

Data, Truth and Trust

Sophia Rosenfeld (University of Pennsylvania, USA)

Let me begin by saying that it is a great honor, as a historian, to be here at the opening of this Paris21 2019 Cross-Regional Forum on Building Trust in Data, and I am very grateful to everyone at the OECD who facilitated my being here today and to everyone in the room for listening and, hopefully, offering your own thoughts on this subject. Thank you.

THE PROBLEM TODAY: A CRISIS FOR TRUTH

I probably will not surprise any of you if I start by saying that truth has been having a difficult time of it these days. Both misinformation and disinformation, including false statistics, are circulating with new reach, speed, and effect, from social media feeds, to political party platforms, to actual seats of government. We know too that there is little popular consensus these days about where or how sound information can be found or even what kinds of data are worthy of our trust. And maybe most seriously, polls, as well as voting patterns, show that a large number of people everywhere just do not care. On the contrary, they seem to embrace this blurry approach to the lines between truth and falsehood.

Some value, as in the case of many supporters of President Donald Trump in the United States, what seems to be political leaders' personal authenticity—"telling it like it is"—over veracity or accuracy. Some want to win at all cost, truth be damned. And many people, more often now on the political Right though at various earlier moments more often on the political Left, have come to see *everything* that "establishment" culture touts as a fact, including official statistics, as actually a matter of opinion or spin, rejecting in some cases the idea that there *are* any impartial, disinterested sources, methods or arbiters of truth out there or any pure, objective information at all. (You might think of recent English-language expressions like "that's my truth" or "alternative fact".) In the United States at least, all data has come to seem politically motivated, from job numbers to crime figures, and so have the categories themselves, especially if they are associated with citizenship status. Conversely, President Trump's favorite expression, 'fake news,' has become both a partisan claim and an all-purpose description of the world, adopted as far afield as Myanmar to deny reports of the attempted genocide of that nation's Muslim minority.

As you also undoubtedly know, in late 2016, post-Brexit and just prior to the last presidential election in the United States, "Post-Truth" was deemed by the Oxford Dictionaries the word of the year—and not simply because of the brazenness of all the lying, but because so many in the Anglophone media had

concluded that people in much of the world had lost any common ground about what constitutes truth and that this fractured data ecosystem meant a kind of existential crisis for democracy itself. Ditto for “Postfaktisch” in Germany in 2016. Some of us might say that the situation looks even worse today, three years later, when we can point to: a) an increase in technological capabilities to produce convincing falsehoods, like “deep fakes”; b) growing awareness of the number of states that are using misinformation or disinformation as a form of international warfare and often with the help of for-profit firms like Cambridge Analytica in the UK and the Archimedes Group in Israel; c) polls showing steadily decreasing trust, in professions and institutions associated with knowledge production, from the press to universities to NSOs, within the general public of numerous countries, as well as assaults on all of the above from emboldened autocrats; and d) more evidence of the nefarious social and political effects of viral untruths, including false statistics, such as the propping up of anti-immigrant and anti-minority sentiment.

But to my mind, before we conclude that we are post-anything and certainly before we tackle what to do about it, we need always to know something more about what came before. That way we can assess what has changed and what has not and why. My subject today (and of my new book, Democracy and Truth; A Short History) is thus a question of history. I ask, bluntly: How did we get to this

point? How did the longstanding and seemingly secure marriage of democracy and truth, including from early on statistical truth, go so astray?

That may sound like an odd question. Indeed, the changing nature of the relationship between democracy and truth—two big abstract ideas—is the kind of thing we tend only to wonder about when a crisis is upon us. But it is important to keep in mind that knowledge, or what individuals believe to be true, including even raw data, has a history. The sources, methods, technologies, practitioners, institutions, even form of truth claims and the conflicts that they generate change over time in relation to a host of external factors, structural and contingent, that can be described as social, cultural, political, and economic.

