con l'evoluzione dell'Internet, l'invenzione del "World Wide Web" nel 1989 e successivamente l'avvento del "Web 2.0". Il web in questa seconda fase si discosta dalla concezione originaria in quanto ormai fondamentalmente caratterizzato dai social network e quindi dai contenuti generati dagli utenti, portando ad un costante moltiplicarsi delle fonti di informazione e ad un volume sempre maggiore di dati e contenuti. Quindi, per definizione, i social media sono la caratteristica distintiva di questa seconda fase del web.

La "Sfera Pubblica Digitale"

Da un punto di vista sociologico, con l'avvento dell'Internet il concetto di "sfera pubblica" assunse una dimensione inedita, in quanto la "sfera pubblica digitale" si caratterizza per il suo altissimo grado di inclusività e accessibilità alle informazioni, dando una piattaforma praticamente a chiunque per esprimere opinioni o impegnarsi con prospettive diverse su un determinato argomento. Data l'inclusività e partecipazione, il dibattito nella sfera pubblica digitale è alimentato dal costante e interminabile flusso di informazioni. Di conseguenza, ciò che emerge è che l'ascesa dei social media e il diffuso accesso diretto alle piattaforme pubbliche ha portato questi ambienti mediati ad essere sempre più dominati dal "dilettantismo". A testimonianza dell'immenso potere della sfera pubblica digitale, si possono prendere gli eventi in Egitto e Tunisia durante la "Primavera Araba", dove le rivolte rivoluzionarie portarono alla caduta dei regimi autoritari al potere. In questi casi specifici, i social media sono stati strumentali nel plasmare dibattiti pubblici,

nell'organizzazione di rivolte e nella diffusione di idee democratiche e rivoluzionarie a livello nazionale, nonché per documentare e dare visibilità gli eventi per i paesi vicini e la comunità internazionale. Un gruppo di giovani "nativi digitali" tecnologicamente competenti ha dunque avviato, guidato e coordinato gli sforzi rivoluzionari sulle piattaforme dei social media.

Comunicazione e Ricezione delle Informazioni nella Sfera Digitale

L'Internet e le nuove tendenze all'interno del Web 2.0, hanno completamente rivoluzionato le basi fondamentali dei media, sia ideologicamente che strutturalmente. Nello specifico, i media digitali si basano su un "sistema di trasmissione dialogica", nel senso che ci sono molte fonti che comunicano a molti ricevitori, mentre i media tradizionali sono ed erano storicamente basati su una "trasmissione monologica", cioè una fonte che fornisce informazioni a molti ricevitori. Per comprendere meglio gli effetti di questo sviluppo, il singolo utente di Internet deve essere analizzato secondo la sua funzione di produttore di informazioni e consumatore di informazioni.

Di conseguenza, l'utente di Internet è fortemente incoraggiato a partecipare alla produzione di informazioni, poiché le piattaforme interattive nella sfera digitale si basano fortemente sui contenuti generati dagli utenti. Questo contributo avviene senza alcuna forma di filtro, potendo l'individuo esprimersi e fornire informazioni senza alcun vincolo alla sua libertà di parola. Mentre in precedenza le informazioni venivano accuratamente filtrate da professionisti, i "dilettanti" hanno accesso diretto e non filtrato a piattaforme pubbliche diffuse. Dato il declino della professionalità a favore del dilettantismo nella diffusione delle informazioni, non sorprende che abbia portato a un declino della qualità e dell'affidabilità delle informazioni accessibili.

D'altro canto, si possono individuare dinamiche specifiche per quanto riguarda il singolo utente come consumatore passivo di contenuti online. Insieme alla televisione e ai siti di notizie online, i social media sono diventati progressivamente la principale fonte di notizie sull'attualità in tutto il mondo. Il carattere poco professionale e non filtrato della produzione di informazioni in ambito digitale, nonché l'assenza di qualsiasi forma di "gatekeeping", dunque il meccanismo di filtri dei media tradizionali, mette fortemente in dubbio l'affidabilità della produzione di notizie online. Inoltre, a causa del fatto che i social media comprendono una varietà di funzioni diverse sulla stessa piattaforma, come l'intrattenimento, l'interazione sociale e il consumo di informazioni, i confini tra queste funzioni sono diventati sempre più labili. Gli utenti sono dunque meno attenti alle fonti del contenuto che consumano e quindi è meno probabile che si distingua tra fonti affidabili e inaffidabili. Un altro aspetto fondamentale da considerare è il fatto che i siti di social media sono progettati per consentire all'individuo di scegliere in modo specifico gli utenti. A causa del fatto che l'individuo è principalmente incline a seguire e interagire con persone e fonti che riflettono le sue opinioni, egli forma una cosiddetta "bolla di filtro", consumando così solo contenuti a secondo delle preferenze. Infine, questi sviluppi hanno inevitabilmente influenzato fortemente i mezzi di informazione tradizionali. Sopraffatti dalla

