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BETWEEN DISINFORMATION TACTICS AND DECIPHERING STRATEGIES, TOWARDS A SEMIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF "FAKE NEWS" AND "ALTERNATIVE FACTS"

Abstract

From traditional to digital media, the growth of false information, hoaxes or rumors has recently crystalized in the formulas "fake news" or "alternative facts", which indicate a certain weakening of critical thinking. These formulas reveal that the public sphere experiences complex epistemological processes, an even more complex relationship to truth and a profound modification of alethurgies. This paper will analyze the "life" of false information in a changing media environment, first by defining what the terms "fake news" and "alternative facts" mean, before subsequently analyzing a recent case study involving different levels of false information and forgeries during the French election, the macronleaks. We will observe the ambiguous role of social networks and the strategies deployed by some actors to decipher false information. Therefore, our aim is to offer a semio-political analysis of "fake news" and "alternative facts" that will help us understand why we are so eager to believe in them, and what to do about them.

Keywords

Veridictory square; fake news; alternative facts; macronleaks; semiology; social networks.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book on the epistemology of knowledge, Gaston Bachelard stated that "knowledge of reality is a light that always cast shadows somewhere" but more interestingly that "reality is never 'what one may believe' but always what one should have thought"[1]. This definition of knowledge in the epistemological context of scientific enquiry resonate today when one think about the propagation of so-called "fake news" or "alternative facts", that some actors tend to promote, mostly in media and politics. For instance, since his investiture President Donald Trump is constantly harassing media and claiming that what they report is "fake" according to what he believes reality is – or should be. More recently, Florian Philippot, number 2 of the French nationalist party, tweeted false information from the "macronleaks" – a vast and broad smear campaign mitigating real leaked documents and forgeries – claiming that even if they are false "they may have been perfectly real", thus worth spreading and "truthful" enough to construct an ideological argument against Emmanuel Macron. From traditional to digital media, the growing number of false information, hoaxes or rumors have recently crystalized in the formulas "fake news" or "alternative facts", which indicate a certain weakening of crit-

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[1] G. Bachelard, *La formation de l'esprit scientifique*, Paris: Vrin, 1999, 304.

ical thinking. When one speaks about *truth*, one must also defines what isn't true, what is *lie, falsehood* or *secrecy*, and what ideological constructs are behind "fake news" and "alternative facts". These formulas reveal that the public sphere experiences complex epistemological processes, an even more complex relationship to truth and a profound modification of *alethurgies*, the revelation of truth.

The first part of this research is dedicated to exploring the definition of truth as well as the relationship between truth and its antonyms and associated concepts such as *lie*, *falsehood* or *secrecy*. From the rumor to the hoax, from the fabricated story to the simple "photoshoped" image, false information are meaningful signs[2] creating a specific rhetoric and aesthetic that need to be analyzed. At the crossroad of the scholastic tradition and a semiotic perspective, the veridictory square designed by Greimas and Courtes will help us to position and observe the different concepts[3]. Secondly, in this paper, we are also conducting a semiological analysis of the different categories of "fake news" or "alternative facts" that one may encounter, by observing the discourse, imageries, media, diffusion strategies, as well as the actors involved in their enunciation, publication or denunciation. We will work on different examples that will help us understand the complexity and historical density of false information and their semio-political signification as well as their techno-semiotic nature[4].

For instance, President Trump's and his administration's tweets and statement on media and facts recall on processes as old as democracy and question the evolution of democracy itself. In the last part of this paper, we will focus on the deciphering strategies engaged by several actors in order to counter disinformation tactics that others engage. We will observe the "macronleaks" which disturbed the last moments of the French presidential election and presented an interesting case of intertwined uses of fake news, alternative facts, real leaks in addition to foreign countries media and hackers interventions to destabilize Emmanuel Macron. Moreover, the analysis of the ambivalent role played by digital media and social networks will hold a special place in this research. If Facebook or Twitter seem to have accompanied the multiplication and the mass diffusion of false information, they also allow the development of faster and more effective verification mechanisms, thus creating a whole new *alethurgy* in which transparency plays a particular role.