Moreover, if we look closely (though few commentators actually have), we will see that the big story here does not actually start in 2016 with Brexit, the last US presidential election, and the emergence of the term “post-truth.” It does not even start with the invention of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube ten years earlier. Rather, the full story starts all the way back in the very particular ‘truth culture’ or ‘truth regime’ (to use the expression of the French philosopher Michel Foucault) in which modern democratic practices were founded and in which they are still steeped. That is the trans-Atlantic Enlightenment. So I hope you’ll bear with me this morning as we start by taking a deep dive back to that moment, some two hundred fifty years ago, just before the Age of Revolutions

took off in North America and then France, and then we work our way forward again to the present and our own predicament. Because I think they are related.

THE DEMOCRATIC MODEL

At the core of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, if we can generalize a bit across geography, was actually a single preoccupation: how can we collectively eradicate error, myth, and false belief and get to something closer to an accurate picture of what the world is really like? Many responses focused on methods for knowing things, or what might now be called epistemology. The French spoke often then about what they called the *esprit philosophique*. But other responses focused on the larger social and political context in which truth about the world could, potentially, best come to light. And in the second half of the eighteenth century, critics of monarchy on both sides of the Atlantic developed a particularly novel argument. They claimed that one major comparative advantage of republics--the eighteenth-century term for what would evolve in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into democracies--was that they would have a uniquely close relationship with truth, understood as a moral category (the opposite of lies) and an epistemological one (the opposite of false information).

Whereas kings (like priests or, indeed, aristocrats) had relied on secrecy and cunning and deception as regular, even valuable tools of rulership—you should be

imagining Louis XIV's Versailles nearby--republics would thrive on exactly the opposite set of values: a) transparency so that everything would be visible to the naked eye, b) a taste for concrete evidence or proof, and c) the personal sincerity of all involved. In 1772, the French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier, a big fan of Rousseau, imagined, the world of the future as becoming a "book of morals" in which everyone and everything would be fully legible to everyone else, what we would call now an open book. Lying would also be a crime.

And in such a world, established truths, including basic moral and factual ones, would serve as a starting point for public deliberation. But participation in the political process—from debating to, eventually, voting—would also, in the end, aid the cause of truth's discovery and expression. It was an idea that was strongly appealing to members of a burgeoning capitalist marketplace too.

The Marquis de Condorcet, writing in prison at the height of the Terror during the French Revolution, was convinced that "zeal for the truth" was the driving force behind the inevitable transformations of the present. Just a few years later in the 1790s, during the battle over the Alien and Sedition Acts, the American statesman James Madison was still declaring as an unassailable fact that "in a republic, light will prevail over darkness, truth over error." To a certain extent, many of us still agree, which may be why we still see a crisis for truth as a crisis for democracy.

But here is where things also get tricky. For eighteenth-century republican thinkers, what would distinguish all truths under the conditions of popular sovereignty (apart from those few truths like 2 plus 2 is 4 that could be established by logic) is that they would be collective, communal conclusions. No one person, institution, or even sector—no king or priest or national research body or specific caste--would get to say what is true. Furthermore, truths (and here again, with the exception of logical ones) would never be fixed or treated as dogma, either. Instead, something like what scholars today call “public knowledge” would be, ideally, worked out through a permanently open-ended, back-and-forth among many different kinds of people.

A small number—what we would now call “experts”--would play specialized leadership roles, outside and often inside government, as a result of their specialized knowledge. Their function would include providing many of the facts that were necessary for public debate and debunking that which was wrong. A larger number (though never everyone) would constitute the audience for this information, but, as citizens, would primarily operate with whatever everyday wisdom they had picked up experientially in the world, being neither too deferential nor too dismissive toward the claims of the educated elite as they together shaped the future. At least that is how theorists of democracy, from Condorcet all the way to John Rawls in the late twentieth century--imagined it.

