

*The impact of social media, 'fake news,' and disinformation on policy advice*

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In Howlett, M. and Mukherjee, I. (eds.), *Handbook of Policy Advice* (pp. 660-672).  
Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035318087.00068>

Published: September 16, 2025

Link: <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781035318087/chapter49.xml>

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**Abstract**

A convergence of existential crises – climate change, geopolitical instability, and socio-economic inequality, among others – has tested the policymaking capacities of governments at all scales. While definitions of and solutions to complex or ‘wicked’ problems are not always straightforward or uncontested, the tools of public policy intervention in legacy governance systems rely substantially on observable and verifiable evidence. This information often comes from scientists, experts, and other knowledge authorities. However, the terms of debate have shifted from how to act on shared understandings of facts to contestation of facts themselves. Socio-political polarization has elevated the salience of anti-fact, anti-expert, and anti-elite discourses, magnified further by social media and potentially by artificial intelligence. The spread of disinformation and ‘fake news’ frustrates policy efforts to establish a commonly accepted narrative about societal problems and solutions. These forces place policy advisory bodies in a politically sensitive position, even as their input becomes an essential safeguard against the disruptive or malicious obfuscation of truth. This chapter discusses the state of knowledge concerning the impact of disinformation on policy advice and proposes new ways of approaching the challenge, including acceptance of and engagement with epistemic destabilization.

**Keywords:** public policy; fake news; post-truth; disinformation; policy advice; policy epistemics

## Introduction

Multiple societal forces and convergent crises are disrupting the once stable epistemic foundations of policymaking. Though simmering for decades, political distrust has reached a notable flash point in recent years with the mainstreaming of populism, anti-globalization, and anti-science rhetoric in many political spheres. The narrative of aggrieved pushback against establishment elites not only impugns the motives of politicians and policymakers but also raises provocative questions about the notion of truth itself. Political dissatisfaction is increasingly apparent in the empowerment of non-establishment politicians and in associated policy consequences like withdrawal from global or regional agreements and institutions, geopolitical saber-rattling and trade wars, and an inward cultural turn that romanticizes and leverages the social identity of the majority.

The reasons for this degradation of political discourse are manifold: structural global economic change and loss of jobs, growing socio-economic inequality, elite abuse of institutions, and rhetorical battles over national sovereignty as against the global collective good. These frustrations have inevitably led to the scapegoating of certain actors and institutions, including the ‘deep state,’ elites in political, social, economic, and entertainment spheres, non-majority communities (e.g., ethnic and religious groups), and those whose identities do not confirm with the mainstream (e.g., LGBTQ individuals).

Manifestation of this pushback plays out not only in increasingly threatening political rhetoric, but also in fake news and post-truth narratives. In what is often called an ‘infodemic,’ the facts and scientific bases on which policymaking and policy advice have long relied are increasingly contested, elevating conspiratorial absurdities and other falsehoods to the legitimate discursive status once enjoyed solely by demonstrable fact. This phenomenon is accompanied not only by increasing populism but also by autocratic sympathies (Moser, 2024), with substantial implications for the credibility and functionality of policy advisory systems.

This chapter explores the impact of fake news and post-truth on policy advisory systems, including how the phenomenon is understood in research, how it can be addressed in practice, and the broader theoretical implications of epistemic instability. The next section discusses the evolution of governance thought and policy advisory systems from a theoretical perspective, focusing on a longstanding epistemic orientation towards instrumental rationalism. The subsequent section provides an overview of how post-truth is understood in the literature, followed by a discussion of policy options for governments and policy advisory bodies. The conclusion contemplates the prospects of a wholly altered policy epistemic wherein questions about truth become matters of political salience commanding direct engagement.