2. THE VERIDICTORY SQUARE

Defining truth is a difficult process. In this paper, we choose to use Greimas's veridictory square to analyze the different forms of false information, hoaxes, rumors or "leaks" one can encounter. The veridictory square, although used by semioticians, recalls on the scholastic tradition which tried to distinguish the *false ontological* – something that is truly, by nature, false – from the *false intentional* – something that someone made false by design. The square also clarifies the relationship of the different concepts with each other by visually positioning them. It is thus an interesting tool both to characterize

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[2] R. Barthes, "Rhétorique de l'image", *Communications*, 4 (1964): 40-51.

[3] A. Greimas, J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris: Hachette, 1994, 454.

[4] F. Allard-Huver, N. Gilewicz, "Digital Parrhesia 2.0: Moving beyond Deceptive Communications Strategies in the Digital World", *Handbook of Research on Digital Media and Creative Technologies*, IGI Global, 2015, 404-416.

"fake news" and "alternative facts" and to understand what these new concepts involve regarding truth in the public sphere. Moreover, by marking the nuance, the different degrees and the distinction between the different terms of the square, Greimas and Courtés wanted to present in this figure the: "cognitive activity of an epistemic nature which [...] aims to achieve a veridictory position"[5]. The square allows the understanding of what "*simulacrums of truth*" are and how to position them in their relationship with truth itself.

The veridictory square is presented in the following way: two lines intersect, the first is that of *manifestation*, "appear / not-appear", the second is that of *immanence*, "being / non-being". On each side of the square stays a concept: *truth* on the top, *falsehood* on the bottom, *secrecy* on the right facing *lie* on the left. Each concept can be defined through the different lines and the side where it stands.

Figure 1 - *The veridictory square*
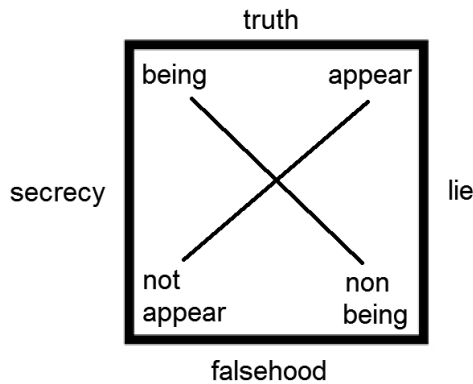
So, the secrecy is what *is*, but does *not appear*. Truth is, on the contrary, what *is* and *appears*. The lie also *appears*, but *is not*. Finally, the last term of the square is falsehood, something that *is not* and does *not appear*. Let us considers lies: they appear at the face of the world but do not exist by nature. On the opposite side, secrets are things that exist but remain hidden. Thus, lying is diametrically opposed to secrecy, which is important when we consider deciphering strategies as necessary new online activities for those who fight "fake news": one must use transparency to reveal secrecy by making it pass into the regime of *manifestation*. Transparency exposes the *non-being* nature of the lie which was already in full light, seen and known to all. Truth rests indirectly on these two sides: it *is* and it *appears*, and can be born at the same time through the revelation of what did *not appear* or through the revelation of the fallacious character of what *is* already in light, of what is not true. Transparency then appears as the activity capable of deciding on the nature of the elements we encounter. The activity of transparency is therefore the exercise of the faculty of judging, at least the premises of the faculty of judging, with the aim of determining what *is* or what *is not*. When seeking the truthfulness of the information we encounter online transparency helps exposing objects as well as determining the nature of these objects. Therefore, truth cannot be seen as a given but

[5] Greimas, Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, 413.

always as the result of a process which infers ruling on the immanence and the manife-station of the object.

