

# **Plots: Literary Form and Conspiracy Culture**

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## 10 Half-truths

### On an instrument of post-truth politics (and conspiracy narratives)

*Nicola Gess<sup>1</sup>*

As Hannah Arendt wrote, ‘no one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other’ (2013 [1971], 44), and by now it is practically a commonplace that truth is a matter of discursive negotiation and cannot always be fully distinguished from fiction. Even so, since 2016, controversies have arisen about remarks made by the likes of pro-Brexit British politicians, the American President Donald Trump, and right-wing European populists, as well as by their supporters. One of the media’s attempts to characterize this new feature of political discourse has been the concept of the ‘post-factual’. Yet among the tools of the political discourse of the post-factual, it is not the obvious false statements but half-truths that stand out most. These can take various forms, such as statements whose facticity can be hard to pin down objectively (because they are very vague, generalize a great deal, or leave out essential information); statements based partly on facts but also on fictive content; and, statements in which real events are exaggerated, reinterpreted or put in misleading contexts.<sup>2</sup> For example, in mid-2016, the right-wing party Alternative for Germany claimed on their website and in official press releases that the German Federal Ministry of the Environment had invested several million euros of German tax revenue in Hillary Clinton’s election campaign. The statement was only deleted when the party was threatened with legal action. In fact, the Ministry had only given a government grant to the charitable Bill Clinton Foundation, in 2013, and for a specific project against climate change in East Africa (Weiland 2016a, 2016b). In another case, Breitbart News reported in January 2017 that ‘at New Year’s Eve celebrations in Dortmund a mob of more than 1,000 men chanted “Allahu Akhbar”, launched fireworks at police, and set fire to a historic church’ (Hale 2017). The *Ruhr Nachrichten* had reported these separate events from New Year’s Eve in Dortmund online, but Breitbart’s article took them out of context, mashed them together and presented them in such a distorted way that the *Ruhr Nachrichten*, the Dortmund Police, and even national German politicians had to issue a disclaimer, along with a warning about fake news (Hackenbroich 2017).

As a rule, such half-truths spread quickly, especially in social networks, where they are enthusiastically commented on, developed further, and

supplemented with similar stories. Their likeness to factuality also allows them to enter into the unsubstantiated truth claims of conspiracy culture, where they mainly serve the rhetorical function of producing plausibility. Half-truths are much harder to debunk than obvious lies. That difficulty is above all that one must contradict them in the form of ‘yes, but’ – as in the Breitbart case: ‘Stray fireworks did start a small blaze, but only on netting covering scaffolding on the church’ (*Guardian* 2017). Even such a small degree of additional complexity is enough to get many people to stop listening or ultimately to reduce the ‘yes, but’ to a mere ‘yes’. So, in my chapter, I would like to take a closer look at the function, construction, and striking success of half-truths in post-factual discourse in general and in conspiracy culture in particular, proceeding from the assumption that they can be analyzed effectively with concepts from narratology and fiction theory. However, I would like to start out with a more basic, one might say historical question, namely whether the post-factual and the accompanying spread of half-truths outlined here are really as new a phenomenon as the omnipresent talk of a ‘post-factual era’ suggests. My answer is ‘yes and no’: yes, insofar as it is new *in the contemporary world*, and no, insofar as this phenomenon definitely has historical precursors.

### **The post-factual: a new phenomenon?**

The legacy of the linguistic turn in the humanities has been the widespread belief that ‘humans are not in the world as it is but rather move in discourses and systems of signs’ (Koschorke 2012, 10), so that truth always has to be understood further as the truth of discursive power. In this context, post-factual discourse could be seen as a reaction – in the sense of a resistance – to the discursive authority of the ruling class. Half-truths would thus be instruments of a kind of ‘information terrorism’. But this perspective overlooks fundamental differences between post-factual discourse and political discourse of the recent past, which strongly suggest that this phenomenon is both new (in contemporary history) and deeply problematic:

- 1 There are formal differences between this discourse and reporting in the mainstream media. In the latter, tendentious journalism is constrained (even if not completely prevented) by self-imposed criteria of quality, such as the formal separation of commentary and news, the commitment to providing citations and sources, and the correction of counter-factual information. The half-truths of post-factual discourse are not subject to such constraints, and their ephemerality often helps them escape from any fact checking at all.
- 2 While democratic politics in the last few decades at least seemed to try to disguise lies and avoid contradicting itself (cf. Gadinger 2019, 125), veracity apparently no longer has any value at all in post-factual discourse.