## Evolution of governance epistemics and policy advice

In the modern era (since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), policymaking has been understood generally as a process of ‘matching goals and means’ (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2017); that is, identifying problems within the purview of government and observing a sequence of stages in translating the most politically, economically, and operationally feasible solutions into desired outcomes (Dunn, 2018; Lasswell, 1970). This rational-solutionist approach is constitutive of a policy epistemic centered on empiricism and instrumentalism. Manifest in policymaking and policy advisory systems through what is casually labeled ‘technocracy,’ this epistemic endures for several reasons. First, the approach aligns with modernization and reform trends in governance practice, including managerialization, digitization, and a focus on evidence-based policymaking. Second, it derives legitimacy from governance and development metrics (including those promoted by global institutions) that can be quantitatively optimized. Third, it harmonizes with aspirational narratives about policy objectivity and fairness. These enabling factors justify ever more of the same in governance and policy advice, while the narrative durability of the underlying epistemic is perpetuated simply by its continued survival. As technocratic ways of thinking become more deeply embedded through path dependencies, policies, policy advisory systems, and narratives continue to be formed and reformed incrementally around this enduring epistemic logic. In this way, the associated notion of instrumental rationality either disappears due to its ubiquity or becomes unassailable ‘common sense’ due to the marginalization of alternatives and the inconvenience of transformational epistemic change.

The manifestation of instrumental rationality in policymaking and policy advice does not take only one form, and its flexibility suggests that it has progressed through multiple iterations. First-generation instrumental rationality emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in part with the application of Taylorism to public administration and management. Efficiency insights from the factory floor were adapted to organizational contexts and ultimately to the public sector, in the interest of creating – along with other reform ideas – a policy science based on evidence and pragmatism. With successive waves of technology, the capacity to pursue rationalist reforms and agendas grew stronger. These efforts targeted not only policy-analytical capacity (e.g., through data storage and processing) but also the more intricate and thorough measurement of environmental, social, and economic conditions. With the ability to gather granular cross-sectional and longitudinal data, governments gained an arguably superficial confidence in their ability to understand problems and assess the impacts of policy interventions.

If the growth of digitization and computing from the 1970s to 1990s was unprecedented, the advent of the internet soon surpassed it in reach and impact. Information and communications technologies helped governments not only collect more data but also introduce conduits of public feedback, heralding a promising era of e-governance. Further, the ability of urban governments to implement sophisticated data-collection systems supported the ‘smart cities’ movement, which has since been broadened in concept to encompass quality-of-life, environmental sustainability, and social justice (Hartley and Im,

2022). The current era of instrumental rationality is supported by continued innovations in artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, and cloud computing.

While the tools of technocratic governance have evolved across multiple generations, there remain higher-level questions about whether and how they impact policy advisory systems. It may be argued that a dialectical relationship exists between analytical tools and policy-advisory activities – new technologies reveal unprecedented policymaking and policy-analytical capabilities, while policy objectives are in turn defined in ways that existing or emerging technologies make possible. This endogeneity begets iterative re-commitments to (or ‘doubling down’ on) existing ways of thinking about policy, particularly as the types of actions undertaken are measurable and progress clearly evident on the same terms. Performance metrics are more frequently designed around the capabilities of technology (e.g., broader collection and faster analysis of data), whereby declarations of success attributed to existing technologies engender expectations of similarly attractive outcomes for new technology. The process repeats itself in a technocratic cycle of problem-framing, resolution, and re-framing or pre-framing as better measurement capacities emerge.

The challenge raised by this type of double-down is that it gives the appearance of novelty without fundamentally disrupting the comfortable hegemony of existing policy epistemics – including those that generated and perpetuated long-standing policy problems. A critical perspective would suggest that there is no genuine pathway to novelty within this iterative approach and its marginal tinkering and technocratic optimization. It is clear, however, why technocratic incrementalism is politically attractive – it requires no disruptive change, while providing selective quantitative evidence of (ring-fenced) success and thus a historical trendline that can be extrapolated into the future to plausibly support narratives about continuous progress. Referring to smart water management (SWM) as an example of technocratic double-down, Hartley and Kuecker (2020) describe how the process unfolds:

*“The SWM solution adds additional order to a system already experiencing an unsustainable rate of declining returns from successive technocratic solutions and waves of technological advancement. Chasing the failure of order is, inevitably, more order – accelerating collapse. In short, society is doing the wrong things but more efficiently, which in a profound paradox can be politically sold as progress.”*

