

TRUTH DECAY IN EUROPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Exploring the role of facts and analysis in European public life



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The role of facts and evidence in public life in Europe

The evolving, uncertain and emotional context of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for accurate and reliable information to make sound decisions in both private and public spheres.

Better access to facts and data should logically translate into sound, weighed decisions. Yet, more information does not necessarily mean better or more reliable information. Having access to more information can even make it more difficult for people to decide what to believe and what not to believe – regardless of the underlying accuracy of the information.

While attention has increased on access to, and the role of, information in decision making – with its resultant challenges such as disinformation, the role of information technology and an increasingly complex information environment – the role of facts and analysis in public life appears to be changing. Yet, empirical data that allows us to assess the extent, scope, and nature of these changes is lacking.

RAND has explored this issue, starting with the United States context. In a 2018 study, Kavanagh and Rich examined the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life, a phenomenon they describe as ‘Truth Decay’.¹ According to this study, Truth Decay in the United States is characterised by disagreement about facts and objective data, blurring of the line between fact and opinion, the increasing relative volume of opinion compared to facts and declining trust in institutions previously considered sources of objective information. The authors surveyed empirical evidence and developed a conceptual

framework to explore Truth Decay in the United States as a system incorporating drivers, trends, and consequences.² They concluded their study with a research agenda to help improve the understanding of Truth Decay and identify solutions to address it.

One of the research streams Kavanagh and Rich recommend is to examine the extent to which the Truth Decay framework, developed specifically for the United States context applies to ‘international analogues’ (i.e. in countries outside of the United States). This report takes up this charge, examining the extent to which there is evidence for the trends, drivers and agents, and consequences of Truth Decay in Europe, and whether the conceptual framework would apply to Europe as well. Given the policy context in Europe at the wake of the 2020s – in particular the COVID-19 pandemic and its sanitary, social and political consequences – the authors aim for this report to be a launching pad for informing a wider set of debates about European democracy.

Looking at Truth Decay in the European context

We examined the different elements of the Truth Decay framework developed by Kavanagh and Rich (‘trends’, ‘drivers’, ‘agents’ and ‘consequences’) to structure the discussion about Truth Decay in the European context. The starting hypothesis was that, for the most part, these trends would also likely be relevant in the European context. For each element of the framework, we looked for empirical evidence in Europe and examined how this evidence compared with what was found for the United States. We also looked at whether the evidence applied across Europe as a whole, or if there are differences within

1 Kavanagh & Rich (2018).

2 Huguet et al. (2019).

Europe. Based on the findings of this research, we discuss the extent to which the original Truth Decay framework applies to the European context and recommend areas for further investigation in order to better understand and tackle Truth Decay in Europe.

The first stage of research was an in-depth literature review. Given the thematic scope of the research, we focused on existing academic studies published in English. The search strategy focused around the four trends identified in the 2018 Truth Decay report, namely: (1) an increased disagreement about facts and data; (2) a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; (3) an increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact; and (4) a declining trust in institutions previously looked to as sources of factual information. Once we collected a sufficient research base around the trends, we looked for and undertook additional targeted searches for indicators across all four trends, to complement the data collected through the literature review. We then examined evidence for the drivers and consequences of Truth Decay.

Evidence for the trends of Truth Decay in Europe

Overall, we found evidence of the occurrence of all of the four trends of Truth Decay in Europe, although the evidence is not as overwhelming nor are the trends as pronounced as in the United States and there is a lot of diversity across sectors.

We found evidence of increasing disagreement about facts and data in Europe.

In some countries we see growing misperceptions about levels of migration and increasing vaccine scepticism, particularly in France and Italy. In addition, misperceptions on the extent of migration have increased in a number of countries such as Spain, Germany,

the Netherlands, France and Poland. Further, while most of the literature suggests that Europeans seem increasingly concerned with climate change, these developments manifest themselves differently in different parts of the continent. There is thus clear evidence of disagreement about facts and data and misperceptions on these issues are widespread. There is also evidence that this disagreement is, at least in some European countries, increasing. Yet, with limited pan-European research available on this matter, it is difficult to say whether this trend is consistent across the continent.

We also found evidence of a blurring of the line between opinion and fact,

as illustrated by an increasing prevalence of interpretive journalism and advertorial content intertwined with news reporting. We do find evidence of this trend in Europe. The line, however, has blurred more in some countries than in others. There appears to be a north-south divide in Europe, where news reporting appears to be more neutral in Nordic countries, Germany and Switzerland, while reporting in southern European countries tends to be more integrated with commentary and opinion. Furthermore, we found that interpretative journalism has become more prominent in some countries. The evidence presented, however, does not show whether interpretative journalism has increased in Europe overall.