Lastly, falsehood is an interesting and complex term in this figure. It is something that *is not* but also does *not appear*. It can be seen as a transitory state rather than a fixed category, as the false often tends to become a lie. Nonetheless, some actors may take advantage from this concept: they imply that the false concept is in fact a secret that is not yet revealed. By doing so, they exploit confusion surrounding not-yet revealed con-cepts to reinforce their ideological position and use false as strong rhetorical arguments. For example, false "leaks" disguise false information as revealed secrets and play with the public eagerness to uncover secret, to discover the hidden truth: the "macronleaks" is a clear example of such mechanism. On a historical perspective, Senator McCarthy's "list" of potential communists within the U.S. administration used similar mechanisms: always mentioned as a hidden truth but never fully disclosed or even attested, it allowed Senator McCarthy to draw power and influence in the U.S. public opinion by becoming the keeper of a secret allegedly crucial for public safety. Subsequently, how can we po-sition and describe "fake news" and "alternative fact"?

3. FROM THE *FAKE* TO THE *ALTERNATIVE,* FROM ASSUMED *FALSEHOODS* TO ASSURED *LIES*

"Fake news". The United States' President Donald Trump used this expression more than 50 times since his election. This expression is most associated with mainstream media networks or newspapers like CNN or *The New York Times* that, according to Do-nald Trump, propagate "conspiracy theories" and are "blind hatred".

On the first hand, "fake news" claims that what *is* and what *appears* is not the truth. It implies that other actors are lying or, worse, that their arguments are false, that they build their discourses on things that do not exist. Qualifying an information, a comment or an analysis, "fake news", therefore lead to push the opponent's argument down the *immanence* line from *being* to *non-being* and to see the opponent as a liar which discourse should not be trusted. Furthermore, suggesting the falsehood of the news is also a way to oblyrate the opponent's right to formulate statements in the public sphere as it implies that his discourse comes from a place of *non-being* and *non-appe-aring*, and should stay this way. When discussing the real number of supporters who showed for President Trump's Inaugural Ceremony, the White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer accused the media of propagating false information: "Some members of the media were engaged in deliberately false reporting"[6]. In order to support his claims, he suggested public transportation passengers' ridership without clear evidence where data came from. Furthermore, in the same press conference, Sean Spicer also declared that: "That's what you guys should be writing and covering, instead of sowing division about tweets and false narratives"[7]. By doing so, he engaged a debate about the veracity, the immanence level, of information circulating in the media as well as a critic of the journalists' right to publish information freely. He also indirectly stated that information he dismisses should never be published. Moreover, during his discourse at the Con-

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[6] Sean Spicer held a press conference, last modified May 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/21/sean-spicer-held-a-press-conference-he-didnt-take-questions-or-tell-the-whole-truth/?utm_term=.ae8478d03a1b.
[7] *Ibid.*

servative Political Action Conference at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, the 24th February 2017, Donald Trump stated that "the fake news doesn't tell the truth"[8]. He corroborated the idea that those using the concept of "fake news" are associated with falsehood, as a refutation of truth. The U.S. President further elaborated on this idea: "We're just not going to sit back and let, you know, false narratives, false stories, inaccurate facts get out there"[9]. Again, the *manifestation* and the circulation issues of contents one judges as "false" are questioned here. This strategy consequently polarizes the public opinion and makes Trump's opponents look like controversial actors. It has been used in the past by Republican actors in the Congress to make Democrats look like they were not respecting the bipartisan system. To make a proposition, a statement or a fact look *controversial* in the eye of the public is also related to the strength and unity one side shows fighting it:

> One crude way to judge a proposal is by how much support it's getting from the "other side". To most voters out in the vast middle, consensus across parties is a very strong indicator of acceptability. Conversely, if there is no support on the other side – if the proposal is controversial – there is something suspect about it[10].

Thus, if there is no support to a proposition or a fact that even actors on both side could find reasonable, it has a lot of chance to appear controversial or extreme for the public opinion. What then matters is the narrative created around the political proposition, not its content: "we live in post-truth politics: a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)[11]", and in our case, facts.

