

SHORT-CIRCUITING PUBLICITY

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European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 852205). This publication reflects only the author's view, and the Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

Nils C. Kumkar: "Short-Circuiting Publicity", in: Pierre-Héli Monot, David Bebnowski, Sakina Shakil Gröppmaier (eds.): *Activist Writing: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, Zürich: intercom Verlag (2024), 39–50.

Is there a crisis of truth? Do we still live in a shared reality or do we now live in a fragmented public of isolated filter bubbles? Has critique run out of steam or is the fact-checker the critic's newest incarnation? The epistemological questions around the phenomenon of so-called "alternative facts" raised in the academic and broader public alike could hardly be more fundamental. The following essay does not set out to answer them; rather, it considers the very profundity of these questions: What is it that is so deeply irritating about alternative facts?

I begin with a reading of Bruno Latour's "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?,"¹ his urtext on critique and its discontents in light of what is known as the "post-truth condition," arguing that this talk came to have a profound influence on subsequent discussions of alternative facts because he conceptualized them as being a form of critique, which foreshadowed critical social science's unease vis-à-vis alternative facts.

Developing a more media-centered sociological perspective on the problem of comparing the two types of "critique," I further delineate this supposed functional equivalence of classical critique in the form of the pamphlet and the new type of critique, alternative facts, as two ways of communicatively challenging the *reality of reality*.² I argue that the pamphlet has to be understood as an element of the figuration of *activist-pamphlet-public*, in which the activist is rooted in counterpublics but established in a specific social role by entering into the public via the pamphlet (and vice versa). Building on my empirical and theoretical research on the communicative function of alternative facts,³ this essay will then argue that social media has blurred the demarcation that had hitherto stood for the politicization of communication. By short-circuiting everyday communication with public discourse, it has simultaneously politicized quasi-private and milieu-specific vernacular forms of interaction and depoliticized public acts of "speaking up."

Following this observation, the article will develop a new perspective on the phenomenon of alternative facts as a symptom of the structural transformation of the public sphere. While it is often assumed that alternative facts are able to flourish due to the intransparency of social media communication, whether due to algorithmically curated radicalization trajectories, filter bubbles, or a lack of media competency,⁴ this article takes the opposite stance. I argue that it is precisely the transparency of social media discourse, in which everything is potentially the object of public discourse and therefore must be assumed to be known, that makes

1 Bruno Latour: "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", in: *Critical Inquiry* 2/30 (2004), pp. 225–248.

2 Luc Boltanski: *Soziologie und Sozialkritik: Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2008*, Berlin: Suhrkamp (2010), p. 152.

3 Nils C. Kumkar: *Alternative Fakten: Zur Praxis der kommunikativen Erkenntnisverweigerung*, Berlin: Suhrkamp (2022).

4 A very illustrative example of these – often implicit – assumptions concerning the causes of the contemporary pathologies of public discourse are Habermas's recent writings, which simply assume them to be driving the "new structural transformation of the public sphere." Jürgen Habermas: "Überlegungen und Hypothesen zu einem erneuten Strukturwandel der politischen Öffentlichkeit", in: *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?*, ed. by Martin Seeliger, Sebastian Seivignani, Baden-Baden: Nomos (2021), pp. 470–500.

the articulation of alternative facts an expedient and probable strategy for getting around inconvenient truths. Confronted with a construction of reality that is in many senses more solid and far-reaching than ever before, they allow a ducking out of antagonistic normative conflicts in which one would be on the losing side if the shared factual basis of conflict were to be validated by both parties. In this sense, the much-proclaimed era of “post-truth” is not so much a crisis of truth, but rather a crisis of public discourse which, at the very moment when its ideals of transparency and synchronicity of communication seem within reach, encounters the limits of understanding.

CRITIQUE’S DISCONTENT

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th U.S. president in 2016, together with what is commonly referred to as the Brexit referendum, sent shockwaves through the political discourse. And one important reason for this was that the blatant disregard that Trump and the Brexiteers showed for the facticity of their statements, a disregard that had been widely criticized and ridiculed, failed to hinder their success. Could it even be that their insistence on alternative facts not only did not hinder, but in fact allowed them to win? How to argue with (or about) truth claims that fly in the face of what in the public discourse is commonly assumed, scientifically validated, and institutionally authorized – such as insisting that Barack Obama was not born in the USA, even when his birth certificate is in the public domain, that the very existence of climate change is scientifically controversial, or that Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony drew the largest crowds ever recorded?

