struggles that it has ushered in. Toward this end, we look more closely in the next section at the definitions of post-truth, fake news and the politics behind the denial of facts.

2 Post-Truth Defined

The concept of post-truth, as it concerns us here, emerged in 2015 during the campaigns for the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump. It had such a rapid rise that Oxford Dictionaries labeled it the "word of the year" in 2016, after a 2,000 percent increase in usage (Flood 2016). Although the term has no fixed meaning, the idea that we have moved into a post-truth world became a major topic of discussion and debate. According to the dictionary, "post-truth" is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions." It refers to "a political culture in which debate is framed largely by appeals to emotion disconnected from the details of policy, and by the repeated assertion of talking points to which factual rebuttals are ignored." As such, post-truth "differs from traditional contesting and falsifying of facts by relegating facts and expert opinions to be of secondary importance relative to appeal to emotion" (Flood 2016). The dictionary further describes it as a word that captures the "ethos, mood or preoccupations of that particular year," and as having "lasting potential as a word of cultural significance."

For the duration of a grueling political campaign leading up to the US presidential election in 2016, blatant post-truth lies and so-called "alternative facts" circulated freely in political speeches and media reporting. So problematic was this that it has led to nothing less than a fact-checking industry. While factual worries could be uncovered everywhere, such investigations found that Donald Trump's relationship to truth has been deeply problematic.[2]

2.1 Post-Truth and Fake News

It is also important to discuss the relationship of post-truth to "fake news," as the two concepts often accompany one another. Although closely related, they are not the same. The essential foundation of post-truth is established, following McDermott (2019: 218), as being "when people consider opinion to be as legitimate as confirmed facts, or when emotional factors weigh as heavily as statistical evidence. When these tendencies hold sway among even a significant minority of the public, they can exert a strong influence on public-policy

[2] Trump's flagrant neglect of the "facts" has been described as socio-pathological (Croucher 2019).

debates as well as on behavioral outcomes," voting being an important case in point. This leads to what can be called "post-truth culture."

Fake news, on the other hand, can be differentiated from post-truth because it mainly involves the spread of false statements.[3] To be understood as fake news, a story must be put forward with the deliberate intent to mislead or deceive the recipient – the reader or listener – for the purposes of political objectives or financial gain. It can be described as an "empty signifier," which in itself carries no meaning but can be attached to anything (Farkus and Schou 2019). Despite its difference to post-truth, however, some argue that the increase in fake news, accelerated by social media, laid the groundwork for post-truth.

2.2 Spread of Post-Truth, Fake News and "Truthiness"

Today, examples of post-truth and fake news falsehoods are so extensive that they are beyond counting. They range from the more traditional variety, such as denial of the Holocaust, to more contemporary examples of falsehoods designed to influence the outcome of political elections, the machinations of foreign political leaders, the refusal to accept the effectiveness of vaccinations, the denial of climate change, myths about the origins of the COVID-19 and election denials. There is scarcely an issue that has not been affected.

Trump, it has been shown, holds the record when it comes to the spread of fake news, sheer lies and falsehoods. (Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly 2020). And, more than a little curiously, this has had only a small effect on his relationship with Republican voters, and next to none on his so-called support base. Even more perversely, they have held him to be more honest than Hillary Clinton. Underlying this are the populist movements in the United States and abroad that continue to be fueled by the rise of social media, the primary mechanism for spreading fake news and disinformation. In terms of populist politics, post-truth social media can be understood as a response to a growing distrust of the political establishment and the media – both their ideas and their practices.

It is certainly not the case that the spread of lies is unknown to politics; indeed, it is as old as the profession itself (Arendt 1972). To take just one prominent political example, George Orwell described political propaganda during the Spanish Civil War as fundamental to the struggle. In Orwellian style, he argued that "the very concept of objective truth" seemed to be "fading out of the world" (Orwell and Angus 1980: 295–296). He worried about how history would record the Spanish war if Franco won and his propagandists were to become the historians. Given that the government relied on the spread of

[3] For a history of fake news, see Czarniawska (2021).

disinformation and lies, he wondered if people would forget what had actually happened, especially after those who could remember the war had died? Would the propaganda be believed, he worried? Would it become universally accepted, with lies turning into the truth?

