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# PUBLIC OPINION IN THE ERA OF POST-RATIONALISM: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Abstract. This article diagnoses the origins and mechanisms of the emergence of post-rational attitudes in society. It points to social media as one of the most important agents of their proliferation. Confused public opinion cannot rely on social media, where messages are increasingly created and promoted to maximize their audience's attention by evoking emotions and tailoring messages to users' pre-identified preferences. Experts and scientists could play an essential role in resolving the veracity of findings, but they, along with other public institutions, are losing public trust. In this situation, the messages of pseudoscience promoters and post-truth spreaders have equal value in public space to the deliberations of scientists and experts. As a result, social media contribute to forming opinions based not on facts and scientific evidence but on emotions, intuition, and subjective beliefs. The spread of such views leads to the fragmentation of society, polarization, social conflicts, and, ultimately, the weakening of democracy. The solution may be to build epistemic trust at individual, social, and institutional levels.

**Keywords:** post-rationalism; social knowledge; social media; epistemic trust

## INTRODUCTION

We are experiencing a crisis of trust in traditional authorities, including experts, politicians, and the media, while simultaneously witnessing a surge in esoteric beliefs, conspiracy theories, and alternative medicine practices. Media-driven imagery and emotions increasingly shape our understanding of the world, making decisions grounded more in personal feelings and experiences than in rational arguments or factual accuracy. By undermining established authorities and questioning scientific findings, society risks institutional instability, the erosion of shared values, the collapse of common reference points, and the loss of objective criteria for evaluation.

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What role does post-rationalism play in these developments? How does the post-rationalist approach to interpreting and explaining the world shape public opinion, and what consequences might arise from its influence? This conceptual article addresses these questions by highlighting the intersection between post-rationalist logic and the operational dynamics of social media.

The term "post-rationalism" first appeared in scholarly discourse in Tom Eyers' 2013 book *Post-Rationalism. Psychoanalysis, Epistemology, and Marxism in Post-War France*. In it, Eyers analyzes the concepts of the precursors of post-rationalism – French philosophers of the mid-20th century, including Gaston Bachelard, Louis Althusser, Georges Canguilhem, and Alexandre Koyré. The post-rationalism reconstructed in the book is not a unified theory but a collection of diverse approaches that unite a critique of Enlightenment rationalism, skepticism, and the belief that our understanding of reality is always partial and entangled with unconscious mechanisms, structures, language, as well as historical, cultural, and social contexts. In an interview with Bloomsbury Publishing, Eyers stated: "We need to transcend the idea that the only alternative to empiricist scientism is relativism or the abandonment of truth. Post-Rationalist French thought provides one alternative to that forced choice" (Eyers, 2013a). According to the logic of post-rationalism, when explaining the world, we cannot limit ourselves to empirically verifiable facts because science cannot answer all questions, the reality is more complex than what we can measure and prove, and the findings we make depend on the context, ideological assumptions, emotions and intuition. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond the traditional philosophy framework and incorporates elements from various sciences and social life.[1]

Post-rationalism thus postulates the need to consider alternative sources of truth knowledge to the scientific ones. However, if science and other traditional ways of explaining the world based on the accumulation of facts are called into question, how can we be sure of any findings? Post-rationalism and other philosophical schools argue that we cannot have such certainty.[2]

Science is a series of certain approximations through which we better understand reality, and our cognition is sometimes limited and temporary. However,

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[1] Tom Eyers accepts scientific logic but is open to other sources of cognition: "Post-rationalism accounts for the errancy of the Real not by an outright rejection of philosophy's founding assumptions … but via a progressive incorporation of nonphilosophical materials—mathematical, psychoanalytic, political—into its bounds, making of philosophy a theoretical practice" (Eyers, 2013b, p. 203).

