



## Final Statement



### ***Truth and Post-Truth in Communication, Media, and Society***

Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

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### **Final Statement**

Intentional subordination of reality and widespread science denial have economic roots in the “dictatorship of money” (Pope Francis) and the increasing inequality between the super-rich and the rest of the planet’s human population. This has political roots in exploitation and power, and cultural roots in a do-it-yourself ideological relativism where facts and their representation are becoming secondary to emotion and personal preference.

Throughout the world, the destruction of truth that we are witnessing is not an abstract or benign development; it is calculated, made by design, and often for-profit. At the heart of this process is an intentional erosion of social trust. And without trust it becomes difficult to agree on a shared understanding of reality required for a diverse and flourishing human, social, and political life.

From domains such as climate change to election results to vaccinations, truth-seeking, truth-finding, and truth-telling have seemingly become a fool’s errand. The path to factual integrity, fidelity to logic, and evidence-based principles are increasingly difficult to traverse. As scholars, we are concerned with the frontal assault on the very foundation of the modern university—the pursuit of truths. There are difficult truths, such as speculative truths; there are fragile truths, such as factual truths; and there are demanding truths, such as practical truths.

We believe that only respect for truth makes us free and capable of building a society that respects the dignity of the human being. Truth is the equation of our mind and reality (*Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*), both factual and metaphysical or transcendental. All fields, from the medical and planetary sciences to the social sciences and humanities, rely on agreed-upon rules and practices necessary for truth-seeking that favor virtuous disagreement, argument, conflict, and continual openness to new evidence.

Unscrupulous political and business leaders, as well as influential public figures, weaponize the inherent uncertainty in truth-seeking and engage in moral racketeering to mislead everyday people and denigrate pathways to truth. They are aided and abetted by untrustworthy news outlets and social media platforms that spread disinformation, driven by algorithms that exploit the attention economy and capitalize on social distrust rather than the common good.

The human desire for truth is more than a desire for objective facts. It involves searching for human meaning and marrying ancient wisdom from philosophy and faith traditions with science and reason. The rejection and subordination of reality do not correspond with and are unnatural to human development and how, even as

babies, we make sense of our relations to the external world. In this way, the subversion of truth stunts integral human development.

We propose three pathways - involving individual- to collective-scale commitments - to combat the assault on truth: (1) Education and Ethical Development, (2) Opposing the Dictatorship of Money, and (3) Media and Data for the Common Good.

### ***Education and Ethical Development***

All persons have a right to seek truth and a right to ethical and scientific education that cultivates capacities for truth-seeking. Education must be a fundamental aspect for any strategy to combat the spread of post-truth. Without it, we are limited to surface-level and short-term technical fixes.

Only education can nurture a culture—the foundation upon which everything else rests—of truth-seeking, scientific reasoning, and ethical engagement needed to inoculate individuals from falling prey to disinformation and profiteering from lies. Therefore, we must ensure universal access to robust scientific, humanistic, and ethical education, beginning early in childhood.

Research suggests that carefully scaffolded, hands-on, project-based teaching and learning offers children and young adults tools for discovery, cognitive engagement, and social belonging. Therefore, we strongly support education that brings a renewed seriousness to the pursuit of truth and builds wisdom and character—the sign of a healthy, flourishing democracy.

Outside of schools and professional settings, the news media can contribute productively to democracy by opening our eyes to evidence and reality, especially the lived experiences of those on the margins of society who are often ignored. But the educational role of media, and its commitment to reporting facts, has given way in part to a post-truth news culture that uses its powers of gatekeeping and framing to distort reality for profit or to pander to the fears of a viewing audience. As a result, accountability, equity and social cohesion suffer.

Further, trends in news reporting on climate change and vaccinations have revealed dangerous illiteracy of two kinds: First, scientific illiteracy, whereby journalists are inadequately trained to report on certain complex, scientific areas and rely on unreliable sources, especially concerning the role of uncertainty and consensus in the scientific method. Second, ethical illiteracy, a reductionistic vision of human personhood, whereby reporters ignore deeper anthropological and transcendent questions probed over the millennia by a diversity of philosophers and theologians.

To lessen these two kinds of illiteracy, we call for more public dialogue between faith and reason. On the one hand, we must cultivate more respect for the scientific process among religious traditions and their leaders, whose voices are often absent in news reporting, partly because of the scientific illiteracy of some religious leaders and their misguided skepticism about the compatibility of faith and reason. On the other hand, we must cultivate more respect for positive insights derived from religion among some who implicitly or explicitly attempt to start from scratch, as a sort of reset that doesn't take history into account.