concorrenza di fonti non tradizionali che diffondo contenuti, anche se spesso inaffidabili, gratuitamente, l'intera struttura aziendale delle testate giornalistiche tradizionali è stata messa in discussione. Data l'incapacità di rispondere alle nuove tendenze e opportunità i media tradizionali stanno affrontando una crisi significativa. Nel complesso, gli sviluppi dell'era digitale hanno quindi prodotto una percezione completamente diversa del valore delle informazioni, creando una dinamica in cui l'affidabilità e la credibilità di una fonte è insignificante per molti consumatori. La struttura delle piattaforme di social media hanno completamente eliminato la struttura gerarchica dei precedenti ambienti mediatici, che per secoli si erano basati sulla qualità e la credibilità di una determinata fonte, dando così lo stesso livello di importanza alle fonti professionali e amatoriali.

La politica nel Cyberspazio

Indubbiamente, il potenziale dell'Internet nella sfera politica è enorme. Nell'analisi di ciò, è necessario distinguere tra il potenziale di trasferimento dei processi democratici nel cyberspazio, rispetto all'impatto della rivoluzione digitale sulla comunicazione politica. Da un lato, il potenziale politico di Internet è stato comunemente associato all'idea di rivitalizzare l'affiliazione politica e invertire le forti tendenze verso il declino della fedeltà degli elettori e dell'appartenenza al partito, portando alla creazione di piattaforme di "e-democrazia". Tuttavia, come testimonia l'esperienza del Movimento 5 Stelle e la "Piattaforma Rousseau", il trasferimento su larga scala dei processi democratici alla sfera digitale è tuttora difficilmente realizzabile, principalmente a causa delle questioni relative alla sicurezza dei dati e alla cybersecurity, che mettono in dubbio i risultati elettorali.

Per quanto riguarda la comunicazione politica, l'avvento dell'Internet e i social media hanno introdotto possibilità inedite e di conseguenza forme di comunicazione politica completamente nuove. La struttura storica della trasmissione dei messaggi politici, che prevedeva l'interazione tripartita tra élite politiche, media e pubblico, ha subito un cambiamento significativo nell'era digitale. Il carattere decentralizzato dell'Internet, così come le caratteristiche stesse delle piattaforme di social media, consentono infatti agli attori politici di eludere i sistemi mediatici tradizionali, acquisendo dunque un accesso diretto e immediato al pubblico attraverso i loro canali di comunicazione online, dando loro una piattaforma per spingere direttamente i loro messaggi politici non filtrati, spesso di carattere propagandistico. Di conseguenza, gli attori politici hanno progressivamente guadagnato potere di definizione dell'agenda politica, poiché ora sono in grado di promuovere temi e plasmare discussioni nella sfera pubblica digitale. Un altro aspetto chiave da considerare è il fatto che dato che gli utenti dei social media formano "bolle di filtro" intorno a sé stessi, egli sono in grado di modellare con precisione la loro realtà politica e le forze politiche che li influenzano, bloccando qualsiasi visione politica con cui non sono d'accordo. Le bolle di filtro, insieme alla nuova possibilità per gli attori politici di influenzare il pubblico sulle piattaforme digitali, aumentano potenzialmente la polarizzazione e la radicalizzazione dell'opinione pubblica. Tuttavia, è importante sottolineare che nonostante questi sviluppi i

media tradizionali hanno ancora un ruolo fondamentale, in quanto il sistema contemporaneo può essere definito come un "sistema ibrido", in cui i media tradizionali e digitali interagiscono e si influenzano a vicenda.

Indubbiamente, i social media sono stati fondamentali per la recente ascesa dei movimenti populisti. Dato il fondamento stesso dell'ideologia populista, le piattaforme digitali, con il loro carattere intrinsecamente decentralizzato e deregolamentato, rappresentano uno strumento molto interessante per i movimenti populisti per diffondere le loro idee e ottenere seguaci. Infatti, la possibilità di avere un rapporto personale con il pubblico, di monitorare direttamente le preoccupazioni pubbliche e affrontarle miratamente, consente il tipo di comunicazione politica emotiva su cui si basa l'ideologia populista. A causa della retorica populista contro le élite e dell'opposizione ai media tradizionali, i social media rappresentano dunque lo strumento ideale per gli attori populisti per pubblicizzarsi e per condurre la loro comunicazione politica.