[2] Subjectivity, the contextuality of cognition, and its limitations are not exclusive to post-rationalism. Many philosophical currents, including postmodernism, empiricism, pragmatism, constructivism, or phenomenology, share these concerns to varying degrees.

this does not mean that the scientific method has ceased to be a credible, reliable, and accurate tool for learning about reality, and awareness of the scientific method limitations is one of its greatest assets. Its ability to generate reproducible and testable results as well as examine and disprove hypotheses, its transparency, its systematic reduction of cognitive errors, and its ability to self-monitor and correct errors mean that science offers us the best available means of predicting and solving problems. Adopting a skeptical stance, scientists treat their findings as the closest to the truth while acknowledging that any theory, discovery, or hypothesis can be challenged as new evidence emerges. However, skepticism in this context is not a sign of distrust in scientific knowledge but rather a means to enhance and advance it.[3]

In public discourse, objections made by scientists and experts about the provisionality of findings or possible errors in research (e.g., sampling errors in representative surveys, margin of error, limitations of self-reported research) are misrecognized as signs of doubt in the ability to explain reality. Post-rationalism, which argues that knowledge is socially constructed and open to multiple interpretations, reinforces a superficial understanding of scientific skepticism. Reason is neither the best nor the only way to understand the world. According to post-rationalist logic, personal experience, intuition, and emotions are equally valuable when assessing reality. This can result in diminishing the importance of science and research methodologies, eroding trust in science to understand reality and produce reliable knowledge, and paving the way for equating opinions with scientific evidence.

The public increasingly echoes skepticism toward expert analyses and scientific conclusions, even casting doubt on observable facts. This skepticism infiltrates the public sphere through indirect cultural and social channels such as politics, media, education, social movements advocating alternative knowledge systems, popular science materials, lectures, and self-development courses emphasizing the idea that individuals can rely on their intuition and personal experiences to "expand their minds" and cultivate their "own truths." These dynamics influence the quality of public opinion and carry profound implications for public life.

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[3] Scientific skepticism is a cornerstone of scientific methodology. It encompasses the ability to test and reject hypotheses, reproducibility of results, critical analysis of data, and verification of research through peer review.

## PUBLIC OPINION IN A DEMOCRACY

Public opinion has consistently faced criticism. Paradoxically, despite being the cornerstone of liberal democracies, it is often dismissed as incapable of independent decision-making, let alone effectively governing a state. As Elmer E. Schattschneider observes, public opinion is an institution characterized by strengths and weaknesses (2004, p. 62). On the one hand, it serves as a foundation for legitimizing political authority; on the other hand, it embodies flaws that were already acknowledged by the architects of modern democracy in the 18th century.[4]

While public opinion plays a vital role in democracy, many scholars argue that the liberal assumption—meaning every citizen holds opinions on all issues, and that these opinions are equally valid in a normative sense—is fundamentally unrealistic. Critics contend that if equality among citizens is to be considered, it should be understood only in terms of shared limitations: subjection to base instincts, hatred, ignorance, irrationality, and susceptibility to manipulation. Rather than being an ideal *demos*, the public is seen as a passive, disorganized mass of individuals with limited knowledge of current issues, questionable rationality, and even less interest in public matters. Joseph Schumpeter highlights this in his observation:

> The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective (Schumpeter, 1950, p. 262).

Critical reflections on human nature, whether implicit or explicit, are evident in the works of Plato, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Stuart Mill. These considerations also served as a foundation for Walter Lippmann's concept of public opinion. In his *Public*

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[4] James Madison and Alexander Hamilton's vision of democracy significantly diverged from the concept of "pure democracy" as practiced in ancient Greece. They critiqued earlier democratic theories for neglecting the realities of human nature. Madison and Hamilton believed that human behavior was driven by an innate instinct for aggression, with individuals naturally prone to hostility, such that even trivial differences could spark intense conflict. As Madison noted in Federalist No. 10, "the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts." In Madison and Hamilton's view, pure democracy fosters corruption in public life as well as intolerance, injustice, and the formation of factions—groups driven by shared passions or interests that undermine the rights of other citizens or the collective good of the community.

*Opinion* (1922/1997) and later in *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippmann criticized the liberal model of democracy, which he believed overlooked human nature's inherent flaws and underestimated demagogic leaders' ability to manipulate public opinion.