Hartley and Kuecker (2020), p. 5

Despite its comprehensive capture of policymaking and policy advisory systems, technocratic double-down now appears to be in some peril. Its superficiality is being unmasked by anomalous data and the undeniable worsening of policy conditions (e.g., climate conditions and livability). An equally imminent challenge to technocratic governance is deteriorating trust. Since the politics-administration conceptual cleavage and the institutionalization of a professionalized civil service, it has been taken for granted that better governance is achievable through the application of social-scientific expertise and managerialist protocols. Accordingly, bureaucratic ranks were staffed with career analysts and officials abiding by professional ethics, codes, and procedures. Despite these efforts, trust

in government institutions has been declining for decades in well documented ways (Dalton, 2005; Hetherington, 2005). The addition of new technology-based analytical capabilities has not ameliorated the situation, due in part to low inherited levels of trust (Hartley, 2021); this inconvenient reality eliminates additional technology investments as a pathway to improving trust. Based on its history, the cycle of technocratic double-down is difficult to interrupt given the embeddedness of its instrumental-rationalist epistemic. Replacing it would be inconvenient and even risky, but the alternative may be just as fraught.

## **Overview of fake news and policy advice**

### *Origins and impacts of disinformation*

The policy literature has recently begun to engage more systematically with the notion of misinformation (incorrect information) and disinformation (intentionally falsified information; Fallis, 2015). The breadth of the topic has elicited both theoretical and empirical work, including studies of the intersection among fake news, social media, and policy advisory systems. Although political movements in the past decade have generated renewed interest, research about misinformation and disinformation goes back decades, including work by Kuklinski et al. (2000) on misinformed public perceptions about welfare policies in the United States, Martin (1982) on the political instrumentality of disinformation to gain a psychological advantage, and Edelman (2001) on the use of misinformation in the preservation of elite interests. The current literature on misinformation and disinformation (see Kapantai et al., [2021] for a review of typologies) often uses analogous terms like ‘fake news’ (in reference to news-like content often shared on social media; see Lazer et al. [2018]), ‘post-truth’ (as an ontological frame; see Fischer [2019]), and ‘infodemic’ (commonly but not exclusively used in the context of pandemic policy response; see Hove and Cilliers [2023] and World Health Organization [2022]). Perl et al. (2018) also apply the concept of ‘truthiness’ (“opinion-driven selective provision of information or, worse, reliance upon intentionally false data,” p. 582) to explore how increasingly ambiguous lines between verifiable fact and misinformation complicate the role of knowledge in policymaking.

In the past decade, research about fake news has often explored the context of expert and scientific knowledge and, in turn, efforts to discredit it. Technical and expert input have long played a role in the policy process, dating back at least to the modernist turn in public administration and policy research and practice; see, for example, Lasswell (1970) on knowledge ‘in’ and ‘of’ the policy process, and Rutgers and Ven Der Meer (2010) and Thayer (1972) on the role of Taylorism-inspired efficiency in public administration practice. Tracing how disinformation interrupts and weakens the process by which science informs policymaking, Lewandowski et al. (2022) argue that the lived experience of individuals can influence their perceptions about the credibility of science and science-informed policy, including cases where certain communities have been marginalized or harmed by such policies. The authors recommend more robust efforts to identify misleading information and

processes to use it for inoculating the public (explicitly exposing disinformation, debunking it, and demonstrating its logical failures).

At a conceptual level, research has also sought to systematically explain how fake news arises – including efforts to connect academic ideas with policy practice. For example, Fischer (2019) argues that postmodern perspectives in academia can help researchers understand post-truth but should not be implicated in the rise of post-truth itself. Fischer further maintains that a strategy of reinforcing the credibility of facts is ineffective in neutralizing what is an increasingly destructive post-truth movement, insisting instead that meaningful dialogue harbors more realistic potential through ‘authentic socio-cultural discussion.’ These dynamics are evident also in the emergence of identity politics and resentment as political tools, magnifying the impact of partisan ideas on policy agendas through not only the proliferation of misinformation but also the incitement of institutional distrust (Head, 2023).

Two of the most common recent contexts for analyzing the political dimensions of post-truth have been the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change. Given the highly scientific nature of the threat, the Covid-19 crisis elevated the public visibility of medical experts and their role in informing policy responses and shaping the public narrative (e.g., the virus as a serious threat and the need for mitigation actions at an individual level). Alinejad and Honari (2024) illustrate how the politicization of science on social media reflects an ‘ideological science denial,’ with mainstream scientists and policymakers accused of excluding information that contravenes a given official agenda (for additional studies about the spread of fake news during the Covid-19 pandemic, see Biradar et al. [2023], Apuke and Omar [2021], Rocha et al. [2021], and van Der Linden et al. [2020]).