We found evidence of an increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact,

as illustrated by the explosion of the availability of online news outlets, including the emergence of niche media that cater for a select audience that shares similar beliefs. Moreover, as with the rising global popularity of social media platforms, it has become possible for everyone to access and share commentary and opinions on contemporary topics with the rest of the world. As this trend has been a

global one, the European media landscape has also become inundated with opinion-based content from millions of social media users. There are also some early indications that the voice of alternative opinionated media is 'louder' than the voice of traditional media, suggesting that the relative influence of such opinion-based news could be exacerbated by the rise of social media.

We also looked for evidence of declining trust in institutions previously looked to as sources of factual information. **We found evidence that trust in political institutions in Europe did decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but this trend seems to have reversed since the end of the financial crisis. Trust in the media in Europe has been declining gradually over the last two decades.** A review of relevant data shows the largest decline in the levels of trust in Slovenia, the Netherlands, Czechia and Poland. Over this period, confidence in the press has increased only in Finland. One of the reasons for this trend could be that Europeans have a decreasing confidence in the reliability of online sources of information. This is despite an increased reliance on sources such as the Internet and social media for news consumption. Trust, however, in the traditional press has remained remarkably stable across Europe, but these sources are used less and less.

Evidence for the drivers of Truth Decay in Europe

We were also able to show the existence of the drivers and agents of Truth Decay in Europe – highlighting relevant differences between the European and United States contexts. Yet, we have not always found evidence of the role of these drivers and agents in driving and exacerbating Truth Decay.

Cognitive biases are hard-wired in the human brain, and they affect the way in which we

process information and make decisions. Therefore, they affect decision making with regard to information processing in the same way across the globe. Research from both sides of the Atlantic has shown, for instance, that humans tend to seek out information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs and hence extends to our prejudices. **While these biases have always played a role in decision making, they can act as a catalyst for other drivers of Truth Decay.** Cognitive biases can be particularly exacerbated by changes in the media ecosystem. Algorithms on social media, for instance, are designed to take advantage of cognitive biases by prioritising content that is more prone to spread quickly.

Another universal driver concerns new information and communication tools, in particular social media, which have increased people's exposure to information. People are no longer just news consumers. Rather, everyone is now potentially a creator and distributor of news and content as well. Social media have democratised the media landscape across the globe. Yet, it has become a profitable business model to distribute eye-catching news items and attractive content on social media. New media outlets, whether they are clickbait farms, Twitter trolls or electronic news clipping services, do not necessarily abide by the same quality standards as the traditional gatekeepers, such as governments or the traditional news media. While revenue models for media companies in Europe appear fundamentally more stable than in the United States, many traditional European news outlets have been struggling too. Not only have these changes in the media landscape contributed to an exponential growth in the sheer volume of news content, the relative volume of content that meets journalistic standards of multiple verifiable sources has shrunk. Moreover, the demarcation between verifiable facts on the one hand and opinion, commentary

or speculation on the other has become increasingly blurred.

While changes in the information system have been global phenomena, national context matters in the extent to which they affect Truth Decay. Europe has a heterogeneous media landscape with a patchwork of differences in the newspaper industry, political parallelism, professionalism and the role of the state. We conclude that in European countries such as Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden or Switzerland, the effects of the changes in the information system on Truth Decay have been mitigated by press subsidies (with press-freedom protection) and strong public service broadcasting. Other contextual differences, such as the journalistic tradition of the media system may also mitigate or exacerbate the effects on Truth Decay. For instance, Italy has a relatively strong tradition of partisan media and commentary-based journalism in comparison to France.

The education systems across Europe differ from those in the United States, making these perhaps less prone to being a driver of Truth Decay, but rather a possible part of its solution. Fostering critical thinking skills and providing civic education to students have been part of traditional school curricula in most European countries, although there have been considerable variations across education systems. The jury is still out as to whether the inclusion of these media literacy interventions in the formal education system has been effective in addressing the challenges related to the changing information system. Yet there is evidence that media literacy education can be effective in school settings. It seems that the role of European education systems and the competing pressures on

these systems have not been as prominent in Europe in driving Truth Decay as it has been in the United States. European education systems appear to have recognised the importance of critical thinking skills and civic education for a future generation of media consumers and participants in their democratic societies.