Bruno Latour’s *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?*, a talk held more than a decade before the discourse on alternative facts peaked with the election of Donald Trump, became one of the most-cited articles in the debate on post-truth and alternative facts. It is plausible to assume that this has less to do with its philosophical niceties or its suggested ways forward, and more to do with its diagnosis of the problem itself: “the danger [is] no longer [...] coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact – as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the past – but from an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases!”⁵ Critique ran out of steam because it became universalized, because it is aimed at critics and their “good matters of fact.” Latour thereby identified a key problem in the debate surrounding alternative facts – not only a decade early but also in a manner more theoretically nuanced than many versions of this argument developed since then. It is therefore worthwhile, and not only because of this text’s prominence, to address its argument in a little more detail.

The essay’s starting point is that what we would now call alternative facts – in Latour’s case: the 9/11 Truth movement and climate change denial – could

5 Latour: “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” (2004), p. 227.

be read as critique. It is this formal homology between the *problem* of so-called “post-truth” and the very *solution* that critiques of ideology once offered that allowed the old front lines of the science wars to be re-established in the debates on social constructivism and alternative facts. Unlike more polemical versions of the argument, Latour does not blame expanding skepticism toward the basic concept of a shared understanding of reality on “postmodernity”. He does, however, discern a problem in the fact that the duo of social criticism and skepticism seem to share a similar form. The solution for him is to shift the register of critique itself – away from “matters of fact” and toward “matters of concern.”

There is a certain hastiness in this homogenization of alternative facts and other forms of social critique with regard to their actual form – but perhaps an even more striking consideration concerns how we are even able to tell them apart in order to compare them in the first place. As already indicated in the sentence cited above, the rise of alternative facts is presented as the rise of “bad” critique, which first and foremost signifies critique employed by the wrong party. The whole talk is permeated with martial metaphors.⁶ For example, Latour speaks of alternative facts as “weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party”⁷ but he is suspiciously silent on what defines the parties at war, aside from fighting each other. The talk seems to simply take it as given that the reader will implicitly understand whom he is talking about when he refers to “us” and “them,” those who traditionally did the critiquing and those who now deploy these weapons against “us,” loosely coupled with the political “left” and “right” (concepts never mentioned in the text) through the examples offered, and perhaps it has to remain obscure since it is the blind spot of the observation itself: Because its key distinction is the distinction of us vs. them, the shift of our weaponry into the wrong hands, this distinction cannot itself be meaningfully observed.

Yet this is somewhat unsatisfying for it begs the question as to why the problem identified is a *problem* at all: why should we redesign our weaponry just because the enemy has started to deploy it as well? Should this not – to stick to the martial vocabulary – mainly be a question of firepower? If the enemy uses it as well, could this not very well be a compliment being paid to the armorer?

A more promising indication of what could help us to get beyond this somewhat stale and decisionist differentiation of us vs. them is an observation in the text that is more formal in nature. Occasionally, Latour seems to reserve the concept of critique proper for us, as in when he speaks of alternative facts as a form of “instant revisionism”⁸ and not of instant criticism, or when he speaks of conspiracy theories as bearing “our trademark: *Made in Criticalland*,”⁹ indicating that they are not really to be understood as truly critical critique, but rather as criticism re-aimed at critique itself (what else could it mean if the weaponry bearing

6 In an interview with *Science* in 2017, he doubles down on this martial rhetoric, insisting that “we are indeed at war.” See: Jop Vrieze: “Bruno Latour, a Veteran of the ‘Science Wars,’ Has a New Mission”, in: *Science*, www.science.org/content/article/bruno-latour-veteran-science-wars-has-new-mission (October 10, 2017).