### *Disinformation and policy advisory systems*

Policy advisory systems are an instructive setting for examining the dynamics of post-truth in political discourse. Halligan (1995) argues that quality advisory systems are characterized by three elements: multiple sources, flexibility in selecting the right mix of sources for a given policy issue, and capacity to evaluate these systems and the quality of their outputs. Such instrumental or mechanical views of policy advisory systems are applicable in situations where the epistemic foundations of empirically demonstrable truth are largely undisputed. However, as McGann (2016) argues, the traditional pathways of influence over policymaking once held by think tanks are evolving, with a rising need for policy advice bodies to be more proactive in the dissemination of ideas and findings, respond quickly to emerging trends with ‘rigorous and innovative’ perspectives, and effectively use technology for communication and outreach. The politicization of policy input – including the strategies of think tanks to enhance their influence – suggests that expertise is not necessarily absolute but ‘contingent and localized’ (Landry, 2021; regarding the role of think tanks amidst political contention and technological change, see Allen [2021] and McGann and Whelan [2020]).

While usefully grounding advice in context, these contingencies also present avenues for political pushback. For example, Lux (2022) argues that the origins of political skepticism

against think tanks originate with official support for policy ideas that skeptics perceive to have been harmful, including globalisation and socio-economic inequalities (see also de Montbrial and Gomart [2019]). Lux argues that think tanks should be better attuned to evolving social dynamics, balancing efforts to maintain elite political relationships with efforts to connect with broader society ('popularisation'). Pursuant to this point, Head (2023, p. 12) states, in reference not only to trust but also to policy performance, that "the authoritative standing of 'elite' experts has been damaged by their perceived inability to help governments solve complex and contested problems, and their credibility has been undermined by the strident opponents of respectful evidence-informed debate, who have used all available channels to sow distrust of 'elites.'" From a technocratic perspective, this quote illustrates a notable paradox: skeptics have some ontological frame for what constitutes a 'complex problem' but ascribe policy futility to traditional forms of scientific evidence.

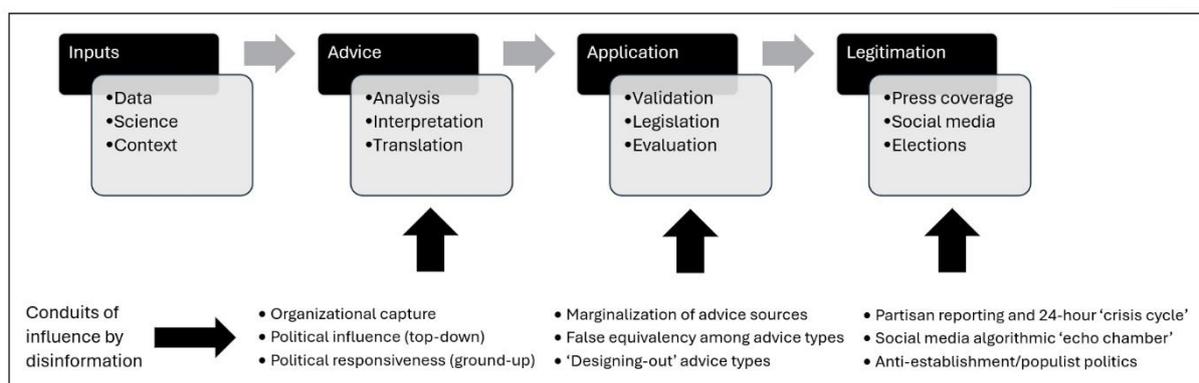
Political system type can also determine the credibility and impact of policy advice. According to Bakir (2023), policy advisors operating in authoritarian regimes are often motivated to offer inputs that are favorable or pleasing to the ruling regime, including biased or unreliable content that could be defined as disinformation (for more about the function of policy advisory systems in non-Western and other understudied regimes, see Head [2021], Giusti and Piras [2020], Howlett [2019], Hustedt [2019]). Even in governance settings that are not fully authoritarian, growing populist sentiment has shaped public perceptions about policy experts. Pfeil (2018) suggests that populist rhetoric, such as that adopted by former United States President Donald Trump, can weaken the impact (i.e., 'ideational power') of think tanks as policy advisors. According to Hernando et al. (2018), declining expert legitimacy has complicated the process of vetting policy ideas, with the credibility gap filled increasingly by post-truth and populist ideas. The authors argue that the curators of policy knowledge should resolve to help policymakers "discern the reliability and usefulness of analytic products [originating from] from disparate sources" (p. 137). In general, the literature has begun to more robustly engage with the deleterious impact of disinformation on legacy policy advisory systems. The next section introduces a framework to more intricately analyze the phenomenon.