So problematic is the situation today that various writers have expressed the same concern – namely, whether or not history could be truthfully written in the future. Very problematically, political systems are now so divided that there is "a battle between two ways of perceiving the world, two fundamentally different approaches to reality," between which one has to decide (D'Ancona 2017: 5). It is a point that can easily be tested. One need only compare the political reporting of Fox News with that of MNSBC on American television. Their interpretations of the same events often leave the impression that they are coming from different planets. Their respective coverage of the Trump impeachment hearing brought this phenomenon to new heights, only later to be surpassed by false claims about election fraud and COVID-19.

2.3 Truthiness

Arguably, Trump's lying has been qualitatively different from the sort of falsehoods that politicians have spread up to this point. Indeed, the contemporary use of the concept of truth in various ways no longer directly relates to truthfulness. In the words of the comedian Stephen Colbert, it can better be described as a kind of "truthiness," referring to the phenomenon of believing a statement to *feel* true, even though it is not supported by factual evidence (Watson 2016). In view of the attention that has been given to this interpretation of post-truth, Merriam-Webster included "truthiness" in its dictionary, stating that it cleared a way for a post-truth world "in which the feel of truth, or "truthiness" is the only thing that matters" (Zimmer 2010).

3 Post-Truth: Ignorance and "Anything Goes"

The emergence of post-truth is, certainly on the surface, a major threat to science and social as well as physical inquiry. Insofar as rigorously pursuing truthful facts with tested methods is the raison d'etre of science, post-truth challenges its very core. It is seen as leading to a form of irrationalism that offers no firm basis for developing the solid, policy-oriented facts required for the guidance of society. Indeed, this poses a fundamental worry for most contemporary institutions, techno-bureaucratic in nature, that are designed to assemble and apply confirmed facts to the policy issues confronting modern society. Indeed, the strategy of "evidence-based" policymaking has emerged in recent times to assist these organizations with the tasks at hand (Young et al. 2002).

More than a few have worried that postmodern thought and its focus on the relativity of truth has played a major role in bringing about post-truth and the idea of alternative facts. So worried is the scientific community about the rejection of facts that it organized a large “March for Science” protest in Washington, DC (Vence and Grant 2017). The predominant counter-response, especially by the media, has been to emphasize “fact-checking.” This is an approach that has been of particular concern in dealing with the pressing problem of climate change, but later the focus turned to COVID-19 as well.

3.1 Agnotology

On a more sophisticated level, this worry has led various scholars to move beyond the emphasis on established facts and acknowledge the failure to understand the role of ignorance, in particular the ways ignorance is shaped and constructed. Indeed, this concern about disinformation has led to a new field of ignorance studies called “agnotology.” As Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) point out, scholars have focused on the production of scientifically tested knowledge at the expense of ignorance, which can also be systematically produced to serve particular purposes. There is a large literature on how to avoid ignorance, but little on ignorance itself, despite its pervasiveness. For Proctor and Schiebinger, the distribution and maintenance of ignorance is a much-neglected element in the current post-factual world. A point central to the post-truth debate, they stress a need to also study the reasons and purposes for the maintenance of ignorance, particularly as it pertains to post-truth.

3.2 Ignorance and Relativism: Science Wars Redux

Those who take postmodernism to be promoting a form of ignorance launch their primary response at its critique of science. Scholars of postmodern persuasion, along with many in the fields of cultural studies and science studies, have been lambasted for raising questions about the nature and practices of science. In various ways, the struggle is more than a little reminiscent of the earlier “science wars” debates of the 1990s between cultural theorists and members of the scientific community (Ross 1996; Berube 2011). These exchanges, often caustic in nature, focused on the claim that science is founded on social, political and cultural factors. Basic to this culturally oriented “deconstruction” of what science does and how it works has been a rejection of the idea that stable definitions of reality can exist, thus undercutting the possibility of universal truths. Although the target of these debates has typically been the physical and natural sciences, it also extends to economics and the social sciences more generally (Graber 2019).