On the other hand, the expression "alternative facts" directly follows the idea of "fake news". Indeed, after Sean Spicer controverted presentation of the inauguration ceremony, Kellyanne Conway, a senior aide to the president, declared at NBC's Meet the Press: "You're saying it's a falsehood [...] Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that". Thus, "alternative facts" implies that something that *is not* – yet verified or may not be verified – can *be* and should appear in the light of a revelation against a supposed falsehood, against someone else's arguments. This concept moves, in the eye of those defending "alternative facts", from *secrecy* to *truth* to counter other facts. But if we consider carefully the concept in the light of the veridictory square, "alternative facts" are, at best, barefaced lies – they do not exist but stand in the light – or at worse, elaborated fake – they do not exist and are not showed, but the claim of their alleged existence is enough to use them as valid arguments. The willingness of some actors to believe in these alternative facts is worrying for the state of democracy. Indeed, in his 1992's essay, the playwright Steve Tesich prophesized a world in which citizens did not seek the truth anymore but willingly acknowledged the fact that truth isn't necessary anymore:

> We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the

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[8] White House Sean Spicer Briefing, last modified May 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/us/politics/white-house-sean-spicer-briefing.html.
[9] *Ibid*.
[10] D. Roberts, *Post-Truth Politics*, last modified August 21, 2017, http://grist.org/article/2010-03-30-post-truth-politics/.
[11] *Ibid*.

truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world[12].

Going back to the scholastic and semiotic analysis, *lie* and *falsehood* hold a special position in our research when we consider the actors behind "fake news" and "alternative facts". Lie and falsehood question how specific actors enunciate what they consider to be the truth or what they hold as the truth, in opposition to what other actors claim or believe. In a semiotic perspective, Greimas calls this relationship the "utterance contract" which is the contractual relationship between the enunciator, the utterance, and the receiver. This relation presupposes that the utterance is not true but appears to be true. Everything is in the subtle relation between veracity and credulity. Opacity does not necessarily harbor the truth, but transparency does not necessarily reveal truths. Sometimes opacity also houses lies and falsehood. The challenge of the utterance contract is to maintain the balance between the actors' beliefs, facts and the discourse they exchange:

> Discourse is that fragile place where truth and falsehood, lies and secrecy are inscribed and read; a more or less stable equilibrium arising from an implicit agreement between the two actors of the communication structure. It is this tacit understanding that is referred as the contract of veridiction[13].

This process of updating the truth through discourses is part of the long tradition of *alethurgy*, that is to say, a series of procedures and processes inscribed within discourses that lead to the revelation of truth. This process also recalls observing the relationship between the enunciator and the receiver, as the contract of veridiction seems to be denounced by some actors and questions the stability of the public sphere itself.

4. QUESTIONING VERACITY AND CHALLENGING TRUTH AS POLITICAL AGENDA

From an historical perspective, the propagation of false information and lies is nothing new. In pre- and post-war societies the collusion between mass communication, media and propaganda in the communication processes raised questions about the status of the opinion, considered manipulable, particularly among some researchers at the Frankfurt School. The birth of the modern habermassian public sphere in relationship with mass media was seen as tainted by the circulation of "alternative facts" such as, for example, the communist implication in the Reichstag fire in 1933. Consequently, political leaders have always been keen on manipulating facts to fit their political agenda and propose their own version of truth.

As we have seen truth is never a given but always the result of a process – an *alethurgy* – which is intimately linked with falsehood, secrecy and lies. At the very foundation of the public sphere and governmentality, truth is at the crossroad between being and appearing. The symbolic of this dialectic has been questioned for a long time and still questions the nature of the political leader. For instance, Machiavel gives great importance to the use of secrets, lies and make-believe for the sake of the leader. The

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[12] Post truth and its consequences, last modified August 21, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/post-truth-and-its-consequences-what-a-25-year-old-essay-tells-us-about-the-current-moment/.
[13] A. Greimas, *Du sens II*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983, 108.

chapter XVIII of the *Prince*, "How Princes should keep faith", theorized a pre-modern opinion and public relation strategies for political leaders:

> It is necessary, indeed, to put a good color on this nature, and to be skillful in simulating and dissembling. But men are so simple, and governed so absolutely by their present needs, that he who wishes to deceive will never fail in finding willing dupes[14].