Our pluralistic society depends on good-faith dialogue and empathy around issues of science, reason, and religion. Improving dialogue will build social trust and create more fertile conditions for truth-telling.

### ***Opposing the Dictatorship of Money***

Commercial interests often monetize post-truth culture, profiting from disinformation, hyperbole, extremism, and political discord. Social media conglomerates, aware of the harm caused by their platforms, continue to cash in on the attention economy with destructive algorithms.

We argue for two pathways to begin to resist this dictatorship of money. First, give voice to the voiceless and promote social trust through the institution of deliberative democracy. Given the scale and complexity of modern polities, which require divisions of cognitive labor, even the most attentive citizens struggle to engage knowledgeably with most of the collective decisions that affect them. The public, therefore, often relies on heuristics, where citizens trust others to make decisions on their behalf. Modern democracies have long relied on such trustees. Yet institutional support for citizen-led democracy is often weak or missing, and bad actors and platform algorithms weaponize this gap.

One promising strand of deliberative democracy is the “mini-public” wherein randomly selected citizens come together in a facilitated discussion, with good information and procedural norms that promote listening and respect in the deliberative and decision-making process. Within these mini-publics, the pathologies associated with post-trust are absent or at least curtailed. Deliberative mini-publics can serve as trusted information proxies that help citizens make informed decisions and reduce the influence of bad actors and platform algorithms designed to pollute their information environment.

Second, we call for an infusion of moral energy, political will, and advocacy to directly challenge the lies—of commission and omission—perpetrated by transnational commercial interests. In recent years, young people worldwide have mobilized to oppose the profit-motivated lies of transnational corporations and their political allies that obstruct and delay action to combat climate change and protect the earth, our common home. We must increasingly see these connections between post-truth culture, powerful special interests, and environmental challenges.

We must also challenge “fake truths” embedded in our culture, especially ones that uphold the dictatorship of money and what Pope Francis describes as overconfidence in the “dogma of neoliberal faith” and “magic theories of ‘spillover’ or ‘trickle’.” Meritocracy is but one example of a “fake truth,” whereby victims of this dogma are sometimes blamed for their poverty or apparent failures. Attributing blame to individuals allows us to wash our hands of broader policies and ideologies that favor financial speculation and quick profits at the expense of many.

In addition to improved “top-down” social policies, we also call for popular movements to challenge the lies endemic to our culture and economy. Such movements, infused with moral zeal for the common good and a more dignified future, should be driven from below, giving voice to the marginalized and disenfranchised—the poor, unemployed, immigrants, minoritized peoples, temporary workers, and others who have been blamed and excluded by the modern dictatorship of money.

### ***Media and Data for the Common Good***

Journalism, and local news in particular, can act as the immune system of a democracy, promoting social cohesion and an informed citizenry. The decimation of local news in the United States, for example, over the past decades has demonstrated that when a town loses its local newspaper, taxes and government corruption increase, fewer candidates run for political office and voter turnout decreases, and polarization worsens. Enhancing information equity, including investment in robust local news networks which rely on sustainable business models, is a key strategy for mitigating the impacts of a post-truth world and inoculating against the belief of false information.

Social networks as they operate today undermine truth-seeking and truth-telling, and their platforms reward extremism and superficial validation rather than moderation and dialogue. Moreover, their business models rely on the commodification of personal data extracted from their own consumers and trafficked to powerful economic interests.

New legislation must promote a digital public infrastructure to address the underlying factors that corrupt the online information environment, including anti-competitive practices, advertising-based business models, and the concentration of power. Increasing public ownership of privatized data and legislating for data portability and interoperability is necessary to counteract the accumulation of market power. At the same time, a robust system of oversight and accountability is needed to understand the influence of algorithms and artificial intelligence on the information environment.

It is also critical for scientific researchers to have open access to social network data. These are presently hidden from view, ostensibly to protect users’ privacy but also to protect the platforms’ business model. But if brought to light, researchers can dramatically improve our understanding of these platforms’ internal machinery and better diagnose potentially harmful issues. The public is entitled to a public audit of the algorithms that play such an important role in shaping their information diet. Such research can support the construction of new algorithms to promote dialogue, pro-sociality, and evidence-based representation. Access to data would also improve research on the tactics and tools of those who intentionally spread lies and misinformation, along with potential cognitive interventions to debunk and inoculate the public against online deception.

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