



---

# Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age

---



Maximilian Conrad  
University of Iceland

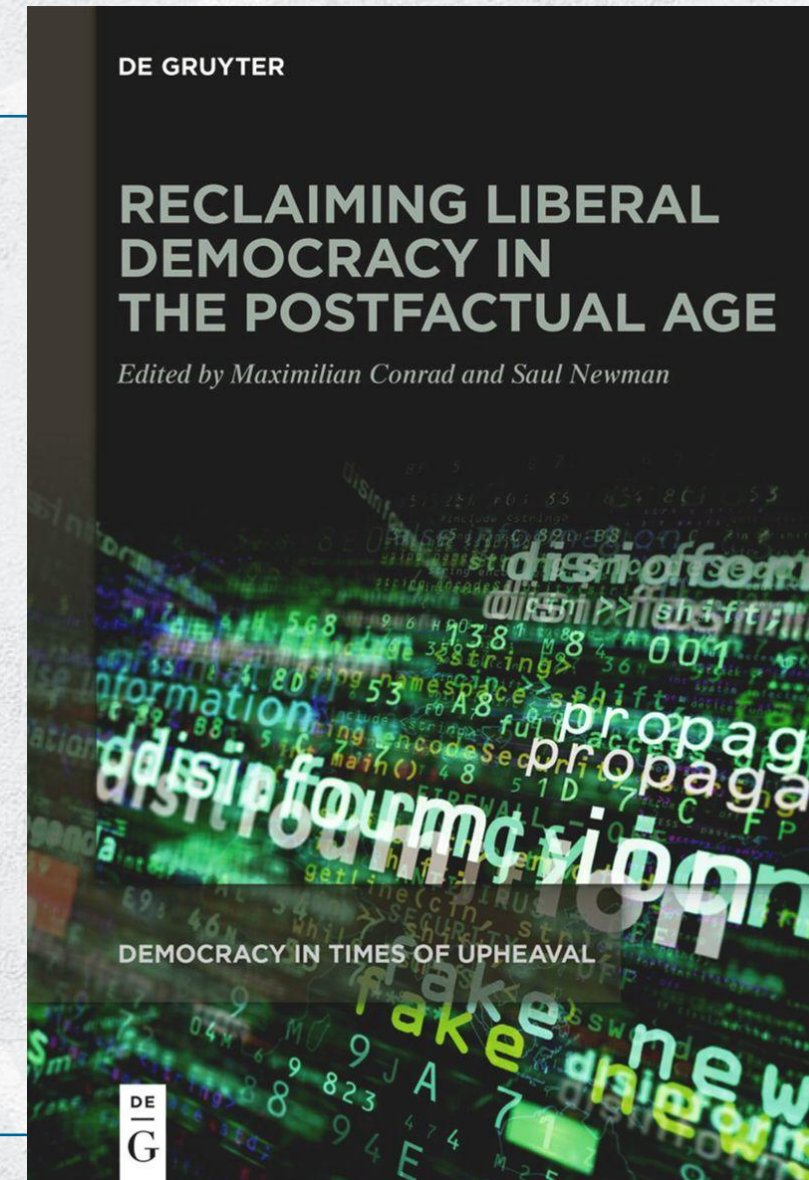
---

# Trust in Science and Universities in Post- Truth Times



## Aim of the talk

- To discuss the impact of **post-truth politics** on **democratic societies** and on **trust in science and education**
- Context: our recently concluded Horizon Europe project **Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age (RECLAIM)**
- **Key claim in this talk:**  
Undermining the epistemic basis of (liberal) democracy, including efforts to undermine trust in science, is an integral part in populist post-truth politics.



## Structure of the talk

---

1. Brief introduction to the RECLAIM project and its perspective on post-truth
  2. Populism's attack on the epistemic foundations of liberal democracy
  3. Impact on democratic societies and trust in science/scientific expertise
  4. What role can science, universities, and citizenship education play in reclaiming democracy?
-