Far-sightedly, the philosopher Harry Frankfurt identified this as ‘bull-shitting’ already in 2005:

The bullshitter ignores these demands [of the authority of the truth] altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.  
(2005, 61)

The attitude Frankfurt identifies, then, is not about truth but about appearance: ‘For the essence of bullshit is not that it is false, but that it is phony’ (2005, 37). The bullshitter wants to communicate a particular image of himself to his listener, and in order to do so, he says whatever seems appropriate to him, no matter whether it is true or false. It just has to have the appearance of truth. Following Frankfurt, then, post-factual discourse succeeds above all in a culture of self-representation, which has long since also encroached on politics.

- 3 The release from factual truth in the post-factual discourse of currently successful right-wing populists is accompanied by the production of and fealty to felt truths based on emotional narratives such as wounded national pride, hatred of ‘elites’, and xenophobia. In political discourse of the recent past, truth was still discursively negotiable, but the felt truth of post-factual discourse is no longer up for debate. Its proponents hang on to it no matter how counterfactual it may be. Under such conditions, even a complete lie can be perceived as ‘half-true’, as long as it corresponds emotionally to a complete truth.
- 4 Post-factual discourse is thus based not on logical argumentation and the testing of claims but on authority (that of the majority or of the political representative claiming to speak for them) as well as on collective emotions that, if need be, are created ad hoc in a process of ‘auto-catalytic self-intoxication’ (Koschorke 2016, 79) – just recall the ‘lock her up’ chants at Trump’s campaign rallies.<sup>3</sup>
- 5 Whenever persuasion is still necessary, post-factual discourse primarily turns to anecdotes that appeal to the audience with everyday experiences and confirm their preconceptions. Following Frankfurt, Eva Horn has characterized this ‘most contemporary form of political untruth’ (2008, 118) as ‘chatter’ (*Geschwätz*):

Chatter is what one wants to hear not because it is true but because it fits whatever plans and ideas one already has anyway [...]. It generates moments of apparent evidence and clarity that make sense precisely because they fulfill expectations rather than because they represent facts.

(Horn 2008, 120)

- 6 In order to offer as much room for projection as possible, post-factual discourse thus generally remains vague and half-finished, without ever taking the concrete form of a creed or a political manifesto. In his analysis of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Albrecht Koschorke concluded that the book's very incoherence probably contributed to the success of the National Socialists and that its 'vacuity and [performative] decisiveness [...] complement' each other (2016, 59). This is also true of the rhetoric of half-truths.

Nevertheless, post-factual discourse *does* have its historical precursors. The post-factual, I would argue, has always been popular in periods of crisis when social changes with unforeseeable consequences for individuals (such as globalization, refugees, and postindustrial society today) coincided with a loss of trust in the knowledge of experts and political representatives, whose perspectives were rejected as being too complex and too partisan. Thus, these crises are not existential crises such as famine or war, but crises of knowledge and trust that can be driven even further by the rise of a new mass medium. Several eras follow this pattern. Around 1500, for example, the era of the '*Wutprediger*' (wrath preachers) also saw the invention of the printing press and the spread of polemical pamphlets (*Schmähschriften*) (Dümling 2018). Similarly, in the Weimar Republic, political discourse, especially in Berlin, was polarized by boulevard journalism, which was then still quite new in Germany. And in the present era Web 2.0 serves as a 'digital form of hearsay that oscillates between orality and script' (Leggewie and Mertens 2008, 191), and whatever statement spreads most quickly and widely is the one most likely to be felt to be true. In a highly complex, functionally differentiated society, according to Niklas Luhmann, personal trust has to become trust in the system (2014 [1968], 27), as individuals planning their future must largely rely on the processing of information and the production of meaning by others (2014 [1968], 66). The undermining of trust in the system creates room for the post-factual, because those who have lost such trust but want to remain capable of action must fall back on a functionally equivalent strategy of simplification: on mistrust, leading them to a greater dependence on a small number of specific items of information from alternative sources (Luhmann 2014 [1968], 93) and tending to escalate in social interactions to the point of self-fulfilling prophecy (Luhmann 2014 [1968], 98). Also, such mistrust is often accompanied by a 'playful elaboration and aesthetic completion' of the fearful situation they feel they are in (Luhmann 2014 [1968], 2). Accordingly, Hans-Joachim Neubauer writes about the rumours flourishing during the First World War: 'Rumors are interpretations. In situations of great uncertainty, they can construct coherence' (2009 [1998], 132). Or Theodor W. Adorno takes a similar tack on the 'post-factual' in fascism:

All modern fascist movements [...] have consciously manipulated the facts in a way that could lead to success only with those who were not

acquainted with the facts. Ignorance with respect to the complexities of contemporary society makes for a state of general uncertainty and anxiety, which is the ideal breeding ground for the modern type of reactionary mass movement.

(2013 [1950], 181)

The certainty that times change and the suspicious uncertainty about the direction of that change thus open up that space for fear, imagination and beliefs in conspiracy that populists are currently filling with virtuosic performances of half-truths.

### **Half-truths produce plausibility**

The half-truths I am discussing in this chapter play a central role in the political discourse of the post-factual. In the interest of and in agreement with particular ideologies, they produce tendentious interpretations of actual situations in order to convince an audience or confirm their expectations. As I am going to elaborate below, they usually take on narrative forms and are not concerned with knowledge and provability but with belief and plausibility. They are factual narratives with real *and* fictive content; a fictive content that is, however, *not* identified as such.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I will argue that half-truths share with rumours the mode of their transmission and an inclination to tell tall tales. But they differ from rumours in that they refer to real events and are believed – or at least treated as true – by those who pass them on. Some half-truths take the form of general narratives; others, such as those referred to earlier, take the form of brief stories that often have a number of variations. As I demonstrate below, such stories share some features with political anecdotes, such as their brevity and their claims to facticity and exemplarity. But an important difference is that half-true stories do not present memorable events, nor do they aspire to be literary gems. Instead, they generate interest only through their frames, which are given directly or indirectly in the form of political narratives or even whole explanatory models of the world, as well as in the form of particular communicative contexts, such as politically homogeneous subspaces of the public sphere.

In these ideological frames, half-truths are an important element in the production of plausibility. On the one hand, they seem to deliver real-life evidence of their claims;<sup>5</sup> on the other, they establish a connection between a correspondence and a coherence model of truth that completely separates itself from the need for proof. Although this mixture of truth styles is also true of other political narratives, this equation of coherence with plausibility operates most extensively in conspiracy theories. The philosopher Karl Hepfer identifies one main characteristic of classical conspiracy theories: a coherence model of truth according to which anything that does not contradict the other claims of a theory can be counted as true (2015, 57). But he adds that conspiracy theories also always require a selective connection to experience that is generally based on a model of truth in which anything that corresponds to one's own experiences in or with the world is counted as true. In conspiracy theories, then,



half-true stories serve the specific purpose of making this selective connection to experience while also creating a connection between the correspondence and coherence models of truth. With their factual content, which is mostly a reference to a real event (for example, the stereotypical reference in the truther conspiracy theory to the collapse of a third tower, WTC7, which was not hit by an airplane), half-true stories establish a correspondence with a reality that can be experienced. In contrast, their fictive content (here, the claim that the collapse of both WTC7 and the Twin Towers was the result of a controlled explosion) is coherent with the political narrative offered by the conspiracy theory (here, the idea that 9/11 was orchestrated by the US government). Both contents are connected by a logical fallacy: because one part seems to be true, the conspiracy theorist readily believes the whole – that is, the whole statement and the whole theory that stands behind it. However, such a correspondence ultimately authenticates a claim that derives exclusively from its coherence with the conspiracy theory, insofar as in this frame only *coherent* correspondences are at all admitted. Or, from another angle, possible connections to experience are always chosen with regard to their suitability for the theory. This can also be described as ‘motivated reasoning’:

Motivated reasoning turns the relationship between ideas and facts on its head. Ideally, you base your ideas and opinions on facts. However, when using motivated reasoning, you start at the other end with a fixed idea and only accept the facts that back it up.

(Hendricks and Vestergaard 2019, 81)

So, what is happening here is not so much an actual reality check as a mere implication, a mere suggestion of correspondence that produces a plausibility that ultimately consolidates the coherence model.