For the philosopher Alexandre Koyré: "Political lie was born with the city itself"[15]. From the moment the political speech is exposed and constructed, deception and artifices are used. Initially conceived as the weapon of the weak who deceives its stronger opponent, lies and falsehood prove to be major elements of modern societies' communication, favored in their diffusion by the multiplication of supports and information sources. However, lies seem to have in some cases a facilitating virtue that elevate it to the rank of art in totalitarian regimes: "Myth is often preferable to science, and rhetoric speaks to passions, when demonstrations address intelligence". However, Koyré brings an interesting distinction between the different forms of lies. One must make the difference between lying as "*suggestion falsi*", a misleading suggestion, and lying as "*suppression veri*", suppression of the truth. This distinction is relevant when we try to understand the nuance between "fake news" and "alternative facts".

One the one hand, "alternative facts" suggests that truth is only a matter of point of views and that some unproven facts can be seen or perceived as the truth even if nothing sustain them like, for example, the number of people attending President Trump's inaugural ceremony. In this case, an alternative fact is a *suggestion falsi*. On the other hand, when President Trump qualifies his opponents of using "fake news" he implies that they are telling lies: "The Fake News Media works hard at disparaging & demeaning my use of social media because they don't want America to hear the real story!" and "it is very possible that those sources don't exist but are made up by fake news writers. #FakeNews is the enemy!"[16]. For him, those who speak against him are seen as suppressing the truth, "*suppressio veri*", and thus as enemies. Indeed, the violence of such statement manifests itself in the political decisions made by the Trump administration regarding mainstream press, for instance banning journalists access to a press conference by suggesting that they are "enemies": "It doesn't represent the people, it doesn't and never will represent the people, and we're going to do something about it".

Alexandre Koyre in his analysis suggested that in some conditions, some actors may see the uses of lies or false information as justified. In the context of conflicting situations, like war, the exceptional use of falsehood can be tolerated. For some actors, the radicalization of antagonisms can thus "psychologically" justify the use of lies in "normal" situations:

> Go further. Consume the break between "us" and "others". Let us transform hostility into an antagonism, in a way essential, founded in the very nature of things. Let us make our enemies threatening and powerful. It is clear that every group, placed thus in the midst of a world of resolute and irreconcilable adversaries, would see an abyss open between them and himself. An abyss that no bond, no social obligation could cross. It would seem obvious that in and for such a group, lying – a lie to the "others" of course – would not be simply a

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[14] N. Machiavelli, *Le Prince*, Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2000, 192.
[15] Koyré, *Réflexions sur le mensonge*, 1943, 9.
[16] http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/archive.

tolerated act, or even a simple rule of social behavior: it would become obligatory; it would be transformed into virtue[17].

Do we find in the context of the "fake news" and "alternative facts" these implicit justifications? What are the conditions that could justify the use of lies for some actors?

First, when the degree of opposition and ideological or even axiological distance between the actors become irreconcilable, some may see lies and false information as a rational tool. For example, in the case of Trump's relationship with the media, the opposition with some newspaper or networks like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or CNN, may be qualified as ideological and thus justifies a strong response.

Secondly, when some actors believe to be in a situation of weakness or in danger, lies become weapons. Following the election and the inaugural ceremony a wave of public protestations in the public space or in universities destabilized Trump administration and somewhat "ruined" its victory. In front of this massive public protest, "alternative facts" became a way to minimize the reality of the opposition.