7 Latour: “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” (2004), p. 230.

8 Latour: “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” (2004), p. 228.

9 Latour: “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” (2004), p. 230.

this trademark is smuggled into enemy territory, which consequently is not “criticalland”), or when he introduces his idea of “matters of concern” by identifying it as “the next task for the critically minded.”¹⁰

If we follow this lead, (and this essay contends that we should), this necessarily entails a shift of perspective. Instead of asking how one ought to reformulate the concept of critique in order for it to be clearly set apart from the critique that the bad guys are using, we should ask how critique is transformed when it has apparently changed hands. Can we formulate a distinction between what is idealized as the true, *critical critique* of yesteryear and the *uncritical critique* that is the object of our current concerns?

To differentiate between the two forms of critique, I would like to consult yet another French theorist of critique who – also prior to the official onset of public panic about alternative facts – investigated the formal affinities between critical social theory and conspiracy theories, albeit principally in the guise of fiction. According to Luc Boltanski, the function of conspiracies in spy novels is the “*construction of reality*.”¹¹ Thus, conspiracy theories (which, by definition, take a critical stance toward the conspiracies they are theorizing about, which sets them apart from beliefs in benevolent hidden actors like Santa Claus, his elves and their collusion with parents) aim at deconstructing reality, which is precisely what Boltanski defines as the function of criticism: to question the reality of reality itself. Unlike Latour, however, he presents us with a more nuanced sociological concept of what he understands as reality: an institutionalized account of “what is the case” – a necessary precondition of coordinating actions and interpretations of the “world” in complex, differentiated societies, while the world, nonetheless, is always exceeding this very reality.

Both conspiracy theories and detective stories take this excess as their starting point whenever seemingly nonsensical “events” challenge our perception of reality. However, while the latter sets out to “repair reality” by dint of interpretation (the detective undertakes to solve the case, thereby re-inscribing the nonsensical event, qua re-interpretation, into our concept of reality), the conspiracy theory plays (more or less joyfully) with the possibility of reality itself being the “crime,” something that is made up in order to cover up a truer, more basic reality. Thus, in both cases, the reality of reality is called into question. In one case, however, we end up with a richer, more elaborate understanding of reality, while in the other, we end up with a reality whose reality status is called into question. Even if one insists on calling what happens in both genres “critique,” one would nonetheless have to concede that they are very different forms of critique.

PAMPHLETS AND INTELLECTUALS

I will now take up two very subtle hints from Latour’s talk – namely that alternative facts seem to function as a kind of “instant revisionism,” might be “miniaturized

10 Latour: “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” (2004), p. 232.

11 Luc Boltanski: *Rätsel und Komplotte: Kriminalliteratur, Paranoia, moderne Gesellschaft*,

like computers have,” and that they resemble a popularized form of criticism.¹² Although these indications should not be taken at face value (good criticism is slow, handwritten, and academically educated), they do lead us to ask important sociological questions, namely concerning the (medial and communicative) form through which criticism is articulated and the kind of social role that is associated with writing critique.

For Boltanski, the archetypal example of the critic challenging the reality of reality is the *pamphleteer*. His pamphlets are “messages in a bottle,” addressed to the public, deriving their authority from the pamphleteers’ subjective experience, which is summoned to confront the reality of the institutions.¹³ In other words, the pamphleteers are intellectuals-as-critics, engaged in a very peculiar act of translation: they transform elements of their experience into a problem of institutional reality by proposing it to be a matter of public concern. It is not just that their subjective experience is unacknowledged in public discourse, but that their subjective experience bears witness to an aspect of the world that is barred from the reality constructed in this discourse – which makes the pamphlet potentially explosive criticism.

This form of critique is therefore intimately intertwined with the ascent of mass media and the establishment of “the public” as an arena in which the reality of reality can be meaningfully problematized. Yet the public also depends on this very reality of reality, making it as much the object as it is the audience of the intervention of the pamphleteers. They can only be pamphleteers by referring to an “outside” of this very public for which they are raising their voice – and be it only by lending their voice to a postulated “party itself,” the “specter” of which is haunting public imagination, as the Manifesto of the Communist Party declares in its famous opening stanzas.¹⁴ In this sense, pamphleteering is a liminal practice, and the constellation of the pamphlet and the intellectual constitutes a form of structural coupling of the mass-media public and its environment that allows for the reality construction of the former to be productively irritated by the latter. It is a significant part of the work of the “detectives” of the critical social sciences, among others, to take up the challenges raised by pamphlets and to reintegrate them into the social self-image of the institutionalized construction of reality.