Over time, this critique of science has given rise to a postpositivist understanding of science that emphasizes the relative, uncertain, contextually site-specific and language-based character of knowledge. The debate, which has vacillated between epistemological sophistication and ad hominem argument, turns on questions about the nature of reality. Is knowledge about reality something "out there" to be uncovered independently of human ideas, as the scientific community generally contends, or is all knowledge, to one degree or another, socially constructed and thus dependent on human conventions? In this postpositivist view, all disciplines need to critically rethink their basic principles in light of these social influences, a view rigorously resisted and rejected by most members of the scientific community, preferring instead to hold onto their foundational myth of "the search for objective truth."

For the opponents of postmodernism, cultural studies and social constructivism, these modes of inquiry are seen to lead to the view that all facts are just matters of opinion. By denying the possibility of truths that are eternal or ideal, the approach is accused of allowing for "anything goes" (Sokal 2008). Such relativism is thus seen to enable an ignorant world in which all competing positions are believed to make equally valid truth claims. However, in the view of theorists who've grappled with relativism, it is not necessarily the case that there are no standards for judging what is good or what is right. Rather, it means recognizing that such standards are the products of conventions and assessments that are always context dependent (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2020).

These ongoing criticisms have led a seminal figure in cultural studies – none less than Bruno Latour (2018) – to assert that the time has come for postmodernists to now reestablish "some of the authority of science." Worrying in particular about the denial of climate change, without altogether rejecting the social elements in scientific conduct, he calls for a revision of the more problematic relationship to reality put forth by the radical critics of science. But this does not mean a rejection of interpretivism, which, as we shall see, need not mean anything goes.

Much of the discussion, however, overlooks the possibility that post-truth may reflect a deeper – even insidious – phenomenon that is about more than established scientific facts per se. While fact-checking is a worthy activity, we need to look deeper into this development to find out what it is about, what is behind it. Toward this end, we look next at "post-truth culture."

4 The Political Rise of the Post-Truth Culture

Post-truth is first and foremost the outcome of the destructive politics that has invaded modern political systems, especially in the United States and Britain.

While a full discussion of the political factors behind the rise of post-truth and alternative facts is beyond the scope of this Element, it is important to point to the basic political dynamics behind its emergence. Even this is not easy as the post-truth phenomena is the consequence of a combination of intersecting political developments: for example, the general decline of democratic politics, a right-wing strategy to fracture the political culture for conservative political gain, the subsequent rise of tribal politics, the role of social media and the politics of disinformation (Bennet and Livingston 2021).

It is first a story of general democratic decline – what some writers have discussed in terms of a new era of "post-democracy" and the manipulation of information that is part of that theory. But more specifically in the United States, it is in many ways the consequence of a political strategy on the part of the conservatives to fracture the political culture. More often than not, political parties now treat each other with animosity, and political commentators have begun to speak of political "tribes" rather than parties. In this game, the goal is to protect one's own tribe regardless of the issue or concern at hand. And it's within this context that the idea of "alternative facts" has emerged. When one of the tribes does not like the outcome of a particular policy study, they dismiss it as "their facts, not ours!"

The influence of such disinformation is difficult to measure, but there is plenty of evidence to make it a troubling reality (Farkus and Schou 2019). As such, it has become the subject of various investigatory bodies, ranging from the US House and Senate to the CIA and FBI. Much of the investigation conducted by these bodies has been concerned with the role of Russian hacking, which has been used strategically to turn the internet into a political weapon. But it has also focused on social media well, in particular Facebook and Twitter (Farkus and Schou 2019). It is a concern that has spread to other countries as well, such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom.

4.1 Political Tribes and the Politics of "Just Say No"

Such feelings about the opposing party are so strongly negative that anything a group says is questioned and rejected just because "the other side" is saying it, giving rise to a strategy of "just say no." This emotionally based "behavioral polarization" – characterized by anger toward the other side, active commitment to one's own party and a tendency to view positions through a biased political lens – is motivated more by a sense of team spirit than by the substance of policy issues. Such tribes, particularly populist tribes, are based on anti-establishment ideologies and often described with terms such as secular religion, like-minded brethren, catechism of sacred beliefs, demonology, political cult and righteous devotion to their causes (Farkus and Schou 2019; Packer 2018). Tribal identification becomes

the basis of a team that has to be defended at all costs against the evil other. Large numbers of conservatives, for example, support climate denial simply because it is part of membership in their tribe (Nyhan 2021).

