



# ***Exploring the Blurred Lines: A Review of “Truth Claims Across Media”***

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In today's fast-paced and ever-changing media landscape, the lines between fact and fiction have become increasingly blurred. Scholars now refer to this as the “post-truth” world, where misinformation and the deliberate spread of false narratives often prevail over verifiable facts. “Truth Claims Across Media” edited by Beate Schirrmacher and Nafiseh Mousavi takes an in-depth look at this daunting subject from many different angles, exploring the ways in which diverse media make truth and other kinds of claims to authenticity.

## **Truth in a Post-Truth World**

The volume is divided into four parts, and although this is an academic approach, a sense of tension pervades the whole book as the reader progresses along a trajectory in which post-truth invades more aspects of people's lives. The unease grows as the reader goes through Parts I, II and III, as layer upon layer of complexity is added to the discussion of the nature of truth and untruth.

Part I examines media manipulation and historical juxtaposition. Beate Schirrmacher's article, “A Story Too Good to Be True,” dissects manipulations in journalistic narratives through rhetorical and narratological analysis. This reverse-engineering method, based on intermedial and semiotic conceptualizations of truth, reveals how factual narratives are often manipulated. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska's “The Montage of the National Past” investigates the way Polish right-wing publications manipulate historical references on their covers, emphasizing the distortion of history through visual comparisons. In a similar vein, Gunilla Byrman and Asbjørg Westum's study, “Trustworthiness in the Swedish Strategies for Covid-19,” analyzes the communication approaches of Swedish authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the clash between official truth claims and public expectations.

The suspense is further built in Part II, which explores individual searches for the truth behind historical tragedies. While Nafseh

Mousavi's "Cameras, Pencils, Traumas: Drawn Images in and as Documentary Practice" examines the role drawing plays in constructing truth when retracing a personal experience during the 2014 ISIS genocide of Yazidis, Camila Augusta P. de Figueiredo's "Unveiling Truth and Truthfulness in the Graphic Memoir *Heimat*" delves into the biographical reconstruction of World War II experience. The articles examine the manner in which hybrid materiality mediates the conflict between the pursuit of verifiable facts and the construction of cohesive narratives.

Part III takes the reader to the brink of this tension as it examines how fact and fiction interact in a variety of media genres. Together with Anna Gutowska's analysis of biofiction in "The Great" (2020), Tamás Csöngé's research on political mockumentaries demonstrates how fictionalized historical accounts can be used to critique modern issues. In a similar vein, Yeqi Zhu challenges the notion that zombie films are just harmless entertainment by arguing in "Impure Realism, Pure Eventness, and Horror Cinema in the Post-truth Era" that they reflect the dissemination of false information in the post-truth era. These media forms challenge the hegemonic narratives fighting them with ironized and fictionalized counter narratives. In this struggle irony and fiction are the weapon of the masses. Or, to phrase it in another way, the pen is mightier than the sword. Or maybe not the pen, but perhaps the remote control is.

In contrast to the previous parts, part IV of the volume lets the tension go and offers catharsis. Elena Musi, Kay L. O'Halloran, Elinor Carmi, and Simeon Yates' "Developing Misinformation Immunity in a Post-Truth World" introduces the Fake News Immunity chatbot, which aims to educate its users how to recognize fake news. The study by Augustė Dementavicienė, Fausta Mikutaitė, and Aivaras Žukauskas focuses on anti-vaccination

Facebook groups in Lithuania and singles out the most important themes in these groups such as the crisis of trust and the rivalry with science. Finally, Morten Boeriis' "Towards a Grammar of Manipulated Photographs" claims that digitally manipulated photographs should be evaluated concerning their trustworthiness from a social semiotic perspective.

### **Blurred Lines of Truth, Authority, and Media Manipulation**

From my perspective, one of the key insights is how the blurring of lines between fact and fiction affects the public's perception of the relationship between truth and authority. Contemporary media culture is a multifaceted complex of different layers of authority and authenticity, combining empirical data with personal experience. The very emergence of terms like "post-truth" and "fake news" testifies to the enormous social effects of this intricate interplay of dynamics. Moreover, the declining presence and authority of traditional editorial gatekeepers and experts in the digital public sphere have led to a fragmented and polarized public discourse. False information can spread virally through digital networks with little chance of detection or correction, thus posing a significant threat to democracy.