Moreover, this would all transpire, in was hoped in the first republics to be formed in the Age of Revolutions, following, almost mystically, nothing more than a few basic principles. One was the idea of *plain speech*, a style of deliberately simple, straightforward, unembellished language, whether of words or increasingly, numbers, meant to create clear, unhindered communication across society but also to replace the ornate, euphemistic, and difficult-to-interpret language of aristocrats and courts. Another was *free speech* (which was quickly enshrined in formal law). Here the idea, dating all the way back to England's John Milton, was that competition--in books, in periodicals, even in information and claims—would, in a world in which it was hard to be absolutely certain about much, ultimately work to dispel errors in fact and interpretation alike and to bring truth to the fore. Finally, and maybe most mystically, was the idea of *trust*: the conviction that most people, most of the time, even if known only by institutional affiliation or professional title and not by any personal ties, were invested in truth, finding it and telling it alike.

That is the ideal in a nutshell. However, what that has meant—if we turn now to political practice as opposed to theory—is that most truth claims, under the conditions of what we call democracy, have actually always been something to fight over. That is particularly the case when it comes to the question of which individuals or sectors within the population are seen as knowledgeable and get to

say what is fact and on what grounds. I might even go so far as to say that most fights over education or over freedom of press are, to this day, about what counts as genuine knowledge and who gets to make that determination on what basis.

What's more--and this is the key point--the democratic truth process has continually been threatened since the late-eighteenth-century founding moment by those who have tried hard to monopolize it, which is to say, to hustle it out this contentious but ultimately collaborative public sphere and capture the power that comes from having the exclusive right to define it. On the one hand, the threat has sometimes come from those knowledge elites ("experts" in nineteenth-century parlance) who can claim superior access to truth and trustworthiness on account of their specialized training and institutional associations, which traditionally also implies something about their race, gender, and/or relative wealth. That has primarily been the case when those experts have insisted upon the validity of their knowledge in isolation, without the leavening effect of ordinary people's basic, more experiential sense of the world, or when expertise itself has been distorted by money and bias. We will come back to this longstanding issue in a moment.

For on the other hand, the threat has also at various times come from those claiming to speak for ordinary or regular or "real" people, people thought to be endowed the kind of everyday, local knowledge of how the world works born of living in it, particularly when they insist on ignoring the necessary corrective of

expert, trained perspectives or outlying voices of various kinds. For ironically, while both—elite knowledge born of extensive education *and* commonsense perspectives--are vital to democracy as first imagined, either mode, without the other, can lead not only to bad policies. They can lead to the dismantling of democracy altogether since democracy rests ideally on a kind of contentious pluralism. It was Robespierre, ironically, who did so much both to forge what constitutes democracy today and to introduce the modern police state in the form of the terror, who saw the risk from both sides circa 1793. Champions of liberal versions of representative democracy have been trying to ward off both tendencies in their extreme form as real, and oddly parallel, risks ever since.

RECENT SOURCES of the CURRENT CRISIS

Now what does this deep background have to do with the present, in which we seem to be squarely in the latter mode, with attacks on official expertise resurgent from Brazil to the United States to Britain to the Philippines and new challenges everywhere to the statistical arena or datasphere?

We can, of course, say ‘not that much’ and chose to concentrate exclusively on those factors that have greatly exacerbated the problem of hostility to official facts and figures in the last few years. That includes: a) an explosion of data, much of it generated by unofficial, non-accountable private sources, competing with

official data in a saturated marketplace; b) new technological capacities for sharing, as well as generating, that information which, in the absence of gatekeepers, makes everyone potentially a knowledge creator, distributor, and consumer at once—and with global reach; c) a regulatory and financial arena in which large technology companies that offer platforms for false and often untraceable information, or that use algorithms that boost what is sensational and profitable over what is true, are by and large, not held liable (and this problem is particularly acute in the United States because of the possibility of companies hiding behind an “absolutist” free speech doctrine); d) the fact that all of the above trends have helped fuel political polarization, as people overwhelmed with a superabundance of conflicting and often inaccurate data are most likely to retreat into information subgroups or bubbles characterized by distinctive kinds of epistemic loyalties as well as ideological commitments—a situation that political parties and political leaders have been able to exploit successfully in many parts of the world as of late; and finally, e) growing economic dislocation and inequality that leaves many people around the world feeling more alienated than ever, culturally and intellectually, from the cosmopolitan world of experts and their exclusive ways of knowing.