Classical democratic theory assumes that citizens have direct access to the issues they are expected to decide upon and can make rational and informed judgments. Lippmann challenged this assumption, pointing out that such abilities are presumed to be equally distributed across all citizens, from the well-prepared and educated to those who are "absolutely illiterate, feeble-minded, grossly neurotic, undernourished and frustrated individuals ... persons who are mentally children or barbarians, people whose lives are a morass of entanglements, people whose vitality is exhausted" (Lippmann, 1922/1997, p. 48).

For Lippmann, reason and observation reveal that a rational, informed public is little more than a utopian ideal held by democratic theorists. Human intellectual capacities are insufficient to grasp or interpret reality fully. Unlike an Aristotelian god who comprehends existence in its entirety at a glance, humans rely on stereotypes to make decisions, causing them to exist partly in the real world and partly in a constructed world shaped by their imaginations and the narratives of others. Consequently, Lippmann and other scholars argue that public opinion is not a tangible social force within the public sphere but rather an illusion or abstraction (Lippmann, 1925).

While public opinion may be described as "the rule of collective mediocrity," it remains a cornerstone of democracy, legitimizing and shaping governmental actions. Despite persistent criticism, this role is undiminished, as evidenced by numerous studies showing that people often act irrationally, lack the willingness or time to engage with political realities, and possess limited knowledge, even on issues vital to the state's functioning (Caplan, 2007; Althaus, 2003; Delli Carpini, and Keeter, 1996; Neuman, 1986; Converse, 1964).

Although public opinion is vulnerable to emotions, disinformation, and fake news, it remains an essential mechanism for holding power accountable. Public approval or disapproval has a direct impact on politicians and public institutions. Demonstrations and protests illustrate that even flawed public opinion can exert pressure on those in authority. In this way, it serves as a barometer of public sentiment, even if that sentiment is not always grounded in reliable knowledge. Expressions of disappointment, dissatisfaction, or concern by the public signal to democratic institutions to address the stability and interests of citizens.

While public opinion is often criticized, it is essential to remember that democracy does not presume that every citizen has expert knowledge on all topics.

Instead, public opinion reflects the population's collective judgments, including rational, well-informed decisions and those driven by emotions, impulses, or chance. The potential influence of "irrational" public opinion on governance was significant enough that certain responsibilities were delegated to representative institutions. As Madison observed in Federalist No. 63, the Senate was designed to serve as a safeguard against temporary errors or delusions of the public:

> [The Senate] may be sometimes necessary as a defense to the people against their own temporary errors and delusions ... so there are particular moments in public affairs when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn (Madison, n.d.).

Citizens elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf, granting them the tools and authority necessary to govern. As a result, the public's role lies more in choosing leaders who shape policies rather than direct participation in political decision-making. Despite the limitations in citizens' knowledge and their decision-making capabilities, they still retain the ability to influence the direction of state governance.

However, representative democracy does not eliminate the weaknesses of public opinion. While often chaotic or uninformed, democratic systems seek to mitigate its effects through institutions grounded in expertise and analysis. Judicial bodies, independent research organizations, and think tanks balance citizens' voices with the need for rational state management. Education also plays a critical role in democracy, as it enhances the knowledge and engagement of citizens. Although public opinion is not always rational, democratic institutions, including the media, schools, and civic organizations, can raise public awareness and reduce the impact of bias and emotion on electoral choices.

A critical perspective on public opinion, akin to the approaches of thinkers like Lippmann and Schumpeter, offers valuable insights into the evolution of democracy. This critique highlights the importance of strengthening educational systems, promoting critical thinking, and limiting the effects of manipulation and populism. Instead of dismissing public opinion, this approach advocates for improvement, fostering a more informed and deliberate democratic process. The media, in particular, can play a crucial role in advancing this effort.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POST-RATIONALIST LOGIC

Citizens do not always have the time or resources to make fully informed decisions. In situations of uncertainty, they often turn to others for information and guidance on interpreting reality. As John Zaller explains:

> when elites uphold a clear picture of what should be done, the public tends to see events from that point of view, with the most politically attentive members of the public most likely to adopt the elite position. When elites divide, members of the public tend to follow the elites sharing their general ideological or partisan predisposition, with the most politically attentive members of the public mirroring most sharply the ideological divisions among the elite (Zaller, 1992, pp. 8-9).