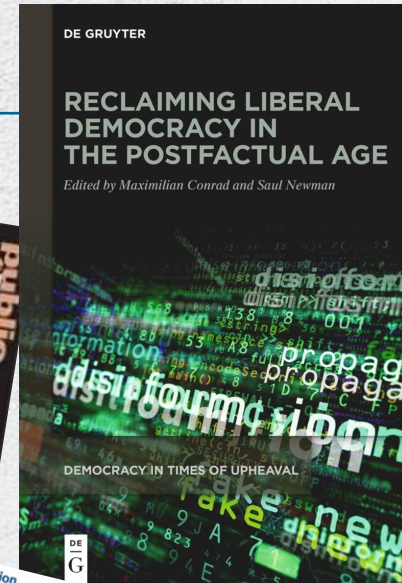
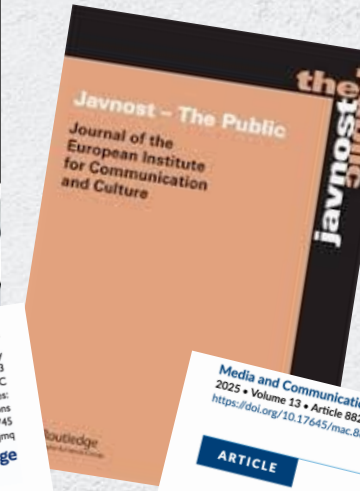
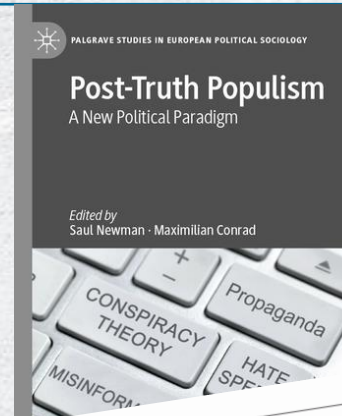
## About the RECLAIM project (1)

---

- RECLAIM: three-year **Horizon Europe** project (grant amount: €3 mio.)
    - coordinated by University of Iceland
    - concluded in September 2025; very successful review in early 2026)
    - 13 partner institutions from around Europe
    - Seven thematic work packages on different aspects of the post-truth condition
  - Main aims/objectives:
    - to **analyze the impact** of post-truth politics on liberal democracy, but also
    - to **propose concrete measures** to mitigate the detrimental impact of post-truth politics
-

# About the RECLAIM project (2)

- **Outputs:**
  - **Academic publications:**
    - Four edited books, incl. the flagship publication **Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age** (De Gruyter, 2026)
    - Several journal special issues,
    - numerous journal articles
    - research reports
  - **Policy papers:** six policy briefs/policy recommendations