### Half-truths are (short) stories

The problem of plausibility is well-known in poetics, especially in theories of literature from ‘prefictional’ eras. For example, in Johann Jakob Breitinger’s *Critischer Dichtkunst* [*Critical Poetics*] (1966 [1740]), the poet differs from the historian in that the poet may extend or supplement what actually happened or turn the available material into new stories whose very novelty rouses the reader’s attention and provides entertainment (1966 [1740], 277–279). The condition, though, is that the new story must obey the imperative of plausibility. For Breitinger, then, while such stories do not have to strictly limit themselves to the truth, they do have to seem plausible to the average reader, and everything that corresponds to perception by the senses, emotions, or superstition is plausible (1966 [1740], 138–139). More specifically, the author should aim to adhere to the common deceptions of the senses, emotions, and superstition (1966 [1740], 299), in other words to what the average reader believes to be true. Breitinger thus makes two assumptions about average readers: they find things plausible that do not actually correspond to reality (for example,



the earth being flat), and they value the truth of the senses or of religious convictions more than the truth of reason. Such an approach, then, should guide the writer who is primarily interested in appealing to a large readership. This is exactly what the half-truths discussed here do: they offer their audience stories that correspond to the truth of their senses, their emotions, or their religion (and in this sense are ‘plausible’) – even though they cannot stand up to logical and/or empirical examination. Still, they present themselves, in Breitingen’s terms, not as literature but as historical writing, or, in contemporary terms, as factual narrative.

When contemporary theories of factual narration distinguish between factual and fictional narratives as well as between real and fictive circumstances, ‘factual’ involves a narrative’s claim to referentiality, while ‘fictive’ refers to the ontological status of what is represented (Klein and Martínez 2009, 3). Ideally, then, fictional narratives should report on the fictive and factual narratives on the real. Many stories, though, do not abide by this clear distinction; instead, their particular charm comes from blurring or even violating it. The literary theorists Matías Martínez and Christian Klein identify four types of ‘borderline texts’: ‘factual narratives with fictionalizing narrative procedures’; ‘factual narratives with fictive content’; ‘fictional narratives with factual content’; and ‘fictional narratives with a factual manner of speaking’ (2009, 4–5). Half-truths can be seen as belonging to the second type: they are factual narratives with partly fictive content, even as they still aim for plausibility. Klein and Martínez may discuss the issue of intentionality here (that is, whether ‘something untrue’ is presented ‘by mistake’ or ‘despite knowing better’ – Klein and Martínez 2009, 5), but intentionality does not actually play a role in the definition of half-truths, insofar as they either undermine the distinction between real and fictive or even transform the fictive into the real.

Perhaps not all half-truths can be seen as narratives, but at least those that are the focus here can. Half-truths in narrative form have a greater power to convince because narrative seems to be ‘that structure in which we humans construct causalities, sequences, and thus meaning’ (Müller 2019, 4). The concept of a narrative should here be understood primarily as the performative, largely linguistic realization of an incident in a plot. This includes specific individual stories *and* more general narratives that such stories can appeal to (cf. Müller 2019, 3). This understanding is based on Koschorke’s definition, in which ‘the concept of the narrative is reserved for a type of generalization opposed to the uncountable multiplicity of particular stories’ (2012, 30). The examples of half-truths discussed earlier, such as the story of New Year’s Eve in Dortmund, are just such individual stories whose success derives at least in part from how they realize conventional narratives and thus authenticate them. They have the form and function of anecdotal evidence. The fallacy discussed earlier can thus be characterized more precisely: within the half-truth there is an implicit analogical conclusion, and in the relationship of the half-true story to the political narrative that frames it there is a logical fallacy, which leaps from the particular narrated incident to a general point – that is, to the truth of the political narrative. Both the analogical conclusion and the

logical fallacy are grounded in anecdotal evidence. In the Dortmund story, then, the political narrative that describes the admission of refugees as ‘the story of a state failure’ (Aust et al. 2015) and that in turn could be analysed as a half-truth, is authenticated by the half-true story of the violence-prone Islamist mob on New Year’s Eve.