Finally, the degree of exchange and the frequency of contacts and skirmishes between opponents reinforce the sentiment of aggression and the need for false justification: "Lying presupposes contact; It implies and demands trade"[18]. What better place than Twitter to start and animate written skirmishes: it is thus no surprise that "fake", "fake news" or "lies" find themselves among the most popular themes in Trump's tweets and serve the purpose to plant seeds of doubt in the public opinion or worse, to suppress truth itself. As Hannah Arendt asked: "Is it from the very essence of truth to be impotent and from the very essence of the power to be deceitful?"[19]

5. THE MACRONLEAKS: FALSE INFORMATION AND DECIPHERING STRATEGIES

Two days before the second turn of the French presidential election that opposed the centrist Emmanuel Macron and the French nationalist Marine Le Pen, and only a few hours before the end of official campaign, a massive amount of leaked data from En Marche – Macron political movement – was released on internet, first on the website pastebin[20] and with numerous links to download (torrents). Under the hashtag #Macronleaks, the news rapidly circulated on Twitter and during the following days emails, accounts data or even official documents from En Marche were scrupulously investigated by netizen. This raised a lot of interest on the web and traditional watchdog as well as leaking sites like WikiLeaks also propagated the information. We can observe information circulating, its accompanying narratives and most interestingly the deciphering processes used to identify if the leaked data are false or not. Just after the leak, the campaign team confirmed that most of the documents were, indeed, real documents stolen during a recent hack in a clear attempt to influence the results of the election (En Marche, 2017). But a few hours later, many false documents, obvious forgeries, also circulated online under the same hashtag, some on Twitter and some on famous forums like 4chan. These do-

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[17] Koyré, *Réflexions sur le mensonge*, 4.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] H. Arendt, "Vérité et politique", in *La Crise de la culture*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972, 290.
[20] Happening Macron Fucked up, Exposed as a Fraudster, last modified August, 22, 2017, https://pastebin.com/gLpwpU2U.

cuments blurred the line between real revelations about the campaign team's work and strategy, and "fake news" created for the occasion.

In previous articles, we observed different semiotic levels of meaning and questions one has to ask in order to understand the nature of a statement, here, tweets and data circulating online and their accompanying discourses[21]: Where does the statement occur (Medium level)? How is the statement enunciated (Document level)? What does the statement say (Text level)? And who said it (Discourse level)? Actors who analyzed documents, emails, tweets and discourses held during the Macronleaks thus focused on different levels of meaning to determine the nature – truthful or fallacious – of the leak and the documents inside.

For instance, one document – a photography of a text – supposedly proved the influence of En Marche's supporters in a violent manifestation against Marine Le Pen. The text suggesting to "kill" her was allegedly sent to all supporters in Reims and a copy of it found on an Iphone. The number 2 of the French Front National, Florian Philippot, tweeted the photography asking for explanations[22]. Internet users as well as the website hoaxbusters then proved that the clock format on the text could not originate from an Iphone conversation but also showed how one can easily create a fake Iphone conversation[23]. In this case, the fake was very clumsy and the attempt to destabilize Macron not very convincing. Those who examined the documents questioned both the veracity of the content (the message carried by the text) and the veracity of the document itself (the clock format of an Iphone's text). Nonetheless, the comments made by Florian Philippot when confronted about the fact that he relayed such obvious "fake news" were explicit: "If you are referring to the Reims demonstration, the problem is not to have relayed a text that everyone thought was true. Everybody thought it was true at first"[24]. The fake thus became an alternative fact that could have been real, that could have been the truth.

Another interesting example is the supposed offshore account of Emmanuel Macron. In the same batch of documents, a bank statement from the First Caribbean was signed by the candidate and proved that he had a hidden offshore account. A few hours later, several French news site as well as anonymous users from 4chan showed the harsh quality of the fake. A graphist who opened the pdf document on Adobe Illustrator even found out that the counterfeiter forgot to "merge" the different layers of their original forged document[25]. The fake combined real names coming from other leaked documents and fake signatures or information. Those who leaked the false documents hence hoped to create confusion by implying that these fakes were in fact revealed secrets. On a semiological perspective, they created a false document but incorporated real text in order to blur the lines. The leakers play on the different degrees of truth and those of falsehood, of secrecy and lies. According to the veridictory square, we find ourselves in a situation where lies, *non-being* and *appearing* are at the heart of the public sphere and within the framework of a political system that favors the existence of these lies. Hannah Arendt distinguishes two forms of lies: on the one hand, the "traditional lies" linked to secrets

[21] F. Allard-Huver, N. Gilewicz, "Digital Parrhesia 2.0: Moving beyond Deceptive Communications Strategies in the Digital World", 409.