## **Analysis and policy implications**

The analysis in this section is structured according to the framework introduced in Figure 1. The figure models policy advisory systems largely as a sequential or linear process, broadly involving the following: (i) inputs gathered and used to develop policy advice, (ii) advice translated into legislative inputs, and (iii) legislative outputs used to legitimize decisionmaking via media and democratic activities. The process-based or stages view of policymaking (independent of how advisory systems are conceptualized) is structured broadly around the activities of agenda setting, optioning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. The linearity of this conceptualization has been critiqued as idealistic or simplistic, and not reflective of the practical realities of policymaking in which multiple

stages occur at once (Weible, 2023; Jann and Wegrich, 2017). Notwithstanding critiques about stages-based perspectives, Figure 1 is useful for this analysis in illustrating where during the advisory process or cycle disinformation impacts policymaking. Addressing calls to account for cyclicity, one may assume that the act of legitimation feeds back into the input stage, in that the terms of the prevailing discourse dictate which information is included or excluded as policy input. This view holds technocracy to be epistemically myopic in selecting only indicators that can be explicitly measured or controlled through policy intervention (see White, 2023; Hartley, 2020). One may also assume that stages occur concurrently, as they do in revised interpretations of the standard process framework.

**Figure 1:** Framework for the impact of disinformation on policy advisory systems



The framework begins with the proposition that the function of policy advisory systems originates, in ideal practice, from the motivation to understand a particular issue and the need to collect information – including data (e.g., official statistics and public surveys), science (e.g., academic and industry research), and context (e.g., the surrounding social, environmental, or economic circumstances). These inputs are then processed or fed into advice-producing activities, which can include quantitative or qualitative analysis, interpretation of findings, and translation for policymaking (e.g., from overarching principles to detailed information that informs quantitative targets). From there, policymaking bodies take ownership of the process by validating the type and source of the translated material, incorporating it into legislative codes and documents. Finally, legitimation can be seen as any activity that helps build support for legislative content emerging from or supported by policy advice. This effort may originate with multiple actors in collaboration or independently, including legislators, traditional media, and social media (thought-leaders or institutions). An additional conduit of legitimation, if indirect, is the electoral process itself (i.e., public support for policymakers who champion particular legislation).

The primary objective of this framework is not to model the policy advisory process itself, but to illustrate where and how disinformation influences crucial stages (focusing on the latter three of the four-stage process). While it may seem that the first stage – inputs – is the likeliest setting for disinformation, the model's analytical boundaries are not intended to

include the entire information ecosystem (i.e., production of data, official statistics, scientific research, and understandings about context). Rather, the second stage is considered more relevant as this is where inputs from the information ecosystem bear on the formation of policy advice. At this stage, disinformation can express itself through (i) political capture or influence on the advisory body (the top-down perspective) or (ii) the motivation of the advisory body (if at all) to be seen as politically representative or responsive in a general sense (the bottom-up perspective). There are numerous examples of both. In authoritarian and top-down regimes, access to policy influence may be granted to agents whose advice promotes or secures the regime (including through disinformation). In more democratic settings, particularly politically contentious ones, agents may seek to strengthen their credibility independent of a currently empowered regime, relying instead on the quality of their advice, ability to impact policymaking, and attention to particular issues (e.g., climate change, social justice, and economic equality).

The third stage of the framework is the second stage in which disinformation can influence policy advice. The translation of advice into legislative content and outcomes is contingent in part on decisions made by policymakers about which advice sources to engage and which types of advice to adopt. Given the recently broadening ideological diversity and polarization of the information ecosystem, particularly regarding policy issues, policymakers must select from among numerous advice sources competing for influence, public visibility, and – in some cases – scientific credibility. Accordingly, policy advice available on the information ‘market’ varies widely in type, objectivity, and scientific quality, and thereby appeals in various ways to policymakers having political agendas; in short, whatever kind of information a policymaker wishes to obtain, some agent is likely willing to provide it. Furthermore, the way policies are designed and policy issues framed can be epistemically ring-fenced in a way that prioritizes certain types of information while marginalizing others. For example, if the social or economic impacts of healthcare legislation are not viewed as a policy concern but rather as a natural consequence of market-based competition, information about social and economic inequality is immaterial to the policymaking exercise – as are the advisory sources of such information.