Beyond that, half-true stories are also similar to anecdotes in some respects. The most recent studies of anecdotes identify not only brevity and their claims to be factual and representative as characteristics of the genre, which they share with half-true stories, but also the origin of the anecdote in the writing of history (Hilzinger 2009, 13). To put it more precisely, they identify its origin in counter-history, insofar as the anecdotes collected in the *Historia arcana* by Procopius (ca. 500 CE; later known as *Anekdotia* and now as *The Secret History*) ‘represented the repressed, secretive side of official historiography and [...] derived their political explosiveness from that’ (Hilzinger 2009, 12). This connection is reinforced by what Sonja Hilzinger argues about the history of anecdotes: ‘Eras of political crisis and transformation intensified the production of anecdotes, which suggests that anecdotes were read as political or at least as texts with contemporary relevance’ (2009, 15). She adds that anecdotes focus not on ‘neutral’ reporting but on ‘partisan commentary’ (Hilzinger 2009, 15). Such commentary makes use of the anecdote’s ‘structurally immanent potential to evaluate complex historical events in a morally unambiguous way, through fragmentation and a focus on biography, and thus exploit them ideologically’ (Hilzinger 2009, 16). This also relativizes the anecdote’s claim to facticity. As Hilzinger writes, the object of the anecdote does not have to be ‘a truth that can be tested for its factual content’ (1997, 232); the concept of truth is understood more as ‘the taking of a position in the sense of partisanship’, which at the same time involves a ‘loss of meaning of the term “true”’ (1997, 232). Standing as it does on the ‘periphery of the literary canon as well as at the limits of historiography and journalism’ (Hilzinger 2009, 12), the anecdote aims at such partisanship by concentrating – to pick up one of the four characteristics Hilzinger identifies as its most stable (2009, 12) – on the *narration* of an allegedly *true, still unknown* (withheld from the public up until now), and *unusual* (potentially unmasking/suspicious) *event*.

As the rhetoric of half-truths in post-factual discourse shares the aims of the anecdote (partisan commentary, morally unambiguous evaluation, and ideological exploitation), half-truths can make effective use of the genre – or at least these commonalities between half-true stories and the political anecdote are not very surprising. Along with brevity and the claim to facticity, half-true stories and the anecdote also share a striving for clarity (say, through personalization) with a simultaneous formal stringency that severely reduces complexity (with respect to both the represented event and the problematic situation addressed more or less explicitly by the political narrative). If narrative, as Koschorke argues (2012), is characterized by its filtering of knowledge so that it corresponds to the expectations of the average recipient and can thus be shared on a wide social basis, then this is even more true of

half-truths. In them, ‘the social dimension of communicated knowledge’ is separated in an extreme way from ‘its objective dimension’ (Koschorke 2012, 36). When they serve as evidence in the form of anecdotes, half-truths can produce a kind of ‘socially shared knowledge’ even in the midst of crises of knowledge (Koschorke 2012, 37). For this reason, half-true stories share two further characteristics with the anecdote: their precarious authorship and their transmission in the form of hearsay as they are repeatedly copied and revised, moving from (digital) platform to (digital) platform.

### **Half-truths are connective and ‘multiversional’**

The ‘connectivity’ of half-truths can be understood more precisely with the help of the narratological concept of ‘multiversionality’. For Fritz Breithaupt, someone reading or listening to a story usually comes up with alternative versions of the story at the time of reception (2019, 40–41; 2012; see also Gadinger 2019, 124–125). This ‘multiversionality’ is especially present in the evolution of stories that are spread orally and repeatedly changed in the process. For half-truths, this observation is doubly relevant.

Firstly, insofar as half-truths often vary as they are passed on in repeated tellings, they always accumulate new fictive elements. One example is the case of the half-true story with which Trump wanted to confirm his claims about voter fraud: he claimed that his friend, the golfer Bernhard Langer, had waited in line at a polling station but had been turned away, while other voters who ‘looked illegal’ had been admitted. Langer refuted Trump’s claims, insisting that he was not a friend of Trump’s; that, as a German citizen, he was not even allowed to vote in the United States; and that he had not told Trump the story. Rather, he had heard it from a friend who had told it to another friend who had in turn told an acquaintance, etc., until the story finally reached the White House and thus was able to enter the public sphere in its modified form:

I didn’t say anything to the president. We never talked. I told a story to a friend and the friend told a story to another friend and another friend and another friend. Somewhere down the line six people later somebody knew somebody at the White House and that’s how it went [...].