[22] P. Philippot, last modified May 15, 2017, https://twitter.com/f_philippot/status/860491942643290112.

[23] Hoaxbuster, last modified May 15, 2017, http://www.hoaxbuster.com/print/hoaxliste/la-palme-du-ridicule

[24] Je n'ai pas relayé de fake news, last modified May 15, 2017, http://www.bfmtv.com/politique/rumeurs-macronleaks-je-n-ai-pas-relaye-de-fake-news-affirme-philippot-1159413.html.

[25] Compte offshore, last modified May 15, 2017,http://www.numerama.com/politique/254983-compte-offshore-demmanuel-macron-une-intox-venue-de-4chan.html.

and "data that had never been made public"; on the other hand, "modern lies" which "deal effectively with things that are by no means secrets"[26].

Figure 2 - *Deconstructing the fake*
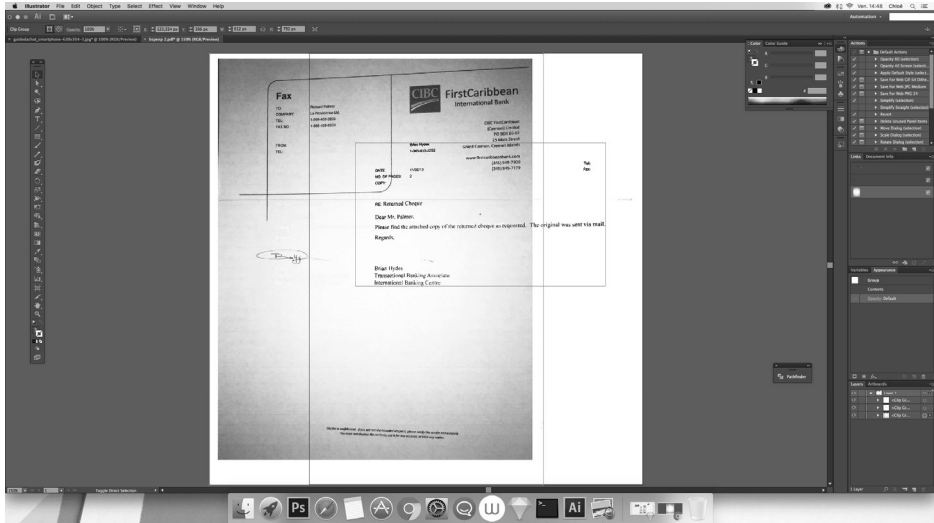
However, if most of the forged documents followed a clear political goal, some of them had a "lighter" purpose and were obviously created as jokes. For instance, in a fake email, the general secretary of En Marche states his love for "yaoi", "progressive metal" and confesses that he binged watched the ten seasons of *Doctor Who*! Similarly, another email claims that Emmanuel Macron is going to impose the expression "chocolatine" instead of "pain au chocolat" in France. Of course, Emmanuel Macron's email account was noticeably a joke: "em_UltraBG.Macron@en-marche.net": "BG" meaning "good-looking guy" in slang![27]

On the medium level, the circulation of the leaks was also accompanied by numerous tweets and discourse especially by Wikileaks who commented and analyzed the data. WikiLeaks plays an ambivalent role in the leak: on one side, it first questioned the nature of the leaked documents, but on the other side suggested that the timing of the leak could only harm... Russia[28]. By doing so, Wikileaks creates its own narrative, its own discourse around the leak and engages itself in a one-upmanship over other actors who tried to understand the data and the leaks. Furthermore, after the leak, Wiki-Leaks conducted a complex study ofthe techno-semiotic nature of the leaked emails to determine which were originals and which were fake[29]. Since the leak, the platform released more than 21.000 "real" authentic emails from Emmanuel Macron's campaign