La Politica Post-Verità

Secondo la definizione ampiamente accettata dal dizionario di Oxford, che ha eletto il termine in questione come parola dell'anno 2016, "post-verità" può essere definito come "un termine relativo o denotativo di circostanze in cui i fatti oggettivi sono meno influenti nel plasmare l'opinione pubblica piuttosto che fare appello alle emozioni e alle convinzioni personali". Dunque, contrariamente alle caratteristiche filosofiche del concetto, la "verità" è diventata flessibile, soggetta a interpretazioni e opinioni. Intrinsecamente emozioni e la "verità" sono incompatibili, poiché quest'ultima esiste indipendentemente dalla percezione o dalla coscienza umana. Applicato alla sfera politica, il tratto saliente della "politica post-verità" è quindi il primato delle emozioni sui fatti e sull'informazione concreta, dove l'obiettivo principale è trasmettere interpretazioni credibili della realtà, coerenti con le credenze e valori degli ascoltatori e non necessariamente fatti. Nel campo della comunicazione politica, ciò ha portato alla distribuzione di messaggi e informazioni, che non hanno una base fattuale, progettati per fuorviare il pubblico e modellare l'opinione pubblica in modo politicamente favorevole. Negli ultimi anni, la diffusa divulgazione di "fake news" e teorie complottiste in ambito politico sono state le caratteristiche distintive di quella che può essere concepita come "l'era della post-verità".

La manipolazione delle informazioni e la comunicazione politica fuorviante sono state storicamente parte dei processi politici. Tuttavia, la misura in cui ciò avviene nell'era digitale non ha precedenti. Ritornando alle considerazioni di cui sopra si può dunque dire che la proliferazione di fonti di informazione alternative e la moltiplicazione delle risorse informative; i nuovi meccanismi di produzione e consumo dell'informazione; la crisi dei media tradizionali; le possibilità offerte ai politici sui media digitali e l'ascesa dei populisti, hanno creato dinamiche che consentono la propagazione di notizie false, realtà alternative e teorie del complotto, che sono caratteristiche fondamentali dell'era della "politica post-verità".

<u>"Fake news" e il loro Impatto sull'Esito del Referendum sulla Brexit</u>

Attingendo al concetto di disinformazione, che fa riferimento a un'informazione incompleta, vaga, fuorviante o ambigua, le "fake news" possono essere meglio definite come una versione avanzata e tecnologica della disinformazione, che compare su Internet e nei social media in particolare. Che l'informazione sia del tutto o solo in parte inesatta è irrilevante, in quanto l'informazione, spacciata per "vera" o fattuale dal comunicatore, è stata deliberatamente manipolata e formulata in modo fuorviante, nel tentativo di influenzare le posizioni dei recettori e trarne beneficio. Nell'era della "politica post-verità", le "fake news" sono fortemente cariche di emozioni, progettate quindi per manipolare i sentimenti e l'intelletto del recettore, dividere l'opinione pubblica e beneficiare del caos o della confusione che ne deriva.