## RECLAIM's take on post-truth

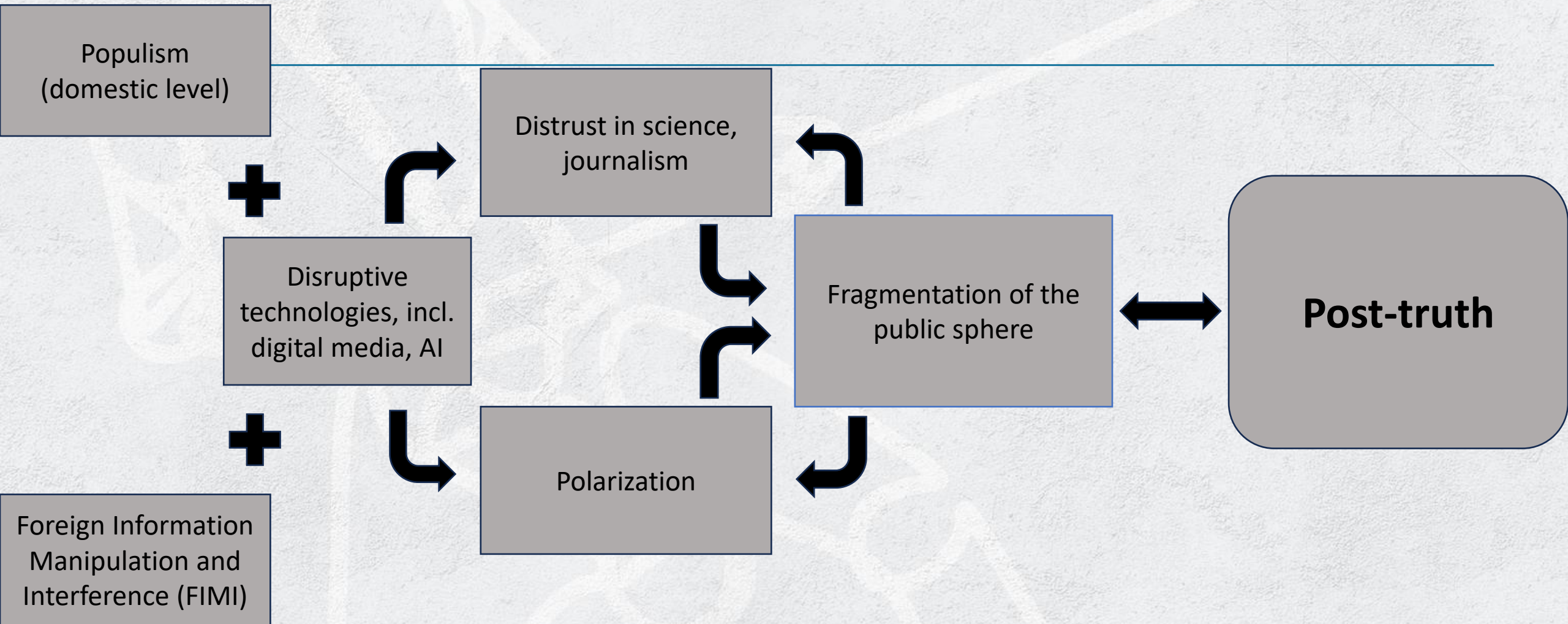
---

- Key point: post-truth as **an ideal-typical concept** to capture the development of **political culture** in liberal democracies
  - Post-truth is more than a “changing status of the truth in political discourse”
  - It is an **epistemic crisis** of democracy, but one with a **decidedly political** ambition
-

# Populism's Attack on the Epistemic Foundations of Democracy

---

- Populist post-truth politics is characterized by a **dismissal of objective facts** and the proliferation of “**alternative facts**”
    - Intimately connected to changes in the **information environment**
    - Facilitated by **disruptive technologies**; dissemination of (**AI-generated**) **disinformation** via social media
    - **BUT**: Facilitated **also** by **changing patterns of trust** in once-trusted sources of knowledge and information – including quality journalism and science/scientific expertise
  - Important to draw attention to the **political** – rather than purely **epistemic** – character of such attacks:
    - Populist efforts to undermine trust in science and expertise, but also...
    - Strategic efforts by external actors to undermine liberal democracies (through FIMI)
  - Challenge for liberal democracies: how to mitigate the effects of post-truth politics and **reclaim** liberal democracy?
-



## Selected key findings

---

- WP2: Intimate link between populism and post-truth politics (e.g., objective vs. alternative facts); **fragmentation of public spheres** (echo chambers); increasing role of social media as a source of information on political events
  - WP4: Signs of **declining trust** in mainstream journalism; changing patterns of media consumption – but also good news: **high demand** for reliable information and quality journalism
  - WP6: significant efforts of **external** actors to **destabilize the epistemic foundations** (“truth regimes”) of liberal democracies
  - WP8: (some) ambitious approaches in citizenship education, but also significant obstacles
-

## Impact on democratic societies and trust in science

---

- Defining feature of populism: binary distinction between elites and the people
  - Science and journalism construed as part of the corrupt liberal elite
  - Populist attacks on science undermine the **epistemic** basis of democracy and, more specifically, of fact-based democratic deliberation
    - Science framed as **politically biased**, but more fundamentally as a **matter of opinion** that is no more valid than any other opinion (truth decay = “declining role of facts and analysis in public life”); case in point: climate science
  - Populist attacks on scientists and, more recently, on universities stoke resentment and (affective) polarization – supported by the view that science isn’t all that relevant
  - Declining commitment to democratic deliberation – understood as a process of reason-giving and argumentation
-

# What role can universities play in reclaiming democracy?

---

- Liberal democracies need to show resolve in **protecting their cornerstones**, including **the public sphere** as a shared communicative space, but also democratic values and virtues
  - The current epistemic crisis of democracy needs to be addressed in a comprehensive approach
  - Universities can play a role in this by being present in the public sphere
    - Increasing relevance of dissemination of scientific findings in relevant outlets
    - Importance of science journalism – making scientific findings accessible
  - But: equally important for policy makers to strengthen the autonomy and legitimacy of scientific institutions
    - More emphasis on **media literacy** at all levels
    - Also more emphasis on **science literacy**
-

---

# Thank you!

- <https://reclaim.hi.is>
  - [mc@hi.is](mailto:mc@hi.is)
-