Zaller's definition of "elites" encompasses a broad spectrum of individuals and groups significantly influencing public opinion. These include politicians and government officials; academics, intellectuals, and experts who provide analytical perspectives on events; influential figures from the private sector, arts, and culture who shape societal norms and values; and journalists, analysts, and commentators who determine how information is presented to the public.

Focusing specifically on the role of the media, Zaller describes it as a "filter" for elite messages. While he does not use the term "post-rationalism" or reference social media in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, his analysis of public opinion formation and elite influence offers insights into the mechanisms through which post-rationalist tendencies can emerge. These include shaping public perspectives through fragmented or polarized elite narratives amplified and mediated by traditional and digital media platforms.

Zaller emphasizes that messages conveyed by various elites heavily influence public opinion. However, conflicting narratives within the public sphere lead to doubt, truth fragmentation, relativism, and societal divisions. The absence of consensus among elites erodes their authority in the eyes of the public, creating space for post-rationalist notions of "personal truth." The media, particularly social media, play a significant role in this dynamic by prioritizing content designed to capture attention—often scandalous, simplistic, emotional, and easily digestible—rather than providing reliable analysis or balanced perspectives. On the audience's side, the responsibility lies in effectively selecting, interpreting, and understanding information.

Zaller's Receive-Accept-Sample model of opinion formation illustrates how public decision-making deviates from the idealized democratic concept of an engaged, rational, objective, and well-informed citizen (Berelson, 1952). In the first stage, individuals are exposed to various messages from elites and the media,

with their choice of media influenced by personal interests and preexisting beliefs. They are more likely to accept messages aligning with their values and prior convictions while rejecting or ignoring those that conflict with their world-view—a phenomenon known as the confirmation effect. Emotional content, such as messages evoking fear, anger, or joy, is particularly likely to be accepted, even when it contradicts factual information.

In the final stage, individuals form opinions or make decisions by drawing on the information most readily accessible. This is often recent, frequently repeated, or emotionally resonant information. As a result, responses are shaped by the immediate context and may lack consistency or depth. Zaller argues that public opinion is inherently fluid, sometimes appearing random. However, it is not entirely chaotic; it revolves around deeply rooted predispositions—previously established beliefs and values. While the specifics of opinions may shift depending on available information, emotions, and context, these core predispositions remain a stabilizing factor (Zaller, 1992, pp. 6-39).

The media play a crucial role in shaping predispositions by providing information and arguments that individuals frequently encounter. Media content is particularly memorable because the public is exposed to it more often than to other sources of information. News presented in the media is readily accessible to people's minds due to several factors: its freshness (recently shared by the media), emotional resonance (emotionally charged content is retained longer in memory compared to neutral information), simplicity (people prefer content that is easy to understand and aligns with their existing beliefs or cognitive patterns), and its reliance on familiar interpretive frameworks (using stereotypes, prejudices, or familiar narratives presented as stories with characters, conflicts, and straightforward solutions).

While social media have the potential to educate the public, this role is complicated by the post-rationalist logic that dominates these platforms. Post-rationalism, which undermines traditional scientific approaches to understanding reality by prioritizing emotions, intuition, subjectivity, and relativism, finds a powerful vehicle in social media.

According to Zaller's theory, social media significantly alter how people receive, accept, and process information, being a major catalyst for the spread of post-rationalist tendencies. With their structure, algorithms, and preferred modes of communication, social media platforms foster an environment where post-rationalist logic—centered on emotionality, relativism, subjectivity, and fragmentation—proliferates rapidly.