All of these factors are vital to the big story. There is much to say about all of them. But there is also a longer tale here of which they are, in fact, a part. That

is a story of continued and indeed mounting tension ever since the eighteenth century between expert knowledge and popular knowledge, a story that has the history of statistics at its heart. In my remaining time, I would like, therefore, to call attention to this larger and more neglected story of how this conflict built, from the age of trans-Atlantic democratic revolutions onward. Then, finally, in a less historical vein, I will say a few words about what we might do about it now and why it ultimately matters.

DEEP SOURCES OF THE CURRENT CRISIS:

PART I, THE STORY OF EXPERTISE

So let's start with the expertise side of the story—which has long posed one kind of threat to democracy in practice when it has been allowed to become too dominant. Already in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, European rulers, as they conquered new territories and tried to expand their power at home and abroad, began to require a growing number of advisors. That included mapmakers, explorers, financial wizards, military specialists, and more, some positioned inside and some outside of government proper. The growth of a secular knowledge bureaucracy is a vital part of the story of the expansion of modern, centralized states and, especially, imperial states (and though my focus today is on European developments primarily because of the link with democracy, it is not an

accident that it is earlier empires, Chinese, Mughal, Ottoman, that developed the most extensive early knowledge bureaucracies).

Moreover, the establishment of knowledge bureaucracies in European states also meant the emergence of a new and lasting class--a new elite--associated with the provisioning of “useful” knowledge. Even in the earliest modern republics, that is, those formed as the United States and France in the late eighteenth century so deliberately in contrast to the monarchical states they left behind, it was widely understood, initially, that in order to put state-of-the-art knowledge to work, leadership roles had to be assumed by the most virtuous (“men of their word”) and the most wise (“men of knowledge”). Thomas Jefferson even spoke just as the United States was being forged of the need for a “natural aristocracy” of talent replacing one of birth.

And from the late eighteenth century onward, it was assumed that much of that useful knowledge would take the form of what was then called in cutting-edge circles “statistics,” literally information useful to states and statesmen. The moment of the birth of the first modern democracies coincides with the moment of the birth of the first national censuses (i.e Denmark, Norway and Spain; the US Constitution was the first in 1790 to mandate regular ones); the introduction of statistics as an academic area of study in German universities; and soon thereafter, the advent of national statistical bureaus, which spread from Europe outward, to

collect and analyze a growing amount of data about natural and human phenomena alike. Publishing numerical descriptions of peoples and especially their economies came to seem vital to the early democratic promise of making information public (which early modern state statistics were not), of building legislation upon a foundation of evidence, and of apportioning representatives, as well as determining taxation, by population figures.

Thus ironically, just as nation-states in North America, Latin America, and much of Europe were actually “democratizing” in the nineteenth century in the sense of finally eliminating chattel slavery, extending educational opportunities, and trying out universal manhood suffrage, so did a new kind of knowledge *professional*, in the wake of this demand for information, appear on the scene. Both on public and, to a lesser degree, private payrolls, men (and I use that word deliberately here) who now called themselves not only “experts” but also “specialists” and “scientists” and “professionals,” all new coinages of the era, proved themselves more useful than ever. For as governments expanded their purview—in part to compensate for the problems generated by expanding democratization and capitalism--they needed more data, of more kinds, and generated with more sophisticated mathematical tools, to build new kinds of government services, including eventually social welfare policies. The numbers of those taking up this professional mission grew steadily through the nineteenth

century. And these were just the precursors, it now appears, to the “policy experts,” like economists, engineers, and urban planners, who would dominate fin-de-siècle and then twentieth-century statecraft domestically, from Japan to Mexico, and in colonial and, eventually, post-colonial realms and transnational bodies alike.

The idea was that impartial, impersonal information, provided by credentialed but nameless experts trained in apolitical, scientific techniques of knowledge gathering and analysis, could be trusted by all, from other experts to citizens at large. This work would then serve as an “objective” foundation for productive democratic debate and governance. Indeed, at the turn of the new century, the American pragmatist John Dewey imagined the future entailing a perfect balance, a blending of democratic and scientific cultures to the advantage of both.