(Hill 2017; see also Thrush 2017)

With every re-telling, new fictive elements become attached to the original story until it ends up the half-truth that Trump used to argue his case.

Secondly, every half-truth as a rule corresponds to many similar ones that all serve one and the same political narrative. Trump’s campaign slogan and meta-narrative, that ‘there is something going on’, is a good example. Its strategic vagueness challenged his audience to take action themselves and develop their own theories about what exactly was going on in secret, such as the claim that ‘Hillary Clinton is seriously ill, and that’s being kept from the public’. For this half-truth – in fact, she had pneumonia – a variety of new and always

quite similar half-true stories were invoked. For example, Clinton's dizzy spell at the 9/11 memorial in 2016 was taken as an opportunity to claim that she had Parkinson's, epilepsy, or other illnesses, or that she was mentally unstable. These claims were grounded in appropriately edited photographs and videos. Others began to think about the 'Mystery Man', a Secret Service agent who often showed up near her – among other things, he was said to actually be Clinton's personal Medical Crisis Handler, who would hurry to give her an injection whenever a spell was imminent (Weigel 2016). Such videos replace purely verbal half-truths with a combination of interpretive commentary and (edited) pictorial material that serves to produce evidence. In the context of an observable shift in social media from the conspiracy theory to the conspiracy rumour, which is characterized not only by its brevity (that conforms to its medium) but also by its vagueness (which increases its connectivity) and its openness (which encourages co-production), Michael Butter, among others, has recently addressed the significance of such pictorial material:

Even greater vagueness characterizes a new kind of internet video that has also appeared in recent years. These are short clips, often only a few minutes long, that react to topical events. [...] Their makers either speak directly into the camera or comment from off screen on pictorial material that they have taken from news shows or other sources.

(2018, 208)

Unlike statements that are subject to the truth (as even lies are, *ex negativo*), the production of half-truths involves a kind of openness to modification. They provide an opportunity to realize a desire to fabulate. In connection with the rumour, which in this sense is closely related to the half-truth, Neubauer also speaks of a '*poésie fabuleuse*' (2009 [1998], 138). Here, reception and production go hand in hand. The vagueness of Trump's slogan offers space for the imagination, so his audience can become active themselves and fill that space with appropriate stories that can be retold and then steadily supplemented and modified. In the context of Web 2.0, the concept of the 'prosumer' has been coined for this dynamic; the prosumer is both consumer and producer of information. Above all, this has consequences for the issue of authorship. On the one hand, the production of half-truths in social networks is driven by the desire to be an author and to have an author's public influence. On the other hand, producers of half-truths avoid the responsibility normally connected with authorship. When Klein and Martínez write of factual narrative that the author as narrator guarantees the truth of the story that is told (2009, 3), that is precisely what is not true of the retold half-truth. In this sense, their authors are more like those of fictional texts, in which the act of pretending releases the author from the responsibility to veracity.

But half-truths follow the logic not of pretence but of hearsay, so unlike fictional invention, their production is based on collective authorship. They make use of the pool of what is generally known, which even Aristotle

already saw (as *doxa*) as an inevitable prerequisite for the project of a persuasive rhetorics. For example, Trump constantly refers to ‘what he has heard’ or ‘what he has heard completely differently’ (FlackCheck 2016). If the prosumer of half-truths hides behind a collective whose production process he integrates himself into, that is also true of the populist politician whose authoritarian assertion of half-truths makes it possible for him to present himself as a spokesman for the people – as in Trump’s insistent claim in his speech at the Republican National Convention on 21 July 2016 that ‘I am your voice!’ (Mills 2016). Thus, half-truths aim for participation in a double sense: participation in the collective *production* of half-truths *in progress*, and participation in a *collective* that not only works together on half-truths but at the same time repeatedly establishes a sense of belonging through that very work.