Several factors contribute to this trend. First, the format, content, and sheer volume of messages on social media reinforce post-rationalism. Social media content—whether memes, tweets, or videos—is often short, scattered, superficial, and designed to be easily consumable and engaging. This makes it difficult for users to construct a coherent understanding of reality, encouraging emotional narratives to overshadow rational arguments and visuals to dominate substantive content. Moreover, the democratization of content creation on social media allows anyone to contribute, creating a competitive "market of opinions" where information from experts and scientists is juxtaposed with contributions from journalists, amateurs, and laypeople. Alarmingly, personal experiences and opinions shared on these platforms often carry equal or greater weight than rational arguments, scientific evidence, or factual information, significantly impacting the quality of public discourse.

Although users are exposed to a wide range of messages on social media, the overwhelming quantity makes it challenging to discern expert-driven content from misinformation or pseudoscience. First, this blending of content leads to faster dissemination of simple, emotionally engaging narratives, pushing aside complex and rational analyses. Social media therefore reinforce post-rationalist attitudes by amplifying accessible and emotionally charged content while marginalizing in-depth and evidence-based discourse.

Second, social media algorithms curate content based on a user's prior activity. This personalization leads individuals to encounter material that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and interests, reinforcing the perception that their subjective view of reality is the only correct one. This is an unintended consequence of algorithms that maximize platform user engagement. The logic behind this mechanism is straightforward: the longer users remain active on a platform, the more engaged they become, and the greater the ad revenue generated. To achieve this, content is tailored to keep users scrolling and interacting. People thus operate within "information bubbles" that provide comfort and support group identity, reducing the need for critical thinking. These bubbles limit exposure to alternative perspectives, further entrenching post-rationalist attitudes where "my truth" becomes the ultimate standard.

Third, social media foster the relativization of truth and the fragmentation of knowledge. While the democratization of communication allows anyone to express their opinions, it also erodes the distinction between expert knowledge and lay perspectives. This dynamic encourages relativism, where all narratives are regarded as equally valid. As a result, scientifically backed reports on topics like climate change, vaccine efficacy, or the safety of 5G networks often lose

ground to pseudoscientific claims and conspiracy theories. These include as-sertions that vaccines cause autism or are part of a global pharmaceutical scheme, that climate change is a fabricated elite agenda, or that 5G technology is harmful. Unfortunately, fact-checking efforts have limited effectiveness in addressing these issues, as audiences tend to prioritize narratives that align with their preexisting beliefs over evidence-based contradictions.

Fourth, social media elevate intuition and personal experience as primary sources of knowledge. Platforms emphasize emotionally engaging personal stories and vivid imagery that resonate with audiences, allowing them to identify with the storyteller. In contrast, expert analyses, statistics, and detailed reports require focus, intellectual effort, and logical reasoning, making them less appeal-ing to an average user. Social media users, shaped by a "here and now" culture, often prefer quick, simple, and easily digestible messages over nuanced, rational discussions considering multiple viewpoints. This reinforces the idea that all opinions and stories hold equal value, regardless of their factual accuracy.

Fifth, politicians, advocates of pseudoscience, and propagators of post-truth narratives exploit social media to advance their political, social, economic, or ideological agendas. By invoking fear (of immigrants, vaccines, or other per-ceived threats), anger (toward "elites," "experts," or "outsiders"), and hope (for a return to traditional values or the superiority of "natural" therapies), they provide a sense of control in uncertain times. These tactics appeal to the emo-tions of "ordinary people" while positioning elites and experts as out-of-touch or self-serving. Post-rational actors deliberately spread fake news, manipulate data, and reduce complex issues to memorable slogans like "Vaccination is freedom of choice!" or "Climate change is an elite hoax!" despite overwhelming scientific consensus to the contrary.

At the same time, scientists and experts are often portrayed as disconnected from reality, biased, corrupt, and beholden to political or corporate interests. This framing undermines trust in scientific evidence, which becomes less per-suasive when contrasted with personal anecdotes and experiences. Such storytel-ling not only discredits analysts and experts but also deepens social polariza-tion, dividing public opinion into "us" (patriots and defenders of tradition) versus "them" (elites, experts, and globalists).