Using the pragmatist-Hegelian vocabulary developed by American philosopher Robert Brandom, we can understand critique in this sense as social inquiry, as a form of developing and bettering the institutionalized representation (reality) of the world via the experience of error.¹⁵ The pamphleteer “makes public” what has hitherto not been integrated into the realm of the real, thereby creating an incompatibility, and public discourse reacts by processing this incompatibility as conflict. The pamphleteering event is therefore the collaborative, social process-

Berlin: Suhrkamp (2013), p. 301, translation NK, emphasis in the original.

12 Latour: “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” (2004), p. 228ff.

13 Boltanski: *Soziologie und Sozialkritik* (2010), p. 152, translation NK.

14 Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: “Manifest der kommunistischen Partei”, in: *MEW (Marx-Engels-Werke)*, vol. 4, Berlin: Dietz (1960 [1848]), pp. 459–493, p. 461.

15 See Robert B. Brandom: *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2019), pp. 63–106.

ing of the irritation caused by public discourse: pamphleteers and experts, organic and traditional intellectuals, critics and scientists – all these figurations capture the political and epistemological processing of irritation-as-conflict. How this conflict is resolved, of course, is a contingent question that rests on, amongst other things, the ability of the institutions to process irritation, the legitimacy the pamphleteers can mobilize for their truth claims, and the public's capacity to “forget” conflict. In principle, the pamphlet can just as well be forgotten as it can shatter the very foundation of reality or trigger only marginal changes. But it is critique in a meaningful sense precisely because it contains the potential for a transformation of reality that hinges on two very basic systemic conditions: an integrated public and the possibility of this integrated public's discourse to process its relationship with its environment via the re-entry of so-called “counterpublics.”

ANTI-CRITIQUE

It may at first seem as if identifying this basic structure is an empty theoretical exercise; after all, did I not reproduce exactly the standard description of alternative facts? Elements of alternative reality constructions, created and validated in self-affirming filter bubbles and transposed into public discourse, where they challenge the established wisdom of scientific or social truth? Have I not simply replicated Latour's dilemma of critique in the wrong hands? My research on alternative facts has led me to a different conclusion: measured against this basic structure of critique as social inquiry, alternative facts are not the functional equivalents of pamphlets in the sense outlined above. Contrary to what Latour leads us to believe, alternative facts are not critique in the wrong hands – indeed they are not critique at all. And this also allows us to point out differences in how critique and alternative facts relate to their respective communicative “infrastructures.”

We might begin with the function of critique as precipitating social inquiry via the process of error. Whatever example we choose from the multitude of alternative facts that have plagued the political discourse in the last decades, none of them has substantially altered our understanding of the reality they explicitly challenged.¹⁶ The practical consensus on the reality of climate change has not been adapted or abandoned because of the “reports” of the Non-Governmental International Panel on Climate Change (one of the most vocal contrarian organizations set up to counteract the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). We do not now know that Donald Trump's inauguration ceremony drew more participants than originally reported. Donald Trump did lose the presidential election in 2020 and even those journalists who reported sympathetically on his claim that the election was “stolen” now seem to have always known that this was not the case.¹⁷ The Coronavirus was not the influenza virus of 2020. The US

¹⁶ Of course, they altered implicit assumptions about reality, such as the widespread illusion of an expertocratic transfer of knowledge from science to politics, but this is not due to their form as critique and can therefore be ignored.

¹⁷ Stuart A. Thompson, Karen Yourish, Jeremy W. Peters: “What Fox News Hosts Said

government did not blow up the Twin Towers in 2001. We can observe in the mid-term that neither scientific nor political discourse incorporated any of those alternative truth claims as reality in the sense outlined above, even as an explicated and relevant possibility.