While politics is typically presented as being about the competition of interests and ideas, tribal politics puts the emphasis on power and the need to make sure that scarce resources are allocated to "our" people, whatever it takes (Lewis 2016). It is in this "weaponized" context of tribalism that fake news emerges as an important resource in the political struggle, whereby political survival assumes greater importance than facts. In the course of the struggle, the ends come to be seen as justifying the means; disinformation emerges as a justifiable political strategy.

4.2 Cultural Cognition and Motivated Reason

From an analytical perspective, Kahan's (2017) "Cultural Cognition Project" helps to explain the intellectual dynamics of this clash of political beliefs. In the case of climate change, for example, Kahan attributes the close correlation between "worldview" and acceptance or rejection of climate change research to a process of "cultural cognition." This points to the way in which people process new data or information in terms of their relationship to their preferred political orientation and the "vision of the good society" it supports. As Kahan (2010: 296) explains, people have trouble believing that courses of action or behaviors that they find admirable are in fact damaging to society and, conversely, that actions that they believe to be "bad" are actually beneficial to society. Insofar as accommodating such a disturbing view can "drive a wedge between them and their peers, they have a strong emotional predisposition to reject it." In short, they find it easier to reject reality claims than to observe damage or destruction to their political worldview. History, in fact, abounds with such examples of "motivated reason."

If powerful belief systems are forced to confront problematic evidence, they seldom fade and disappear altogether (Kolberg 2017). Instead, they can develop cult status, even if marginalized. In the process, the believers come see the problem not as intrinsic to their belief or worldview, but rather a result of failures by biased political or scientific leaders to exercise the appropriate intellectual or scientific rigor. Instead of reconsidering their beliefs, as in the case of climate research, they prefer to shoot the messenger.

4.3 Fact Resistance: The Need *Not* to Know

In the case of post-truth, this has led to a perverse situation in which certain segments of these societies – the so-called "base" in Trump's America – have

hardened their ideas and beliefs to such a degree that they can be described as "fact resistant." Indeed, as Gitlin (2020:50) puts it, they "[live] in falsehood." Many of them know that the views they hold conflict with demonstrated facts, but they've learned to live with this cognitive disconnect. Research shows that a fair number of them understand that they support ideas that they do not themselves entirely believe in; that is, they do not wholly believe their own convictions. Some of them seem to rationalize discordant information, while others seek to spin or evade factual information that counters their beliefs. As Gitlin (2020:50) explains it, they have "a need not to know." Research on "cognitive dissonance," focused on such mental stress, demonstrates that when confronted with a conflict between evidence and beliefs, believers will tend to hang on to their beliefs if they are practically and emotionally invested in them.

Some admit that they willingly retain these false views, often based on lies, because they believe it will lead to a greater good. That is, many of them know that Trump tells lies, but accept this because he is seen to represent their last line of defense against what they view as a repugnant political system they've identified with the Democratic Party. Gitlin argues that it is not unlikely that Trump's base's commitment to him "can outlast many disappointments insofar as they can be blamed on the treachery of his unrelenting enemies" (Gitlin 2020: 59). It is a point dramatically reflected in their unwillingness to accept his loss of the 2020 presidential election. It is a reality that is not limited to those with low levels of education: it includes many conservatives with a college degree.

5 Emotion and Post-Truth: Living with Falsehoods

How do people convince themselves to believe in and act upon things that are not true? An important part of the answer relates to emotional commitments. Although this is a complicated topic that cannot be discussed here in detail, it is important to recognize that emotion is an essential component in helping people to paste over contradictory beliefs and falsehoods. Indeed, emotion is part of the definition of post-truth and thus discussion of its role is required, even if brief.

As we have already suggested, post-truth arguments can be understood as a fusing of emotion with information. Indeed, this can arguably be the definition of "truthiness," understood as an argument or claim conditioned by a particular emotional orientation. It refers to the accepting of a claim as true because it *feels* true, even though it is not supported by verified information or knowledge – that is, something that has the "feel of truth." Appeals to emotion – disconnected from factual details – are thus becoming more important in the

forming of public opinion than is demonstrable evidence. Emotional appeals, as noted, are often now juxtaposed to evidence-based policymaking.