The final stage goes one step beyond the roll-out of policies informed by advisory systems, recognizing the need for policymakers and politicians to legitimize their decisions. While this activity is often a rhetorical exercise in technocratic solutionism or political argumentation, a policy’s credibility may be dependent also on the information used to create it and the source of that information. While the narrative may originate with a particular policymaker, political party, or policymaking body, it is typically co-created or reshaped by other actors including the press, social media, and adjacent political operatives. The use of disinformation by such actors is well documented (Howard, 2020). Indeed, the media ecosystem has over time fragmented away from a small number of mainstream providers and towards a more polarized environment with numerous smaller providers occupying ideological niches on all sides of the political spectrum. The spread of disinformation on social media and use of disinformation by reactionary, populist, and authoritarian political movements are well discussed phenomena (Bennett and Livingston, 2023; Tumber and Waisbord, 2021).

Finally, in understanding the behavioral and choice dynamics driving the engagement of public consumers with disinformation (whether witting or unwitting), it is helpful to consider how context predisposes them to make certain choices. Hartley and Vu (2020) introduce an equilibrium model concerning how potential sharers of fake news (on social media) interact upon first encountering it, outlining several implications that suggest ways to improve the information ecosystem in which policy advisory systems operate. The measures are applicable to three parties: governments, social media platforms (as organizational actors), and digital citizens.

First, according to Hartley and Vu (2020), governments should establish (i) operating guidelines and protocols for social media platforms concerning the verification of information shared online, and (ii) regulatory and enforcement mechanisms that outline minimum operating standards regarding the efforts of social media platforms to preserve the integrity of the information ecosystem. Second, Hartley and Vu (2020) suggest that social media platforms should (i) improve algorithms to identify and marginalize fake news, including the use of emergent technologies like artificial intelligence, (ii) crowd-source efforts to manage fake news by involving users in identification and suppression, (iii) collaborate across the industry on research about the policy-analytical impacts of fake news and best practices for managing the phenomenon, and (iv) engender an online culture and code of conduct concerning perceptions about and engagement with fake news. Finally, according to Hartley and Vu (2020), digital citizens should (i) develop or improve their judgment in assessing online content and interacting with fake news (i.e., media literacy), and (ii) observe ethical standards that may have been developed or promoted by an individual's online social circles. These efforts can help foster an information ecosystem in which disinformation is identified, assessed, and managed, with immediate improvements to the circulation of information in the public sphere and, potentially in the longer-term, improvements to the function of discursive arenas where, at minimum, participating advisory bodies seek to promote objective, defensible, and empirically grounded policy input.

## **Conclusion and ways forward**

In the coming decades, instrumental-rationalist governance approaches are poised for double-down even as the epistemic foundations of policymaking are destabilized on multiple fronts – from post-truth and anti-science movements on one side of the political spectrum to valorization of folk, local, and indigenous experience on the other. The notions of epistemological populism (knowledge based on experience and ‘common sense;’ Saurette and Gunster, 2011) and counterknowledge (appeals to alternative sources of knowledge; Ylä-Anttila, 2018) also offer politically feasible frames for discrediting expert knowledge. Policy measures to address the more overtly destructive of these – post-truth, anti-science, and information warfare – can be effective but only in limited ways; addressing the rising influence of disinformation requires deeper contemplation about the current era's nihilist strand of political pushback and its provenance in, for example, American anti-intellectualism

(Hofstadter, 1962). An example of such rhetoric comes from American professional athlete Aaron Rodgers, who stated the following in a diatribe about Dr. Anthony Fauci (chief medical advisor to American President Joseph Biden during the Covid-19 pandemic):

*“And if you do even a smidge of research—and I know, I’m not an epidemiologist, I’m not a doctor, I’m not an immunologist, whatever the f\*\*\*—I can read, though. And I can learn and look things up just like any normal person, you know. I can do my own research, which is so vilified, to even question authority.”*

Aaron Rodgers, quoted in Dunn (2024)