From this perspective, the over-hastiness of Latour's homogenization of alternative facts and critique consists in the ignoring of their respective processual quality as communicative phenomena. If we focus not only on what is said, but on what difference saying this makes in its respective communicative context, the difference between the two genres becomes apparent – and this difference does not have to rely on identifying them with any political party. It is true, on the level of their explicit propositional content, that both alternative facts and critique do challenge the reality of reality. However, while the latter dynamizes reality in the sense of a social inquiry, the former seems to do the exact opposite: they – for the moment – stall the processing of irritating information. Upon closer inspection, it is a shared property of all the alternative facts mentioned thus far that they are not so much about “what happened” as about “what *did not* happen”: man-made climate change, terrorists attacking the United States, a small crowd gathering at the inauguration ceremony, the deselection of Donald Trump, a pandemic plaguing the world, etc.

They may be highly irritating because they are incompatible with the inferences of institutionalized reality construction and, if followed through, would have catastrophic consequences for this reality construction: the laws of physics would probably have to be reformulated, the electoral system of the USA would be corrupt beyond repair, the newsrooms of almost all media would have to be restaffed – but claims that those measures are necessary are barely heard beyond fringe conspiracy theory sects and the populist rumblings of election campaigns.¹⁸ These consequences are “theoretical” in the colloquial sense of the word – and it is a rather typical example of *scholastic fallacy*¹⁹ to conclude that any actor suggests enacting those consequences practically, simply because (s)he articulated those claims.

Alternative facts have a rather conservative direct impact: not only do they not challenge reality in the sense of a lasting impact on its inferential structure, but they in fact cushion reality against the changes implied by the very fact those alternative facts are denying. We might, for the moment, ignore the fact that Trump was only elected by a small minority and not carried into office by a populist mass movement, laying bare both the vanity of his self-portrayal as a populist leader and the capacity of the electoral system to produce such a freak outcome. Or we might for now ignore the fact that addressing climate change would call for dra-

Privately vs. Publicly About Voter Fraud”, in: *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/02/25/business/media/fox-news-dominion-tucker-carlson.html (February 25, 2023).

¹⁸ In those instances, however, the catastrophic nature of the consequences to be enacted is a function of the articulation of the alternative facts – here, their actual propositional content becomes secondary to their mobilizing and socializing the affects of the “great awakening” celebrated on those occasions.

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu: *Meditationen: Zur Kritik der scholastischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp (2001).

matic economic restructuring (at least), paradoxically comforted by the fact that “one does not really know.” We might rightfully shy away from radical measures aimed at curbing the spread of Coronavirus because evidence as to the relative impact of different measures and the lethality of the virus is still ambiguous, etc.

And this can be observed not only from the perspective of their discursive functioning – after all, one could easily claim that the majority of pamphlets and other criticisms have just as little impact on the social construction of reality: they are simply relegated to the dustbin of historical debates, waiting to be re-actualized or simply forgotten. But unlike in the case of alternative facts, this is not a defining feature of pamphlets; rather it just means that they have failed or their moment has passed. Once we are sensitized to this aspect of the communicative form of alternative facts, it becomes apparent even on the level of the articulated propositional content of alternative facts. I would like to illustrate this using the very prominent example that gave the phenomenon its name.

In a press briefing on January 17, 2021, press secretary Sean Spicer disputed media reports of a relatively small crowd being present at Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony.²⁰ A day later, Kellyanne Conway, an advisor to Trump, gave an interview to NBC News in which she pushed back against the question as to why Spicer had made misleading claims about the size of the crowd, insisting that he had not lied, but rather that he had presented alternative facts, and the rest is history. The rather spontaneous coinage of a neologism²¹ “ushered in the era of ‘alternative facts’.”²²

The memory of this press briefing is shaped by the press reaction to it, which was mainly to refute its content as lies,²³ glossing over the very peculiar form in which these “lies” were presented. Therefore, let me briefly sum up what Spicer said with regard to the crowd size at the inauguration.²⁴

First, the problem he seeks to address is formulated as follows: “photographs of the inaugural proceedings were intentionally framed in a way, in one particular tweet, to minimize the enormous support that had gathered on the National Mall.” For Spicer, the object of contention is therefore not a concrete number to be contested, but rather the supposed downplaying of support.