La campagna politica che ha preceduto il voto sulla Brexit è stata altamente divisiva. La natura dell'oggetto del Referendum ha inevitabilmente diviso il Paese, creando una forte contrapposizione tra le opzioni "Leave" e "Remain". L'ostilità nell'ambiente politico derivava principalmente dalle strategie di campagna politica da parte della parte "Leave", guidata dai populisti Nigel Farage e Boris Johnson. La campagna "Leave" si basava su due affermazioni fuorvianti: "Il Regno Unito invia 350 milioni di sterline a settimana all'UE" e "La migrazione netta verso il Regno Unito ha raggiunto i 330.000". La prima dichiarazione è stata notoriamente stampata su un poster di autobus, che diceva: "Inviamo all'UE 350 milioni di sterline a settimana, finanziamo la NHS". Non solo è stato dimostrato che l'esplicito importo monetario non teneva conto di una varietà di fattori diversi che ne riducevano notevolmente il numero effettivo, ma l'affermazione implicava anche falsamente che il denaro sarebbe poi stato destinato al Servizio Sanitario Nazionale. Il secondo tema ricorrente della campagna "Leave" riguardava la migrazione, tema sensibile all'epoca. In tale contesto, la retorica anti-immigrazione ampiamente promossa soprattutto da Boris Johnson e Nigel Farage e amplificata dai mezzi di informazione tradizionali che hanno sostenuto la campagna, ha trovato terreno fertile, evolvendosi nell'ambiguo slogan emotivo "Riprendere il controllo". Inoltre, le risorse destinate alla campagna politica digitale, nonché il traffico sui social media sui siti della campagna "Leave", erano di gran lunga campagna avversaria. Dunque, questo può essere considerato un caso primario di "politica della post-verità", in quanto qui si osservano le caratteristiche fondamentali di questo concetto: il disprezzo della verità oggettiva e della razionalità a favore di messaggi carichi di emozioni, spinti da attori populisti e ulteriormente amplificato dai media digitali. Sebbene la sorprendente vittoria del "Leave" non possa essere semplicemente attribuita alla retorica fuorviante, poiché devono essere presi in considerazione numerosi altri fattori sociopolitici ed economici, si può giustamente sostenere che la strategia della campagna "Leave" è stata strumentale nel rafforzare il sostegno, oltre a far oscillare gli elettori indecisi a loro favore.

<u>Teorie del Complotto e "Post-Verità" nella Pandemia COVID-19</u>

Una teoria del complotto può essere definita come la teoria che un fenomeno si verifica a seguito di una cospirazione tra le parti interessate, spiegando quindi un evento o un insieme di circostanze come risultato di

un complotto segreto di cospiratori solitamente potenti. L'aspetto centrale del concetto è il fatto che le teorie del complotto, che hanno origine dall'immaginazione di uno o più individui, fanno appello ai recettori del messaggio per fattori emotivi e psicologici. Che poi queste teorie si rivelino vere non ha importanza, dato il fatto che una teoria del complotto, che scaturisce unicamente da un'opinione o da un'interpretazione, viene presentata come veritiera sebbene la realtà fattuale non solo non le corrisponda, ma vi sia anche prove schiaccianti contro la teoria. Nella diffusione delle teorie del complotto i social media sono stati determinanti. La democratizzazione della conoscenza e della distribuzione delle informazioni ha inevitabilmente fornito ai teorici della cospirazione un'enorme piattaforma, con i singoli utenti sempre più esposti a queste idee infondate.

La pandemia ha colto di sorpresa il mondo intero e ne è derivato un ambiente caotico, in cui la paura e l'incertezza hanno dominato le società di tutto il mondo. In un tale contesto inevitabilmente iniziarono a circolare teorie del complotto. Le informazioni false sono state ampiamente divulgate attraverso i social media, dai reportage sensazionalistici dei media tradizionali, ma anche dalle dichiarazioni negligenti di potenti politici, in particolare Donald Trump. Le principali teorie del complotto presenti soprattutto sui social media sono state molteplici e talvolta anche contraddittorie tra loro, in quanto sostenevano che il virus fosse una bufala, che il virus fosse diffuso deliberatamente come arma biologica o per uno scopo politico, che le antenne 5G accelerassero la diffusione del virus e che i vaccini contenessero microchip progettati per monitorare persone. Il consumo su larga scala di queste affermazioni cospirative ha influito negativamente sulla percezione della minaccia per la salute che il virus rappresenta, sulla volontà di adottare azioni preventive e sulle intenzioni di vaccinare. Sebbene storicamente l'impatto delle teorie del complotto era per lo più trascurabile, le affermazioni cospirative nel mezzo di una pandemia possono essere estremamente dannose per gli sforzi di controllo dell'emergenza e l'adozione di misure per trovare una via d'uscita. Mentre nell'analisi dell'impatto della "post-verità" viene data una forte attenzione alle sue conseguenze politiche, la disinformazione diffusa durante la pandemia di COVID-19 ne evidenzia l'impatto sociale.