But there was always a hint, even in so-called Progressive doctrine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that experts sometimes had to override “the people” for their own good. Money, it became apparent, was always going to matter to the datasphere too, as knowledge is a commodity under capitalism, and financial incentives were bound to play some role in shaping its contours. Here we might think of Max Weber’s famous claims from the Weimar period in Germany about democracy and bureaucracy being born together, but also his insistence that the latter would necessarily always prove to be a thorn in the

side of the former since they pulled in such opposite directions, not least in terms of their social foundations.

Indeed, much of the twentieth century now seems rife with examples of states, “developed” and “developing,” that have done just that: increasingly moved towards technocracy. “Technocracy” is simply the name we now give to the modern “planning state” when it seems to be run almost entirely by bureaucrats and specialists and sometimes businesspeople, a condition that today’s European Union seems, to many observers, to be close to embodying. When Europeans complain about the “democratic deficit” of the EU, they do not mean simply that European “citizens” are not involved in a direct way in making policy (since they aren’t in most places). What they mean is more that “citizens” have so little influence over the nature of those policies, and so little means to hold officials accountable, and so little even basic understanding of the EU’s technical reports and bills and by whom or how they are crafted, that what gets passed as EU law often seems (and fishing laws are a frequent example) utterly cut off from the lived experience or “truths” of ordinary Europeans, left or right.

The same is the case in Washington DC. Official statistics are produced in voluminous quantities by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Economic Research Service, Energy Information Administration, Internal Revenue

Service Tax Statistics, National Agricultural Statistics Service, National Center for Education Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, Office of Personnel Management, and Office of Research Evaluation and Statistics, not to mention the agencies that monitor all this information, most of it too arcane and specialized for ordinary people to understand even if publicly available. And that's only the federal level. States and regions, NGOs, think tanks, and businesses issue yet more, often with conflicting numbers. It is certainly similar in many capital cities around the world. One danger of the trajectory of modern political life is thus that, under the banner of democracy, we have been steadily pushing all truth but technocratic truth, with its close association with statistics, to the side —thereby, accidentally or not, eroding participatory democracy itself.

DEEP SOURCES OF THE CURRENT CRISIS: PART II, POPULISM

Yet this is, as anyone who knows their modern history is aware, only half the story, at best. For resistance both to elites' dominance of knowledge production and elite ways of knowing, including statistical knowing (with the exception perhaps of sports statistics), also began even before the Age of Revolutions. Pushback came from anti-Enlightenment types who touted not the methods of the scientific revolution applied to the social and political sphere, but

rather faith, or instinct, or local traditions, or practical know-how, including what we might now call “the wisdom of the kitchen table,” as less pretentious and actually superior ways of getting to truth. Moreover, the common sense of the common people, or what the French sometimes called *le bon sens du village*, was an idea with an Enlightenment pedigree too insofar as it could involve challenging established, elite truths by using no more than some very basic reasoning.

And then, in 1776, the Anglo-American revolutionary Thomas Paine, author of the great political pamphlet Common Sense, gave this long-simmering alternative epistemology political significance. He announced that, in fact, when it came to the truths of political life, ordinary people not only knew *enough* but actually, in the aggregate, knew *better*. And to make this point, he called on a kind of reverse snobbery in which he suggested that it was precisely the people’s native honesty and plain understanding of things that allowed them to cut through all the phony truisms and absurdities traditionally spouted by church, king, and their fancy, overeducated spokespeople and to get back to basic truths, moral and factual. Moreover, he insisted this everyday common sense provided a foundation on which an entirely new kind of egalitarian, participatory, and radically transparent government could be built. Early efforts in this direction include the first constitution for the state of Pennsylvania and the first Jacobin constitution for France. In both, the idea was that the people’s active presence inside government,

combined with the elimination of an epistemic ruling class, was essential doubly as protection against inevitable elite abuses of power and as a source of real wisdom.