Rather than strengthening the authority of science and trustworthy sources of information, social media foster emotion, skepticism, subjectivity, and rela-tivism, thereby undermining society's capacity for critical thinking and its ability to discern what is closer to the truth. These effects contribute to the "triumph" of post-rationalism, marked by the erosion of objective truth criteria, the prevalence

of emotional narratives, and the fragmentation of social reality. Does this suggest that societies inevitably descend into the "abyss of post-rationalism"?

## WHAT IS NEXT?

To address this question, it is crucial to acknowledge that while human nature is inherently flawed, this does not absolve us of the responsibility to improve social media. History demonstrates that societies have successfully developed mechanisms to mitigate the negative effects of new media as they emerge. Today, growing awareness of disinformation and fake news in the public sphere underscores the necessity of reforming media regulation and advancing public education.

Fundamental changes are needed to increase transparency in the algorithm recommending content, mainly by reducing the spread of false, sensationalist, and misleading information. Collaboration between platforms and fact-checking organizations is essential, with verified harmful content flagged for users. Artificial intelligence presents an exciting opportunity to combat disinformation by automatically identifying and curbing its spread in real time while also delivering educational content tailored to users' knowledge levels and interests.

In parallel, promoting media literacy is vital to the enhancement of students' critical thinking skills, as well as the ability to analyze information and to identify manipulation and disinformation in media. Media education should explain how social media platforms capture users' attention, create information bubbles, and reinforce echo chambers. It should also build practical analytical skills, including evaluating information sources, recognizing manipulation, interpreting data, and identifying argument flaws.

Furthermore, fostering digital literacy and awareness of the influence of emotions and biases on information processing is essential. Educating the public about the role of science and encouraging a healthy form of scientific skepticism can help to counter the negative impacts of misinformation. Implementing such educational initiatives in schools, universities, and public campaigns could significantly reduce the harmful effects of social media and strengthen society's resilience to disinformation and manipulation.

According to the Copernicus-Gresham law, which posits that "bad money drives out good," neglecting efforts to address these issues will further deteriorate public opinion quality. This would effectively confirm that post-truth, disinformation, and emotionally charged social media messages are more successful in capturing attention than rational arguments. This pessimistic view

is reinforced by survey findings that reveal a chronic lack of public know-ledge—not only about the functioning of key democratic institutions but also about the processes of public policymaking, legislation, as well as the sources and verification of information that shape electoral decisions and worldviews.

Such ignorance within public opinion—both in terms of knowledge and reasoning—is particularly problematic in a democracy, as it undermines citizens' ability to develop informed perspectives and rational solutions to complex prob-lems. This gap poses a significant challenge to the expectations placed on public opinion in a democratic system. As Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee (1954) explain, the ideal democratic citizen is expected to be well-informed about political matters, including understanding the issues, their historical context, relevant facts, proposed alternatives, party platforms, and the likely outcomes of political actions (p. 308).

The challenge is rooted in the widely accepted belief that "democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed" (Delli Carpini, and Keeter, 1996, p. 1). Addressing this ignorance is therefore critical to ensuring that demo-cratic principles can be upheld, and that public opinion can contribute mean-ingfully to political discourse and decision-making.

Indeed, knowledge grounded in rational inference is essential for making sound decisions, but can social media regulation and media education truly eliminate post-rationalist attitudes from the public sphere? Would individuals who believe that vaccines are harmful and cause autism or other illnesses re-consider their views after encountering evidence of their effectiveness? Sim-ilarly, would reports and explanations persuade those who believe that airplane condensation trails are toxic chemicals deliberately sprayed to control populations or the climate?

Research indicates that even individuals with extensive political knowledge are often more polarized than those with less (Herne, Christensen, and Grönlund, 2019). Furthermore, people with high scientific understanding and advanced reasoning skills frequently use these abilities to reinforce their worldviews. As Kahan et al. (2012) observed:

> public divisions over climate change stem not from the public's incomprehension of science but from a distinctive conflict of interest: between the *personal* interest indi-viduals have in forming beliefs in line with those held by others with whom they share close ties and the *collective* one they all share in making use of the best available science to promote common welfare (p. 2).