There has been a long-standing lack of attention to the role of emotions in the social sciences, and in the field of public policy in particular, which has only begun to be corrected in more recent years. Although those in the practical world of politics have always recognized the emotional nature of political controversies, the social sciences traditionally sought to rule out emotion as "irrational" and thus not amenable to rigorous analysis. Indeed, much of the early history of the social sciences was devoted to substituting emotionally laden value issues with objectively verified knowledge. Today, the renewed attention in an era of post-truth can only be a welcome development, as an understanding of the role of emotion and passion is of critical importance for grasping post-truth politics (Durnova 2019).

To come to grips with the post-truth phenomena, we need to recognize that earlier understandings of the role of emotion are antiquated. We have subsequently learned, with significant help from neuroscience, that emotions are not necessarily irrational and problematic (Markus 2002). Rather, they can be meaningful responses – a form of "emotional sense-making" – that help people take notice of things, such as events, ideas, understandings and perceptions, that they consider important and usually in need of relatively immediate attention. Emotions can, for example, alert and prepare people for the appearance of dangerous enemies – "Mexican rapists" crossing the border – or they can help rally appreciation and affection for a particular political leader – as witnessed by the passionate demonstrations on the part of Trump's political base. If these people come to believe that the "deep state" is about to engineer a political overthrow of their duly elected leaders, they will appeal to Trump to save them.

5.1 Narrative Emotions as Mix of Feeling and Belief

Emotions can be analyzed in a number of ways. Particularly relevant for an understanding post-truth is an analysis of the role of emotions in stories, or "narrative emotions" (Keen 2015: 152–161). For example, from this perspective we can explore the ways that the political rhetoric of populist narratives is tied to particular emotional responses (Durnova 2019; Kleres 2010). Here, the theorizing of Nussbaum (2001) is helpful. She has illustrated how emotional influence works to shape the "inner landscape" of our political lives, both mentally and socially. Such inner emotional landscapes – right-wing populist or liberal progressive, for example – operate as deep dispositions toward political situations, particularly as they relate to group interests and values. If events point to political actions judged to be beneficial – "clean the swamp" –

the inner landscape generates positive feelings, and, conversely, worrisome feelings if the situation or event poses problems or dangers – for example, Hillary Clinton's pedophiles preying on young children.

There are, in this regard, good emotions that play constructive roles (compassion and love) and bad emotions (hate and anger) that lead to destructive consequences. In positive terms, Nussbaum (2001) points to the essential role of beneficial emotions for social solidarity, identify and harmony. This need for solidarity and group identity is often associated with basic emotions expressed by alienated people who feel that society has left them behind. Unfortunately, this need to assuage such feelings can render them susceptible to populist disinformation that plays to their biases in reassuring ways. Indeed, Trump regularly sought to exploit these emotional needs for political gain. This susceptibility, moreover, is perhaps even more likely for people locked down because of COVID-19. With little outside contact, many can only make supportive contacts with other anxious citizens online via social media.

5.2 Emotion and Intelligence

Further, emotions are themselves suffused with tacit knowledge. In Nussbaum's view, emotions are a composite mix of feelings and beliefs. They can thus serve as deeper sources of awareness, social understanding and critical judgment. Emotions can trigger thoughts and beliefs, but the latter can also be the initiators of emotions, and emotional responses are forms of intelligent reactions that can in important ways be dealt with through persuasion. This is a point demonstrated time and again in the disagreements over governmental measures to deal with COVID-19. For those who think that a societal lockdown is a secret strategy for elites to gain greater political control, the story itself can generate emotional outrage, which can lead to public protest in the streets, and even to taking guns to the state capitol. People are typically emotionally excited by things they consider to be unjust or wrong. The beliefs they hold may be "erroneous and their anger unreasonable but their behavior is intelligent and cognitive in the sense that it is grounded upon a belief which may be criticized and even altered by argumentation" (Fortenbaugh 1975: 17). But this possibility depends to a significant degree on a level of trust and commitment on the part of those manning the post-truth barricades. And trust is just what is missing.