In German Romanticism, such considerations were widespread and came to be characterized as the ‘new mythology’. A good contemporary example of this is offered by the myth of the ‘Great Replacement’ that is being busily woven by, among others, the identitarian movement, while also serving to unify them. According to this conspiracy theory, which can already be found in William Luther Pierce’s novel *The Turner Diaries* and was famously taken up and propagated by Renaud Camus, the mentor of the identitarians in France, an ongoing population replacement has been planned at a high level in such countries as Austria, Germany, and France. Depending on the country, group, and partisan, there are various versions of the ‘Great Replacement’; for example, sometimes a country’s own ‘elites’ (as forgetters of their own culture), sometimes America, sometimes ‘global Jewry’, and sometimes the Muslim world are seen as responsible, but the identitarians can nevertheless unite behind the jointly woven myth and continue writing a narrative for which new half-true stories can be steadily produced as alleged proofs. For example, in August 2017, a post from an amateur detective spread from Facebook to right-wing forums and blogs: he had fished a bank statement out of garbage thrown away by a young man from Afghanistan, and it supposedly proved that he was officially receiving €1,780 a month as an asylum seeker. According to the right-wing interpretation, the German government was treating refugees better and valuing them more highly than Germany’s own population, who also needed help. In actuality, the money that had been paid to the account of the young man’s father was the entire payment for a family of seven (Woitsch 2017; Weidner 2017; Wolf 2017; Locker 2017).

However, not all half-truths can be so easily dissected. Rather, the value of the analytical concept of the half-truth is precisely how it can describe speech acts that situate the fictive in factual narratives and threaten to blur distinctions between knowing and believing, between facts and opinions. For even when such a dissection is relatively simple (and it is much harder when analysing fallacies and rhetorical manoeuvres), those who have staked their beliefs on the half-truth are *not* going to be convinced by factual (counter-)



evidence about the falseness of a statement; or, for that matter, in the political conviction or conspiracy theory it supports. For half-truths are organized in narrative form and thus aim at a plausibility that lives not from agreement with facts but from the confirmation of previous convictions, the avoidance of cognitive dissonance, the confirmation of a ‘felt truth’, and the reduction of contingency and complexity. Still, prosumers of half-truths do not completely surrender their connection with reality. Within democratic discourse, after all, they cannot simply present an authoritarian assertion of their view of the world; rather, they have to promote it and convince others of their perspective *discursively*. That’s what half-truths are for. They serve as a kind of ‘gateway drug’ into the post-factual discourse of contemporary right-wing populists and conspiracy theorists alike. Through the factual mode of the story and through their partial reference to real events, they suggest an orientation towards reality while also resorting to the fictional to address emotional truth, the satisfaction of needs (such as affectivity, scapegoats, a sense of belonging, or being a hero) and everyday perception.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Translated by Andrew Shields. A slightly altered German version of this chapter that dates back to an essay originally written in the fall of 2017, appears as ‘Versuch über die Halbwahrheit’, in M. Martínez, K. Rennhak, M. Scheffel, R. Sommer and A. Weixler (eds) *Postfaktisches Erzählen*, pp. 23–44, Berlin: De Gruyter (2021), available online at: [www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110693065-003/html](http://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110693065-003/html), and has also been taken up in my German book: *Halbwahrheiten. Zur Manipulation von Wirklichkeit*, pp. 31–49, Berlin: Mattes & Seitz (2021). Reused with permission.
- 2 Among the many texts on the concept of facts in the age of the post-factual, Philipp Sarasin’s relatively early reaction to the debate is exemplary (Sarasin 2016).
- 3 On her recent analysis of the ‘System of Trump & Co.’, see van Dyk (2017).
- 4 Cf. Klein and Martínez’s distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ (2009, 1–2). Here, though, I understand ‘fictive’ not only as ‘invented’ but also as ‘modified’ (a modified ‘real’, so to speak), in the sense of the examples above (generalizations, omissions, exaggerations, reinterpretations, etc.). Cf. also (Breithaupt 2012, 40).
- 5 Cf. Müller in the context of his distinction between narrative and story: ‘The function of individual stories is always the “proof” of a narrative, although as a rule individual cases are generalized’ (2019, 9). See also Hendricks and Vestergaard on ‘misinformation’ (2019, 55).
- 6 The explanatory potential of the analytical concept of the half-truth is tested further in more in-depth analyses of texts/videos/statements by former journalist Claas Relotius, conspiracy theorist Ken Jebsen and public intellectual Uwe Tellkamp in my book *Halbwahrheiten. Zur Manipulation von Wirklichkeit* (2021).

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