This idea has survived (though neither radically republican constitution did) down to the present, sometimes associated with the right, sometimes the left. At its best, the repudiation of elite epistemology and the defense of the honesty and wisdom of ordinary people—meaning those outside the realm of educated expertise, which could include women, people of color of both sexes, peasants, and/or workers—has served as a way to justify all sorts of emancipatory social and political movements. It has also, as in the case of the civil rights and anti-colonial movements in the 1960s, drawn needed attention to the constant complicity of knowledge and power (though in some ways this was always evident—even the very first census in the United States raised the question, for example, of whether slaves should be counted as people when it came to measuring population).

We cannot be surprised either that this kind of skepticism of official truth claims survives still in the general population, as experts move between government, academia, NGOs, and political parties, and as the rest of us understand less and less about the information that experts provide and the sources or biases behind it. We are probably right to maintain some moderate level of skepticism about all information that we encounter, including what our government says and what it doesn't. The ability to question claims, including official ones,

was one of the original reasons for laws protecting freedom of expression in democracies.

Still, this has not been the only or even dominant form that the challenge to elite or established truth has taken over the last two hundred plus years, in France or the United States or anywhere else. Non-expert, non-elite claims to truth have also often worked quite the opposite way: not to make a claim on behalf of those marginalized by the dominant conception of truth, but as a way to try to reinforce the idea of a single truth position on the part of the “real” or even “true” people, whether of a city, a region, or a nation as whole. For just as claims for elite knowledge without the corrective of popular truth can turn exclusionary and lead to the kind of sterile, technocratic government often associated with Brussels or Washington, so arguments for “the people” as the only real source of truth in a democracy can and have run a parallel risk. That is encouraging disdain for all forms of verifiable, expert knowledge and its purveyors (you might think of British political leader Michael Gove saying pre-Brexit: “I think people have had enough of experts”), as well as for dissenting or outlying voices of all kinds, including foreigners or immigrants--until a demagogue is found to perfectly and often cynically incarnate the true will of the true people.

You may recognize this as a style of politics that now often gets labeled populism. What I want to stress here is what this discussion has obscured: that

populism depends at its core on a very particular conspiracy story related to democratic truth. The starting point is that some group of people—often intellectual elites, with or without being in cahoots with an oppressed or marginal group like immigrants—has, via obfuscating jargon and phony claims learned at school or abroad, usurped the people’s basic, primordial democratic right to define the way the world is. But, the story goes, when the real or true people finally wake up and realize that everything around them is subterfuge or “fake news,” from press reports to the “scientific” conclusions of universities and government agencies, they will be able to restore the reign of the true people’s everyday common sense and candor. Then the reign of real-life, consensual solutions to real-life problems will begin at last.

This story too goes back to the very birth of modern democracy and, in variants, has been cropping up sporadically ever since in democracies around the world, from fringe party platforms to presidential rhetoric, on the left and on the right and in between, stoked by a free, commercial press, by domestic and foreign propaganda, and these days, often by industries that stand to benefit from capitalizing on it too. Think of all the sites of arguments globally against scientists’ climate change data, from industrial concerns to political platforms to on-line civil society groups—and how often they turn out to be directly fueling one another conceptually and financially. Indeed, an anti-elite and anti-expert notion

of truth and knowledge seems very recently to have become the fastest growing, if not necessarily yet the most dominant, idiom of politics in the world today, and at a steep price, as Robespierre was among the first to notice. But it does not and cannot exist without its perennial foil.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

This brings us, finally, back around to the present. If we accept that technocratic and populist truth have been on a long collision course and that this much is built into the structure of post-Enlightenment democracy *and* if we also accept that their antagonism and indeed desire to eliminate the other has been recently ramped up in unprecedented ways, in part by technological and media shifts, but also by large macroeconomic trends, the next question is obvious. What, if anything, can be done? Can trust, including in official data and NSOs, be rebuilt—but without the pendulum swinging so far the other way that it creates an even greater popular backlash?

Here I tread carefully. For one, I am a historian not a prognosticator, and secondly, the stakes are high. As the émigré philosopher Hannah Arendt famously pointed out, when it comes to truth, there is the danger of doing too little and there is the danger of doing too much. Too little and you risk fascism or totalitarianism, where everyone accepts lying, including from official sources, as a matter of

course and expects nothing different. Too much and you get the reign of terror with its obsession with unmasking of every person and every claim. We might then try to think on different scales.