Post-truth and the tribal politics to which it has given rise have, in short, dramatically thrown up emotional barriers that block the possibility of meaningful discourse. Fundamental to these impediments in modern social and political processes is the media, particularly social media. Through the mass

media, especially television and the internet, emotions play a large role in the communication of information. With the emergence of a commercially oriented entertainment format, even news reporting becomes something akin to an emotional construction of social reality. Truth, in this context, is often judged by the degree to which it *feels* genuine (Fischer 2019; MacIntyre 2018: 63–122). It is now a phenomenon closely related to the rise of post-truth culture.

6 Social Media and Disinformation

It would be difficult to underestimate the role of right-wing social media outlets in the distribution of false news. Writers such as Bennet and Livingston (2018: 122) describe such disinformation as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals." It involves "systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows due to strategic deceptions that may appear very credible to those who consume them."[4] While there are some radical left networks also distributing disinformation, the tendency is more common on the radical right. It emerges as part of a more general attack on the press, described by Trump as "the enemy of the people."

Attacking the press, to be sure, is not new. But Bennett and Livingston find a distinction between attacking the press and the contemporary politics of disinformation. Essentially, the latter is a strategy conceived to divide the information system itself, the result of which is now an underlying division between the mainstream media and those of the alternative conservative movement. People counted among the radical right in the United States, as well as in other lands, can now find competing social media advancing alternative versions of social and political reality.

In earlier eras there were comparatively fewer media channels through which official information passed. During those times, trust in institutions and the information they purveyed was much higher than today. As Bennett and Livingston explain (2018: 128), "the combination of higher trust and fewer public information sources enabled both authorities and the press to exercise more effective gatekeeping against wild or dangerous narratives from the social fringes or foreign adversaries." But the contemporary mix of volatile hate, disinformation, media outlets and institutional corrosion has facilitated oppositional groups in transitioning into destructive, undemocratic political forces in many countries, as the alternative social media has reached larger and larger followers, and served to assist populist movements in achieving significantly

[4] Disinformation differs from misinformation. Whereas misinformation is simply false regardless of intent, disinformation involves an deliberate intention to mislead or deceive.

higher level of electoral gains. Often facilitated by right-wing think tanks (Landry 2020), the essential goal of the mobilization of radical right groups has been the creation of "information silos" that seek to exclude and denigrate those who offer different views. These include, among other things, the spread of cultural stories that challenge the essential commitments to democratic freedoms, political tolerance and the norms of evidence and reason intrinsic to informed civic discussion.

The breakdown of authority in political institutions, together with an increase in alternative information channels (generating political myths for consumption by political tribe members), leads many people to seek out and support parties and movements removed from the mainstream, particularly on the right (Bennett and Livingston 2021). As these radical right movements reject the core institutions of the press and politics, often hostilely so, a political environment emerges that is conducive to the spread of mythologies, such as myths about climate change and COVID-19. Both the political left and the right have sought to bend the social media to serve their own purposes, but such efforts have been of far greater significance on the right than on the left. The emergence of what has been called the "media echo chamber" has its roots in the rise of conservative talk radio in the latter part of the 1980s, later to be dramatically ramped up by an astonishing array of social media platforms, including Twitter, radical websites, YouTube, Facebook, WikiLeaks and Astroturf think tanks, operated by an array of communications professionals, among others (Jamieson and Capella 2010; Farkas and Schou 2020).

6.1 Alternative Social Media as Post-Truth Response to Political-Cultural Upheaval

The post-truth phenomenon is, in short, better understood in terms of political struggles than in terms of intellectual debates about knowledge and epistemics, which is not to suggest that the latter are unimportant. Post-truth, as we discuss it today, has emerged from a convergence of nefarious events that is generally dated from 2016, but arguably with roots in the political deceptions that trace back to Bush's and Blair's fabricated justifications for the Iraq wars, if not earlier. In any case, the contemporary problem is anchored in a growing anxiety that has emerged around the world over the past decade, thanks in significant part to the destructive outcomes of neoliberal global markets, the hardships resulting from the financial meltdown of 2008, the emergence of migration jeopardizing some peoples' economic and social security, and the troublesome realities of climate change, to mention only the most obvious sources of angst (Latour 2018; McIntyre 2018).

