

# Media and Migration in the Age of Post Truth Politics

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## Executive Summary

For several years, we have lived in the so-called post-truth area. The aim of this project was to analyse the possible impact of post-truth politics on the mediatisation and politicisation of migration in Europe. We focused in particular on studying how social media platforms and alternative outlets spread ‘fake news’, capitalise and play on the anti-immigration sentiment in several European contexts. However, we also explored the role of governmental actors in presenting certain ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ on migration related challenges faced by Europe.

Our research results clearly show how post-truth politics impact on how migration is being (re)framed in social media by citizens and identity entrepreneurs, as well as how some political actors instrumentalise it. The consequences of this are an increase of extreme speech around migration-related themes and a banalisation of anti-immigration discourses on social media but also in the political sphere.

Based on our results, we strongly call for an increased effort in holding social media platforms accountable for the spread of misinformation and disinformation, especially on topics related to migration. We also argue for the importance of tackling polarised narratives on migration and addressing the interplay of social media and news media in such efforts.

## Introduction

In the post truth era, debates on migration have increasingly flourished in news media and social media, with the circulation of materials between these two media fields strengthening the intensity and spread of communication. Migration has become one of the most contested topics in the public sphere. Thus, studying how this topic is mediatised and politicised is a key aspect to the understanding of post-truth strategies.

The research conducted in this project shows the crucial role played by social media as a public or semi-public space, where disinformation about migration related topics is (almost) freely circulating, without the contribution of efficient gatekeeping strategies or practices by the social media platforms. The project findings also indicate that the dissemination of ‘fake news’ is the result of a wide array of actors. It is not only extreme far-right actors, who produce and distribute ‘fake news’ but many other actors participate, directly or indirectly, in the strengthening of post-truth politics in Europe. The interplay between news media, governmental actions and social media is also central for the spread of and actions against post-truth politics. The details of these issues will be discussed below, in order to develop recommendations for developing policies.

## Approach and results

The research conducted in this project introduces several crucial questions related to the way migration is treated as a political

question in the media in the post-truth era. Building on the findings of an edited book, we outline four main questions.

First, Verena K. Brändle’s work on information campaigns produced for potential irregular migrants shows how governmental actors claim authority over the ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ of irregular migration. What we learn from this research is that such campaigns hamper any constructive social and political change. Instead, they are an obstacle against the improvement of the current situation around the external borders of the European Union.

Second, research by Anna Björk on the outcomes of, and the rationale and ethos behind, the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) identifies success particularly in the developments towards a common information infrastructure and converging understanding about the key indicators characterising global migration. Nevertheless, this research shows that the member states remain invested in emphasising their sovereign governance over migration, particularly accentuated on the symbolic level. As a result, the official discourses commonly avoid deliberating wider issues of global migration and focus on context-specific, nationally mediated challenges related to migration.

Third, the study by Sanna Malinen, Aki Koivula, Teo Keipi, and Arttu Saarinen, based on a national survey, found that the higher the trust in media the respondents expressed and the more positive their attitudes were towards migration, the more likely

they were to be concerned about the spread of fake news on social media. Those who distrust traditional media are strongly against content moderation, thus strict moderation on news media sites may lead to even deeper frustration and alienation from traditional media. This implies that to decrease the impact of fake news, moderation strategies on social media are a central means.

Fourth, the analysis of Facebook posts of Finnish far-right anti-immigration groups *Close the Borders* and *Finland First!* by Gwenaëlle Bauvois and Niko Pyrhönen highlighted the fact that fake news and explicit disinformation are only the tip of the iceberg. The post-truth strategies of the far right entrepreneurs are more nuanced than we might think. Rather than putting resources into generating convincing disinformation from scratch, many successful actors rely on opportunistic strategies that aim to attract a large base of social media followers with relatable, affective content based on immigration themes.

### Conclusion

False, distorted or extreme discourses on migration are at the heart of post-truth politics in Europe and their spread is greatly facilitated by social media. The findings from this project indicate that disinformation and 'fake news' are distributed by a variety of actors on social media. Moreover, the successful actors also rely on content and stories that seek to win the audience through appealing to the emotional rather than the rational/fact based persuasion. The project findings indicate that not only extreme far-right actors, who produce and distribute 'fake news', but many other actors participate, directly or indirectly, in the strengthening of post-truth politics in Europe. The interplay between news media, public narratives, governmental campaigns and social media is central for the spread of post-truth politics, but also crucial to take into account in actions that seek to counteract and tackle post-truth claims.

### Implications and recommendations

The implications of the mediatisation of migration are an increased deterioration of public debate and an even stronger rise of right-wing populism and extreme xenophobic ideas in Europe. Our recommendations include:

1. **Moderation strategies and development of efficient moderation practices** are central to improving social media communication and the tackling of post-truth claims. Public authorities should continue their efforts in making social media platforms and providers accountable, especially regarding their responsibility in spreading misinformation.
2. In order to tackle the issues of public narratives that support polarising narratives of citizens and migrants, 'us' *versus* 'them', EU member states need support in their efforts to address migration-related phenomena. However, the EU should include more rigorous **guidelines for using the funding earmarked for information sharing** by the member states, in order to prevent misleading campaigns linked to political party agendas.
3. Policies that seek to tackle post-truth politics should pay attention to the **interplay between news media, public narratives, governmental campaigns and social media**. Thus effective actions will not merely focus on one of these, but take into account the circulation of information in the changing media landscape.