Briefly, at the micro level, it is vital for good information, meaning quality data, to continue to be produced and widely disseminated; that is the work you already do. It is also vital that we encourage the press *and* government agencies to engage in sober, non-partisan fact checking and issue corrections of faulty information, even if it is often ignored or even if, on occasion, it backfires, pulling obscure conspiracy theories and lies into the light of day. At the same time, we need campaigns to encourage everyone, including especially the young, to develop new information habits that focus more attention on where they are getting information and determining what is grounded in fact and what is not. And those who produce official data should be encouraged to explain to the public not just what their numbers mean in jargon-free, laymen's terms, but also how those numbers were produced, and how they are related to public perceptions and experience, and what they are relevant for. How, for example, are statistics on homelessness relevant both to people who see homelessness in the streets and find it threatening and to people who are experiencing homelessness themselves? In other words, populist pushback should be met head-on, not ignored. But those are,

in the end, also small-scale responses—and alas, they will probably have relatively small benefits.

At the grandest macro level of national or even global political change, the hill is steeper, but we, as citizens, might still push hard for policies that attack growing income inequality—a global problem--so that we are not so very far from each other in experience and opportunity that we seem to be inhabiting different worlds. That’s vital. We can also try to step away from increasingly obsolete notions of ideas existing in a “marketplace” (as it is often described in the United States) and demand more national and transnational regulation, especially of new media businesses. Liability matters, and I don’t believe we can count on self-regulation and voluntary codes when it comes to technology giants like Google or Facebook, who seem constantly to be one step behind disinformation propagators.

Finally, in the middle, I believe we have to do more to support the variety of democratic institutions properly concerned with the production, discovery or diffusion of truth, especially those with some commitment to bridging social and epistemological gaps. That should include every kind of school and library, as well as research institutions of all kinds, since all have the capacity to model a healthy, properly democratic skepticism toward established truths, but also some sense of where and how verifiable knowledge is produced and where it can be found and of what demonstrability and proof consist. They can also try to involve

people from many walks of life in the process. The French Republic famously made ‘expert’ a wide category in rebuilding after the Second World War—and gained considerable buy-in that way.

There is no magic bullet. But all are worth trying. For in the end, verifiable truth, including that residing in official statistics, no matter how contentious and ultimately open-ended they prove to be, *does* matter to the survival of democracy. Some forms of truth—medical, for example--could probably survive without democratic politics. But democracy cannot, I believe, survive without any commitment to a common foundation of truth and hostility to lies, which is to say, epistemic trust.

At a practical level, democratic debate has been premised from the start on every opinion being informed by some shared body of factual truths. How, for example, could any body or group of people ever decide on or even fruitfully debate labor policy if it could not first agree about whether the unemployment rate has gone up or down? But even more, I think, democracy requires truth--meaning the accurate representation of the world through words and numbers--as a key aspiration. For without this aspiration towards knowing more, and the conviction that it is possible, there is little reason why we might want to live under such an uncertain or precarious system of governance in the first place.

Now some of you might say, maybe we don't need democracy either. It is not working very well. And it is just a nice papering over of various forms of exclusion, domination, injustice. Truth might be one more of its mythologies. Democracy has, though, as reimagined in the late eighteenth century, the extraordinary virtue of always providing for the possibility of second and even third or fourth chances. That is because of its relationship to truth. By this way of thinking, democracy's great advantage is not a question of the empirical outcomes that it generates, as some political theorists would have it today. Rather, it is that we can never be certain that we have got it right thus far, and that is ok. For I would say that only if we can imagine moral and epistemic progress—that is progress away from lies and propaganda and towards a truer view of reality, however elusive—can we begin to rectify the gaps between democratic theory, with all its promises, and the world in which we *actually* live and operate now. A historical perspective, I believe, does not offer precise lessons. But it helps us see the work that is still to be done.