While these existential worries had somewhat different origins in different places around the globe, the common anxieties result from the general feeling that things are not under control and are experienced as increasing levels of economic risk and social uncertainty. Many people have, in fact, seen their standard of living fall significantly, while others feel threatened by growing the migration they believe to be responsible for their social and economic precariousness. To this we need to add perceived levels of crime and violence, high costs of living, unaffordable health care, the decline in upward mobility, stagnant wages, automation and the deterioration of traditional family structures, among other factors. This has led to precarious degrees of distrust of the political elites and institutions taken to be responsible for the current turmoil, frequently portrayed as a crisis of liberal representative governance (Tomey 2016). As liberal political elites and the mainstream media have largely failed to adequately represent or portray the interests and concerns of the lower-middle and working classes, a political void has opened, which right-wing media could step into and exploit with alternative facts and narratives (Bennett and Livingston 2021). Here, no falsehood circulated by the right-wing social media has played a greater role than the idea that migrants are stealing jobs, are exploiting social welfare systems and are engaged in violent criminal acts, including raping white women.

6.2 Social Media and the Paranoid Style of Politics

This anxiety-driven search for new political narratives to explain these worrisome realities has led to widespread dissatisfaction with the politics and policies of the established political parties. Indeed, it has given rise to new political cleavages, often extreme enough to be referred to as "political tribes," especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. Driven by growing feelings of alienation, these tribes bring together people who share suspicions, and even emotional hostilities, toward both the ruling elites and the opposing tribes. It is not unusual, given the levels of estrangement, for conspiracy theories to emerge, as Richard Hofstadter showed decades ago in his book on the "paranoia style" of politics. In the case of climate change and COVID-19 in the United States, for example, it is framed as a deep state conspiracy aimed to impose a left-wing political agenda.

Despite the long history of paranoia-style conspiracies, Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019) find a difference between present-day conspiracy theories and those of yesterday. As conspiracies have shifted from the margins of society to mainstream politics, including the corridors of power, the demand for evidence and explanation has fallen away. Whereas it was normal in earlier

periods to seek out evidence in support of claims, the demand for explanation has gone. Now, the purveyors of conspiracies simply impose their own reality and reinforce it with constant repetition rather than evidence. As they put it, conspiracists simply circulate their claims under the cover of lots of "people are saying . . ."

Explaining why people are susceptible to conspiracy theories is challenging. A considerable amount of social and psychological research has attempted to answer this question (Moyer 2019). Whereas the deniers constitute no monolithic group with just one point of view (Bokat-Lindell 2021), a number of psychological features can be identified that help to explain the phenomenon. They include people who feel superior to their fellow citizens (especially those who feel down and out) and look for reasons to justify their superior status. Some believe they have access to information less known, even secret, that others – dumb or blind – do not possess, and feel obligated to make it known. There are also disadvantaged groups, especially the economically downtrodden and socially depressed, for whom it is important to have villains to blame for their situation. Conspiracy theories offer them an outlet to explain away their own hard luck and lack of social standing.

What has made this struggle with disinformation particularly pernicious is the rise of the new internet-based social media. If various elements of this post-truth bricolage could have been found in other times, what is distinctive now is the presence of social media and its ability to greatly speed up the circulation of political messages (typically anonymously unattached to their senders). This has been an essential – some would say *the* essential – feature of post-truth politics today. The new media – found on Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube internet platforms – send messages that can quickly go viral, circulating and recirculating at unprecedented speeds. Facilitated by the use of sophisticated algorithms and bots that collect and distribute information, the messages are fed to people – on both the political right and the left – in ways that either substantiate their established biases or create new ones. In the case of the radical right, they serve both unintentionally and intentionally to attract unknowing, but susceptible media consumers to right-wing websites that spew out hate messages that target Muslims, blacks, Jews, liberal politicians and others with inflammatory rhetoric. (Research shows that while young people are often the target of these efforts, people over 65 seem to be the most susceptible). The pervasiveness and repetition of the messages give them a sense of credibility – or, at least, they seed enough doubt in their followers to keep them tuned in. Indeed, the messages are intentionally designed to traffic in both "alternative facts" and outright falsehoods.