We also found that the role of polarisation is crucial in explaining the differences between Truth Decay in the United States and Europe.

In recent decades, American society has become increasingly polarised along partisan political lines, but also along socio-economic ones: people tend to surround themselves with those who think or look alike.³ Such increased sorting creates groups with similar characteristics who can become insular in their thinking and communication, creating a closed environment in which opinions or even false information can proliferate.

We found evidence for several trends of Truth Decay in countries or settings where political views or ideologies were characterised by polarisation. In combination with other drivers, such as cognitive biases and changes in the information system, polarisation may exacerbate Truth Decay. In particular, polarisation has been found to be associated with decreasing trust in institutions formerly respected for their objective information. A recent RAND study has addressed the crucial role of trust in the analytical framework for Truth Decay.⁴ Other evidence also suggests some association between perceived political bias and distrust in the media. In countries that are characterised by higher level of political polarisation, the trust gap between groups that hold different political views in terms of their trust in the media also tends to be larger. This causal mechanism was illustrated by

3 Kavanagh & Rich (2018, 168).

4 Kavanagh et al. (2020).

the Brexit referendum, when overall trust in the media throughout the United Kingdom dropped considerably in the aftermath of the intense referendum campaign. As another example, Poland has experienced an increasing animosity between the supporters of the right-of-centre liberal Platforma Obywatelska (PO) and the right-wing conservative Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS). Empirical data for affective polarisation support this thesis. Other indicators also suggest that Poland has polarised from a socio-demographic and economic perspective. The various indicators show a steady trend of rising income inequality in Poland since the end of communism.⁵ This situation has become a fertile breeding ground for Truth Decay. In Poland, trust in public institutions is at its lowest level, trust in the media is declining and audiences' trust of news outlets is particularly polarised, certainly in comparison with other European countries.

There is evidence that polarisation across different dimensions has been increasing in Europe. This trend is not visible in all European countries, and it is nowhere near the level identified in the United States. This may be one of the explanations of why we do not find as much evidence of the processes of Truth Decay across Europe thus far. Polarisation in the United States has shown to act as a major catalyst for especially a declining trust in sources of objective information. Yet, where and when European geographic settings or timeframes are characterised by polarisation, there appears to be more evidence of Truth Decay.

Evidence for the consequences of Truth Decay in Europe

We also found examples in Europe of most of the consequences of Truth Decay as presented by Kavanagh and Rich and some evidence, though weaker, that these consequences stem from the trends of Truth Decay. In the European setting, the consequences of Truth Decay differ from what is seen in the United States. This may be due to wider societal differences, such as political systems or that instances of Truth Decay are less prevalent or consequential. In addition, although we found some evidence of the consequences described by Kavanagh and Rich, we found little direct evidence of a link to Truth Decay.

Civil discourse in multiple European fora is far from being always informed, honest, open-minded and constructive. This may be due to a number of factors that facilitate the production and dissemination of discourse – including those identified as drivers of Truth Decay – cognitive bias, changes in the information system and the media business model, and politicians and media as agents of Truth Decay. An eroded civil discourse is also closely linked to Truth Decay trends: it is tied to increasing disagreement about facts, is interlinked with the trust of formerly respected institutions and tends to alter this trust at least as much as it is driven by it. While we can document specific instances of the decline of civil discourse, without data tracking this issue over time we cannot assess the extent and scope of any 'decline' in civil discourse.

We did not find evidence of a link between political paralysis and Truth Decay largely because we did not find clear instances of political paralysis leading to institutional paralysis in the European context. While we

5 Brzezinski et al. (2013); Bukowski & Novokmet (2018).

can argue that disagreements about facts and data, driven by political polarisation and changes in the information systems can affect trust in institutions in Europe, political paralysis does not seem to affect the functioning of institutions to the same extent as it does in the United States. We attribute the institutional effects of political paralysis to differences in the institutional systems, with European political systems having more safeguards against the implications of political paralysis on institutions than the United States.

We found evidence of pockets of civic disengagement in Europe. Participation in elections has been declining in Europe in the last decades, although it did appear to increase in recent years. There is also evidence of news avoidance, another manifestation of dissatisfaction and alienation, that is driven by some of the same trends that characterise Truth Decay. Some of this shift, however, may be a shift in forms of participation. Europeans increasingly find ways to express dissatisfaction and participate outside of traditional channels, including online. Overall, we can say that the trends of Truth Decay do seem to contribute to alienation and disengagement in Europe, but not in the same way or extent; and are evident primarily in terms of news consumption behaviour and not political expression.