Second, and more importantly for the purpose of this essay, the way he processes this problem also indicates that arguing about the actual crowd size is but

20 For a more detailed discussion of the incident, see: Kumkar: *Alternative Fakten* (2022), pp. 48–58.

21 Kellyanne Conway retrospectively tried to walk back on it, minimizing its meaning to that of a different perspective on shared facts, like the question of whether a glass of water is half full or half empty. See Olivia Nuzzi: “Kellyanne Conway Is a Star”, in: *New York Magazine*, www.nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/kellyanne-conway-trumps-first-lady.html (March 18, 2017).

22 Rebecca Sinderbrand: “How Kellyanne Conway Ushered in the Era of ‘Alternative Facts’”, in: *Washington Post*, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/how-kellyanne-conway-ushered-in-the-era-of-alternative-facts/ (January 22, 2017).

23 e.g., Jill Abramson: “‘Alternative Facts’ Are Just Lies, Whatever Kellyanne Conway Claims”, in: *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/23/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts-lies (January 24, 2017).

24 This is based on the Politico transcript of the press briefing, see: “Transcript of White House Press Secretary Statement to the Media”, in: *Politico (blog)*, www.politico.com/story/2017/01/transcript-press-secretary-sean-spicer-media-233979 (January 21, 2017).

one way to address *this* problem. Concretely, he makes the following claims: (1) white floor coverings made the crowd seem smaller than in previous inaugurations; (2) fences and metal detectors used at the entrances kept many people from entering the Mall; (3) no one has any reliable numbers on the attendance; (4) indicators one could use as proxies for crowd size actually suggest a comparatively large inauguration; (5) “This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period – both in person and around the globe.” Or in short: (1) the crowd only looked small; (2) the crowd was small for a good reason; (3) we do not know how big it was; (4) we guess it was big; (5) it was the biggest crowd ever.

It is obvious that these statements can hardly be considered to constitute a consistent proposition about the crowd size at the inauguration – indeed they blatantly contradict one another. The only possible proposition that could integrate all these statements coherently would be “it was the biggest crowd in history, even though we cannot put out a definite number and it might have been even bigger were it not for adverse circumstances.” Yet, such an “overdone” proposition only really makes sense if we consider it to be a rebuff to the complex statement “the crowd was small and this shows the lack of support for the president.” In this light, all elements of the chain of statements address the elements of this sentence: it is wrong because the number only appeared small. It is wrong because there is more support than the number would suggest. You don’t have any numbers supporting your claim. Your claim is wrong because the crowd was, in fact, bigger than “yours.” The speaker does not take responsibility for the truth values of any of those claims – unlike pamphleteers, who invest the statement delivered with their own authority, the alternative fact-er focuses on disputing the legitimacy of those presenting the original fact in question.

DISCURSIVE OPACITY

Alternative facts are not critique in the sense of social inquiry but rather they constitute a form of communicative denial. They do not challenge reality by introducing a truth claim that reality cannot easily digest, but rather they challenge exactly those kinds of truth claims. Not only does this functionalist definition permit a refutation of the homogenization of critique and alternative facts, (and I presented Bruno Latour’s speech at Stanford as one of the more nuanced examples of this), but it also permits the development of some (admittedly very general) hypotheses on the changing structure of the public, which has allowed this form to gain such prominence in discourse. For I would argue that it is not so much that critique is a weapon that has been smuggled across the border. Critique, particularly in the emblematic case of the pamphlet, has always been a weapon used by all political parties, with the pamphleteer even having a tendency to tilt to the right.²⁵ And nor is it that critique has run out of steam – pamphlets do still exist; it may be rare for criticism to be consequential, but there is no reason to believe

that it is less consequential than in days past. It is rather the case that alternative facts have become an increasingly probable and visible part of the repertoire of discourse *around* critique because of changes in the (infra)structure of the public. In what remains of this essay, I would like to sketch out this counterintuitive relationship, which runs against the standard narrative of “bots, bubbles and fools” that is often employed for explaining alternative facts.