<u>Costituisce la Politica Post-Verità un Pericolo per la Democrazia? La Presidenza Trump</u>
Il 6 gennaio 2021, i sostenitori pro-Trump hanno preso d'assalto il Congresso degli Stati Uniti, nel tentativo di interrompere la sessione congiunta del Congresso che avrebbe formalizzato la vittoria di Joe Biden delle elezioni presidenziali del 2020. Metaforicamente, forse nessun evento potrebbe riassumere meglio la presidenza Trump. Notoriamente, Donald Trump è salito alla ribalta nella sfera politica con la ripetuta affermazione durante le campagne presidenziali del 2008 che l'ex presidente Barack Obama non era nato negli Stati Uniti e di conseguenza non poteva servire come presidente, insistendo sulla sua affermazione anche quando sono state presentate prove contro di esso. La campagna politica prima delle elezioni presidenziali statunitensi del 2016 è stata altamente polarizzante. L'uso da parte di Trump delle piattaforme digitali, la sua deliberata divulgazione di informazioni false, dichiarazioni offensive e messaggi populisti di carattere

fortemente emotivo, non avevano precedenti. Dopo l'irruzione sulla scena politica, Trump ha dunque immediatamente dominato l'ambiente mediatico, ponendosi al centro dell'attenzione mediatica, anche attraverso il suo uso dei social media. Twitter, dato il suo carattere decentralizzato, non filtrato, deregolamentato e superficiale, si è rivelata la piattaforma ottimale per Trump. I suoi "tweet" quotidiani, pieni di informazioni fuorvianti, avrebbero dominato le discussioni nei media tradizionali e digitali. La divulgazione di informazioni false fu inoltre accelerata sia dall'interferenza russa nelle elezioni, che da attori non statali che diffusero disinformazione a scopo di lucro. La Presidenza, simile alla campagna elettorale, è iniziata con una serie di false affermazioni. Riferendosi alla cerimonia di inaugurazione, Trump non solo ha affermato falsamente che non ha piovuto, ma ha anche esagerato eccessivamente la folla presente all'inaugurazione, accusando i media di manipolare le immagini della folla. In risposta alle domande sulla questione, il consigliere senior di Trump, Kellyanne Conway, ha affermato di avere "fatti alternativi". Forse nessuna affermazione potrebbe riassumere meglio la "politica post-verità" e l'interpretazione di Trump della stessa. La lunga campagna di disinformazione di Trump alla fine è culminata nella sua diffusione della teoria della cospirazione, secondo la quale le elezioni del 2020 sono state truccate contro di lui, portando all'attacco dei sostenitori di Trump a uno dei maggiori simboli della democrazia americana. Per Trump la presidenza si è conclusa con un processo di impeachment per incitamento all'insurrezione, una sospensione da Twitter per l'esaltazione della violenza e un accumulo di 30.573 falsità dichiarate. La presidenza Trump può essere vista come il principale esempio della minaccia che la "politica post-verità" pone alla democrazia.

Infatti, per qualsiasi democrazia è essenziale un'accurata distribuzione delle informazioni, poiché queste costituiscono la base per il processo decisionale politico del pubblico. Tuttavia, gli attori politici possono ora presentare informazioni propagandistiche e messaggi politici di fatto imprecisi, senza conseguenze. Dato che gli individui sui social network formano "bolle di filtro" attorno alla loro presenza digitale, includendo quindi solo fonti che risuonano con le loro convinzioni già esistenti, l'influenza della trasmissione unilaterale di messaggi politici, idee e propaganda polarizza e radicalizza sempre più il pubblico. La propagazione di informazioni false fino a questo punto da parte di politici in posizioni di alto rango, come il presidente degli Stati Uniti, non ha precedenti in un contesto democratico. Infatti, la democrazia si basa su un quadro di verità comuni, razionali e oggettive, che costituiscono i fondamenti del discorso democratico. La "post-verità" rende quindi impossibile un discorso democratico e delegittima le istituzioni democratiche che costituiscono la base di qualsiasi sistema democratico. Si può dunque sostenere che la "politica della post-verità" rappresenta una minaccia significativa alle fondamenta stesse della democrazia.

Conclusione

Considerando queste osservazioni, si può affermare che l'avvento delle tecnologie digitali e in particolare dei social media hanno consentito e facilitato la diffusione capillare di retoriche fuorvianti, "fake news" e teorie del complotto. Tuttavia, questa affermazione deve essere ampliata. Nel corso di questa tesi è stato evidenziato

come le diverse tecnologie dei media siano state sia influenzate dalla società sia da essa a loro volta modellate. Di conseguenza, nel caso delle tecnologie digitali, si può sostenere che i social media hanno introdotto una dinamica sociale in cui i confini tra realtà fattuali ed emozioni sono sempre più sfumati. È emerso così un ambiente, in cui le informazioni false sono ampiamente diffuse e facilmente accettate. La falsa informazione politica, che prima era un fenomeno marginale, è diventata ora una caratteristica dominante nella sfera politica. Questo rappresenta indubbiamente una minaccia ai pilastri fondamentali della democrazia.