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[26] Arendt, "Vérité et politique", 291.
[27] Macronleaks, la grande foire aux "Fake News", last modified May, 15, 2017, http://www.liberation.fr/elections-presidentielle-legislatives-2017/2017/05/09/macronleaks-la-grande-foire-aux-fake-news_1567868.
[28] Macronleaks, mais à quoi joue WikiLeaks?, last modified August, 21, 2017, http://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/macronleaks/macronleaks-mais-a-quoi-joue-wikileaks_2180819.html.
[29] Macron Campaign Emails, last modified August, 21, 2017, https://wikileaks.org/macron-emails/.

team[30]. Nonetheless, those who leaked the documents leant on nowadays information consumption and social media uses to spread the idea that Macron was hiding the truth about his campaign. The exchange of tweets during the leaks is typical of the tendency to share information that are "crowd-curated" rather than curated by specialists like editors, and most of the links shared are not read by those who share them: "This is typical of modern information consumption. People form an opinion based on a summary, or summary of summaries, without making the effort to go deeper"[31].

6. CONCLUSION

The issues raised by post-truth's techniques and rhetoric meet the concerns raised by Colin Crouch when describing the situation of our democratic countries in what he calls a post-democratic era:

> Under this model, while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professional experts in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. […] Behind this spectacle of the electoral game politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites which overwhelmingly represent business interests[32].

Being a businessman and a Reality TV star, Donald Trump interestingly masters the art of spectacle as well as represents himself and other business interests at play in the political game. Telling false truths, deceiving and smearing the opinion is thus nothing negative, it is part of the "spectacle", a sort of political wrestling in which the U.S. President already illustrated himself: "the virtue of all-in wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess[33]".

Figure 3 - *#FraudNewsCNN*

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[30] WikiLeaks publie l'intégralité des "Macron Leaks" avec moteur de recherche intégré, last modified August, 21, 2017, https://www.marianne.net/politique/wikileaks-publie-l-integralite-des-macron-leaks-avec-moteur-de-recherche-integre.

[31] http://datascience.columbia.edu/new-study-highlights-power-crowd-transmit-news-twitter>.

[32] C. Crouch, *Coping with Post Democracy*, London: Fabian Society, 2000, 1.

[33] R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1991, 15.

In all these cases, social networking websites played an ambivalent role: on the one side Twitter and Facebook propagated the fake news and popularized the hashtag Macronleaks, especially in the French Nationalist networks, but on the other hand, they also helped refutations circulate more easily. Both originate nonetheless from a form of "negative citizenship" recalling on the negative side of transparency: "the negative activism of blame and complaint, where the main aim of political controversy is to see politicians called to account, their heads placed on blocks, and their public and private integrity held up to intimate scrutiny"[34]. Ultimately, fake news and alternative facts' propensity to circulate and to be easily believed is linked to the complexity of the relation between truth and public opinion itself. Hannah Arendt observed that the discursive and "fluctuating" or even consensual character of public opinion poses a problem to the truth, or rather to the nature of truth itself:

> Rational truth illuminates the human understanding, and factual truth must serve as a matter for opinions, but these truths, although they are never obscure, are not transparent in any case, and it is of their very nature to refuse to later elucidation, as it is the nature of the light to refuse to be brought to light[35].

By criticizing, doubting and even challenging mainstream media, those who believe in alternative facts may be seen as liars, conspiracy theorists or simple minded, nonetheless some of them actuality try to exercise their judging – inappropriately or even for false motives – and genuinely question the ontology of truth and its limits in our "transparent society"[36].

[34] Crouch, *Coping with Post Democracy*, 4.
[35] Arendt, "Vérité et politique", 292
[36] G. Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, London: Polity, 1992, 129.