### **The Erosion of Boundaries in the Digital Era**

The increasingly blurred distinction between truth and falsehood mirrors a more general phenomenon of the rapid erosion of the boundaries between the public and the private. This is especially true in the way online communities question hegemonic discourses and truth producing regimes creating in their place other publics with high social impact, as the Lithuanian anti-vaccination movement in the book demonstrates.

Media manipulation also serves as a tool of political rhetoric. Mockumentaries and other hybrid forms combining fact and fiction are examples of such rhetorical strategies shaping public opinions and political discourses. Satire and parody are typical strategic choices of this media form encouraging the viewer to ponder about the nature of the information s/he is receiving. Political mockumentaries (C.S.A: The Confederate States of America, analyzed by Csöngé in the volume, for example) use the discourse and the problems of a specific social inequality or abuse of power in the fiction they create and in this way make a political statement. By combining documentary style with purely invented footage they question the truthfulness of the represented events. On the other hand, hybrid forms of media combining fact and fiction nurture in general a suspicious attitude towards public institutions and official powers. This scepticism is intensified by the confusion and misinformation that result from selective exposure and filter bubbles on social media platforms. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread dissemination of misinformation and the erosion of trust in mainstream media and government institutions underscore the difficulties of navigating an information landscape where factual accuracy is frequently contested.

### **What Helps Us Navigate This Labyrinth?**

To navigate this intricate landscape, the book suggests recognizing the pivotal role of emotion and personal belief in shaping public opinion. In a post-truth society, appeals to emotion and personal belief often outweigh objective facts, rendering truth seemingly irrelevant to those who strategically disseminate false information. For example, the case of Claas Relotius, a reporter at *Der Spiegel*, as explored in "A Story Too Good to Be True: The

Manipulation of Truth Claims in Faked News," illustrates how fabricated narratives that appeal to emotions and personal beliefs can be mistaken for truth. Relotius created stories that were "beautifully narrated fiction" rather than accurate representations of events, manipulating readers' perceptions by leveraging their emotional responses. His stories, such as "The Story of Ahmed and Alin," employed emotionally charged, unverifiable details to craft compelling but false narratives. This manipulation exploited readers' empathy and preconceptions, making the stories appear more authentic and believable despite their lack of factual basis.

Similarly, in the realm of digital media, manipulated photographs and deepfakes exploit the emotional and cognitive biases of viewers, further blurring the lines between reality and fiction. These techniques demonstrate how emotional manipulation and the use of symbols from collective memory (the *reductio ad Hitlerum* discussed in the chapter "The Montage of the National Past: Polish Right-Wing Illustrated Press and the Abuse of History") can significantly influence group identities and political discourse within online communities. By understanding these dynamics, where emotional manipulation and the use of collective memory play significant roles in forming group identities and influencing political discourse, we can better discern and critically evaluate the information we encounter. Recognizing the strategies used to appeal to emotions and beliefs helps us to navigate the complex landscape of post-truth society and to separate fact from fiction more effectively.

### **The Cultural Dimension of Truth Claims**

The significance of digital ethnography and the requirement for historical interpretation of the

phenomenon are also emphasized in the book. Deep mistrust of public authority and institutions has been seeded by Soviet totalitarianism in post-Soviet societies such as Lithuania. This historical experience encourages the emergence of alternative truth claims, which frequently deviate greatly from Western narratives, and breeds a particular kind of scepticism toward official narratives. In Lithuania, anti-vaccination movements are rooted in the historical context of Soviet control and the ensuing widespread mistrust of any authoritative body. In Western countries, anti-vaccination movements typically arise from mistrust of pharmaceutical companies and government health agencies. This results in a different form of narrative that combines historical scepticism with contemporary issues. In Poland, the manipulation of historical narratives by right-wing media reflects another cultural dimension where history is used as a tool for contemporary political purposes. Polish media often utilize historical events and figures to construct a nationalistic narrative that supports current political agendas. This approach can blur the lines between fact and fiction by selectively presenting historical facts to fit a modern political narrative. Both Lithuanian and Polish examples illustrate the use of "ideological circuit breakers," where discussions are framed in a way that prevents constructive debate and reinforces existing beliefs.

To sum up, "Truth Claims Across Media" offers a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the complex problems surrounding truth and disinformation in the media landscape of today. The book provides helpful strategies for navigating the complexities of the post-truth era, while also effectively revealing the various methods used by the media to construct and challenge truth through its well-organized chapters. All things considered, this book is a priceless tool for academics, media professionals, and anybody else trying to

analyze and confront the problems with truth in the digital age. 📖

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