We found evidence of uncertainty in Europe and some evidence that this uncertainty was driven by disinformation and the trends of Truth Decay. This evidence was apparent in economic uncertainty as well as government policy uncertainty. We also observed uncertainty in science communication driven by low trust. It does appear that some of this uncertainty is a consequence of trends and drivers of Truth Decay, particularly in situations such as the run-up to and the aftermath of the Brexit referendum or in the political discourse in Poland in recent years. Some of

the uncertainty, however, is due to the difficulty in accurately predicting future events, and dealing with unknown situations generally (for example, the 2007 financial crisis, or the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic).

Conclusions and recommendations

In light of the evidence we found, we recommend that policymakers in Europe should be vigilant of the drivers, trends and consequences of Truth Decay. Beyond acknowledging the importance of this phenomenon, we recommend the scale and scope of Truth Decay should be monitored and assessed in Europe. The drivers of Truth Decay should be tackled in order to prevent that these trends follow a similar trajectory as they have in the United States.

Considering the evidence for the drivers, agents, and consequences of Truth Decay, we offer some pointers towards what we believe should be the highest priorities for policymakers in Europe in order to slow the pace and mitigate the implications of Truth Decay:

1 **Ensure that whatever drives Truth Decay, citizens are equipped to play their part as actors of democracy in Europe and to avoid becoming agents of Truth Decay themselves.** For instance, investing in media literacy skills would help people address their cognitive bias towards processing information and make people less vulnerable to disinformation when accessing various forms of media, particularly online social media. It would also make it easier for them to distinguish fact and opinion.

2 **Provide news organisations with a business model that guards against incentives to contribute**

to Truth Decay, even unintentionally. Ensuring that the news media do not rely on advertising alone or on sensational content to optimise viewer- or readership and revenues would contribute to fighting Truth Decay. When support comes from public funds, this financial support could come with something in return: for example, a pledge towards quality and concrete actions to (re)gain trust from the public.

3

Introduce measures that help elevate the political debate to serve the quality of democracy in Europe.

In addition to funding investigative journalism, measures to promote honesty and clarity in political communication could include systematically fact-checking political debates and/or having non-partisan research institutions estimate the (economic) impact of electoral programmes. Reinforcing rules for electoral campaigns (e.g. reporting or prohibiting private donations) and protecting whistle-blowers effectively would support the quality of democracy in Europe.

4

It may be unrealistic to expect that private enterprises who benefit from some of the elements of the Truth Decay

framework (e.g. social media) abandon their profitable business model. It may, however, be possible for social media **to mitigate their contribution to Truth Decay by demanding easier and wider access to their (anonymised) user data for independent researchers.** Research findings can be used as an opportunity to build a more socially sustainable, yet profitable, business.

5

This study pertains to Europe as a whole. One area for future research would be to examine the extent to which the framework applies to

different national or regional contexts.

Other areas for future research include: (1) in-depth examination of specific aspects of the framework, such as disinformation as a trend of Truth Decay in Europe; and (2) setting-up more longitudinal studies focused on the issues raised by Truth Decay overall.

The research community should take up the challenges and opportunities that both this report and the wider Truth Decay research agenda represent, and enrich the current knowledge base with further research on parts or all of the Truth Decay framework, particularly in relation to the hotspots of Truth Decay that we have identified in Europe.

Overall, we found that Truth Decay is real in Europe, but it does not happen at the same scale as is the case in the United States. This sends a hopeful message that there is still time to act and room for intervening and slowing down or countering the trends of Truth Decay in Europe.

What's next?

Overall, this research shows evidence that Truth Decay occurs in Europe. The phenomenon, however, is less prevalent than in the United States, at least for the time being. This signifies that perhaps Truth Decay in Europe is at a less advanced stage than in the United States, indicating that there is time remaining to act, or that there are specific factors in Europe that help prevent or slow Truth Decay.

This research pertains to the European context as a whole. One area for future research would be to examine the extent to which the framework applies at national levels. Other areas for future research include examining specific aspects of the framework in greater depth, such as disinformation as a trend of Truth Decay in Europe and setting-up more longitudinal studies focused on the issues raised by Truth Decay overall.