Quotes like this exemplify one type of pushback against modern policymaking and advisory systems. The statement implies that there remains a role for knowledge and truth (‘research’ in the quote) but not the type promoted by ‘authority’ (e.g., government and science experts). Such rhetoric rejects mainstream and institutionalized sources of policy knowledge in favor of whatever can be gathered and argued by non-experts (“normal person” in the quote, or the “wisdom of crowds;” Collins and Stevens [2023]). The underlying logic of the quote, if one assumes there is one, appears not to dismiss the idea that truth matters in policymaking; the quote may be considered revolutionary only in that it discredits traditional policy advisory systems. Whether the quote was uttered sincerely or satirically, it reflects an increasingly visible anti-expert skepticism that trades in disinformation and fake news. The phenomenon is particularly apparent during rapidly emerging but poorly understood crises (e.g., pandemics), when delays in official response are seen as uncertainty or weakness.

The prospect of policy advisory bodies maintaining their legacy function rests not only on their own credibilizing actions but also on the condition of state-society relations. When examining the impact of disinformation on policy advice, it is helpful to consider the intermediary role of knowledge-producers – the ‘line workers’ of advisory systems – and the political pressures placed on them by society and political actors. These knowledge-producers rely on certain institutional and societal conditions, including the free flow of information and a general regard for objectivity and truth. In a robustly competitive ‘marketplace of ideas,’ the most evidence-based and scientifically indisputable arguments would be expected to win the opportunity to impact policy – based on support by politicians and, less directly, the public. Nevertheless, the ability of public sentiment to influence the credibility and adoption of policy advice is distorted when people are uncertain about the veracity of what they hear and see, and when doubt and distrust become currency in mainstream political discourse.

Rooted in 20<sup>th</sup> century rationalist paradigms, the current concept of policy advisory systems bears the vestiges of early technocratic modernism and the knowledge hierarchy that granted it authority. However, shifting epistemic foundations may lead to some unexpected developments in the policy advisory sphere. Seeking to boost their relevance in an increasingly crowded and contentious information ecosystem, policy advisory bodies may aspire to be more politically responsive by broadening the mix of input sources and embracing policy ideas that emerge from outside the mainstream. This approach could take these advisory bodies in any number of partisan directions. At the same time, facilitating a

productive policy conversation across the current era's yawning political gap requires a common understanding about the terms of debate – including agreement on the process of validating policy advisory input. Subject-specific experts have typically helped establish the scientific and evidentiary basis for policy options (see Aagaard et al., 2024 regarding experts as 'public sense-makers'). However, politicization is now moving up-stream in the policy process, with debates reaching the fact-finding and information-collection stages. Disagreements about the credibility of information sources are increasingly common, while political skepticism against knowledge-makers is observable, for example, in right-wing antipathy towards universities (Douglass, 2021) and transnational governance organizations (O'Byrne, 2019).

One can view the question of how fake news impacts policy advisory systems as part of a broader inquiry about the shifting epistemic foundations of public policy and state-society relations. Rethinking policy practice to accommodate these deep-seated issues requires more than marginal tinkering. Verovšek and Gorišek (2023) propose that declining public trust in scientific expertise can be addressed through better 'digital design' (e.g., the impact of user interface in social media platforms on how users receive and interpret information) and education of platform users (e.g., identifying disinformation and understanding why and how algorithms circulate it). Additionally, emergent technologies like artificial intelligence have been promoted for their novel analytical capabilities (Safaei and Longo, 2024), potentially lending an additional veneer of competence and objectivity to policy advice. While there may be a role for these types of efforts, they target only the improvement of existing ways of thinking about and making policy while failing to engage meaningfully with epistemic instability.

In closing, a lingering question is whether policy advisory bodies will resist epistemic instability by doubling-down on objectivity and evidentiary credibility or reframe their role to be more epistemically fluid (see Dunlop and Radaelli (2021) regarding empowerment and reflection as roles of policy scholarship). Technocratic perspectives suggest that iterative rounds of analytical de-politicization may be the answer, but the current political climate suggests otherwise. Disinformation exists not because technological tools to suppress it are ineffective; these tools can only manage its spread. Coming to terms with a new epistemic reality – one characterized by uncertainty, emergence, and the displacement of old ways of thinking about policies and solutions – is the most productive, if inconvenient, way forward.

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