So let us return for a moment to the basic structural problem that the pamphlet is addressing. It challenges reality by introducing an indigestible element into it, a stumbling block that necessitates the reformulation of the inferential structures of reality construction (if it cannot be ignored, which is the more probable scenario). The activists/intellectuals are therefore involved in a liminal practice of translation: they transform private or subaltern knowledge into an object of public discourse. This necessitates the existence of a public for which this translation is performed and which reacts to it – and whose attention toward the subject matter exerts pressure on the institutions involved in constructing social reality. Zola’s *J’Accuse!* functions as a pamphlet because its publication implies it will be read by people whose opinion on the subject matter is important for the legitimacy of the Dreyfus case. On the other hand, in order to exert pressure on the public, the authors of the pamphlet have to somehow acquire the authority of someone who is to be listened to. This is usually done by performing a representative function with regard to a counterpublic, a group whose shared, yet hitherto publicly unacknowledged knowledge is made public by the pamphleteers: by claiming to speak for a group, by speaking the group into existence (as the Manifesto of the Communist Party turns a specter into a real movement) or by collecting signatures/supporters.

Alternative facts have become more prominent because this liminal position of translating between counterpublic and public, between latent knowledge and explicit discourse, has lost relative importance. This is not because society has fragmented into filter bubbles,²⁶ but because public discourse is more integrated than ever. “We are spared nothing, not even being informed about it all,” as the invisible committee put it in their pamphlet *now*.²⁷ This integration poses a problem for public discourse because it has made it increasingly unlikely that unsolvable problems can be postponed by de-thematizing them: everyone can be expected to have seen the pictures of the modest crowd at the inauguration, to know about man-made climate change, the dangers of Coronavirus, etc. Yet, the conflicts surrounding this information are too tense to be resolved, and thus they are transformed into conflicts about *belief* in the facticity of the information itself. This is not done primarily by proposing a different fact, a determinate negation, of what the case is supposed to be, but simply by insisting that other people believe different things. Donald Trump’s team knew perfectly well that the public had seen the picture of the small crowd at the inauguration ceremony and that the very

26 Early on, researchers pointed out that the empirical evidence for filter bubbles having any relevant impact on opinion formation is rather weak: see Frederik Zuiderveen Borgesius, Damian Trilling, Judith Moeller, Balázs Bodó, Claes H. Vreese, Natali Helberger: “Should We Worry About Filter Bubbles?”, in: *Internet Policy Review: Journal on Internet Regulation* 5/1, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2758126> (2016).

27 *The Invisible Committee: Now*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) (2017).

fact of a small inauguration ceremony would be read as a sign of the president's lack of support. Which is precisely why they had to react. And it was only because they could not undo the publishing of the picture, which had already circulated around the world at the very moment they learned of it, that they had to raise suspicions about whether it had captured the reality of the ceremony correctly. Alternative facts are thus self-induced opacity in public discourse: they react to what is already publicly known not by making something else known, but by "turning up the noise."

From this perspective, we can gain some insight into why knowledge-centered approaches to counter alternative facts necessarily run into obstacles and why they are so profoundly irritating when it comes to public discourse. Since alternative facts do not bear witness to a lack of available knowledge but, on the contrary, react to an excess of "inconvenient truth," their functioning is not blocked but, in many cases, ironically, enhanced by attempts to refute them. "To regain some of the authority of science"²⁸ leads nowhere, because the authority of science is not what is in dispute. By unmasking the claims with regard to the crowd size at Donald Trump's inauguration as lies, discourse shifts – from the topic of the legitimacy of a president elected by a minority of the population to the question of the facticity of expressed beliefs in crowd sizes, even though it is highly doubtful that a significant number of people do in fact believe the false claims raised.²⁹

And this is exactly what is so profoundly irritating about alternative facts: because they prove immune to being refuted qua argument and their function even thrives on attempts to refute them, they challenge the very self-idealization of public discourse as deliberative. Successfully confronting alternative facts is therefore not a matter of confronting them as false facts to be refuted, but of fighting one's case in the conflict that gave rise to them.

28 Vrieze: "Veteran of the 'Science Wars'" (2017).

29 Brian F. Schaffner, Samantha Luks: "Misinformation or Expressive Responding? What an Inauguration Crowd Can Tell Us about the Source of Political Misinformation in Surveys", in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82/1 (2018), pp. 135–147.