The Table below summarises findings from our research on Truth Decay in Europe and

compares them to findings from the Truth Decay framework defined by Kavanagh and Rich.⁶

Truth Decay framework elements	Evidence of Truth Decay in Europe	Comparison with Truth Decay in the United States ⁷
 <p>Increasing disagreement about facts and data</p>	<p>We found evidence of increasing disagreement about facts and data in Europe, illustrated with several examples across Europe</p>	<p>This trend is not as pronounced in Europe as in the United States (earlier stage of Truth Decay)</p>
 <p>A blurring of the line between opinion and fact</p>	<p>We found evidence of a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, as illustrated by an increasing prevalence of interpretive journalism and advertorial content intertwined with news reporting</p>	<p>This trend is not as pronounced in Europe as in the United States (earlier stage of Truth Decay)</p>
 <p>The increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact</p>	<p>We found evidence of an increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact, as illustrated by an explosion of the availability of online news outlets, including the emergence of niche media that cater for a select audience that shares similar beliefs</p>	<p>This trend is not as pronounced in Europe as in the United States (earlier stage of Truth Decay)</p>
 <p>Declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information</p>	<p>We found evidence that trust in political institutions in Europe did decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but this trend seems to have reversed since the end of the financial crisis. Trust in the media in Europe has been declining gradually over the last two decades</p>	<p>This trend is not as pronounced in Europe as in the United States (earlier stage of Truth Decay)</p>
 <p>Cognitive processing and cognitive bias</p>	<p>Cognitive bias affects decision making the same way in Europe as in the United States. While these biases have always played a role in decision making, they can act as a catalyst for other drivers of Truth Decay</p>	<p>Similar driving role in Europe as in the United States</p>

6 Kavanagh & Rich (2018).

7 Kavanagh & Rich (2018).

Truth Decay framework elements	Evidence of Truth Decay in Europe	Comparison with Truth Decay in the United States ⁷
 <p>Changes in the information system</p>	<p>We found that changes in the information system drive Truth Decay the same way in Europe as in the United States</p>	<p>Europe is at an earlier stage of changes in the media business model and the use and influence of social media (in particular in Eastern Europe), therefore the role of this driver was not as prominent in Europe as in the United States and varies across countries</p>
 <p>Competing demands on the educational system</p>	<p>Education systems in Europe were more 'ready' to address challenges linked to Truth Decay, therefore the role of this driver is not as prominent in Europe as in the United States</p>	<p>The education systems across Europe differ from those in the United States, making these perhaps less prone to being a driver of Truth Decay, but rather a possible part of its solution</p>
 <p>Polarisation</p>	<p>We found that polarisation drives Truth Decay, but it operates in a different way than in the United States</p>	<p>We also found that the role of polarisation is crucial in explaining the differences between Truth Decay in the United States and Europe: the way polarisation operates in Europe is more complex than in the United States - this is because both social, economic and political polarisation present many different gradients in Europe</p>
 <p>Agents of Truth Decay</p>	<p>We found evidence of the agency of the media, and academia and research organisations in the European context</p>	<p>The role of agents seems less prevalent than in the United States - this is linked to differences in institutional systems (e.g. polarisation) and a different stage of change in the information system</p>
 <p>Erosion of civil discourse</p>	<p>We found that civil discourse is eroded in Europe, but no evidence that this is a new phenomenon nor that it is increasingly eroding</p>	<p>Erosion of civil discourse is less prevalent in Europe than in the United States</p>

Truth Decay framework elements	Evidence of Truth Decay in Europe	Comparison with Truth Decay in the United States ⁷
 <p>Political paralysis</p>	<p>We found that there is political paralysis in Europe as in the United States, but this political paralysis does not necessarily affect the functioning of institutions the way it does in the United States</p>	<p>Political paralysis has to do with institutional systems. In Europe there are multiple systems, strong administration and civil service (which do not change with political changes) and institutional processes, which mitigate the potential consequences of Truth Decay. Therefore Europe seems less 'vulnerable' to political paralysis than the United States</p>
 <p>Alienation and disengagement</p>	<p>We found evidence that alienation and disengagement are happening in Europe but there are notable exceptions - there are groups (e.g. youth and the green) that are actually more engaged, both in traditional and non-traditional ways</p>	<p>This consequence is not observed as much in Europe as in the United States</p>
 <p>Uncertainty</p>	<p>We found evidence that there is uncertainty in Europe but not necessarily a link with Truth Decay</p>	<p>Compared to what was found in the United States, we see uncertainty in Europe as a 'consequence of consequences', with a less direct link with Truth Decay than other consequences</p>