Studies also reveal a correlation between high levels of knowledge and a greater "resistance" to new arguments. Even individuals with extensive knowledge often process information in ways that align with their preexisting beliefs, ignoring evidence, facts, and data that contradict their perspectives (Mercier, and Sperber, 2017; Kruger, and Dunning, 1999; Nickerson, 1998). As outlined by Amos Tversky, and Daniel Kahneman (1974), cognitive heuristics further complicate the issue by leading individuals to oversimplify complex issues or draw inaccurate conclusions. Such individuals also tend to defend their existing biases, a phenomenon noted by Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler (2010) called "backfire effect," where attempts to correct misinformation can inadvertently strengthen false beliefs.

If even high levels of knowledge fail to protect the public from flawed reasoning and entrenched biases, the question arises: What tools can be developed to address public ignorance effectively? Addressing this challenge requires adopting innovative strategies beyond conventional education and regulatory measures, emphasizing the development of critical thinking, openness to new ideas, and the capacity for constructive engagement with diverse viewpoints.

Philip Kitcher provides a compelling proposal to address these issues. Acknowledging the limitations of public opinion in democratic societies, he observes:

> Irremediable ignorance abounds. Many citizens understand that they do not know enough to address technical questions themselves (even if they do some reading), and are also quite confused about who, if anyone, might have expertise. Even thoughtful people can easily be confused into thinking there are two sides to questions about the history of life, competing "experts" who make claims a lay audience has no way of sorting out (Kitcher, 2011, p. 120).

For Kitcher, the core issue lies in the unequal distribution of knowledge within societies. Individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds often have better access to information and education, creating an asymmetry that marginalizes less privileged groups. This exclusion limits their participation in public discourse, resulting in fragmented societies where different groups operate in distinct informational realities. Compounding this issue, even when scientific knowledge is accessible, it can often be too complex for the general public to comprehend. Kitcher stresses the importance of bridging this gap by improving communication between scientists and the public. To achieve this, he proposes creating accessible and understandable knowledge resources managed by a "council of experts." This council would consist of impartial, well-trained individuals representing diverse perspectives, mediating between science and society. Their

role would be to distill complex scientific concepts into language that the public can grasp, fostering informed decision-making and democratic engagement.

However, Kitcher acknowledges the challenges when experts struggle to reach a consensus. In such cases, society becomes vulnerable to manipulation by "skillful rhetors" who blur the lines between scientific, non-scientific, pseudo-scientific, and ideological arguments. These manipulations can obscure scientifically grounded reasoning, further complicating the public's ability to navigate complex issues and undermining trust in expert advice.

CONCLUSIONS

Social media pose an increasing challenge to democratic practices, fostering an environment where post-rationalist logic—rooted in relativism, subjectivity, emotionality, and fragmentation—emerges and rapidly proliferates.

Philip Kitcher (2011), Jón Ólafsson (2017), Sheila Jasanoff (2005), and Brian Wynne (2006) emphasize the critical issues of how social knowledge is distributed—the public's trust in experts, and the role of science in democratic processes. A central concern is the erosion of epistemic trust within societies. When the sources of knowledge (scientists and experts) and the processes behind its production (scientific methodologies) are openly or subtly questioned (to which social media contribute significantly), it creates fertile ground for post-rationalism. Without trust in scientists, scientific institutions, and credible media, the knowledge they produce is no longer regarded as objective or reliable. This leads to a situation where experts' findings are perceived as "as credible" as pseudoscientists', supporting the notion that "everyone has their truth." This shift results in a greater reliance on subjective experiences, intuitions, and emotionally driven beliefs—a trend amplified by social media platforms prioritizing engaging and emotional content. Such an environment fuels the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, further eroding shared epistemic foundations within society. The absence of a common basis for evaluating knowledge prevents different groups from reaching consensus on critical issues. As traditional knowledge sources lose credibility, people turn to simplistic narratives to make sense of complex realities—narratives often found in outright falsehoods and conspiracy theories.

This relativization of truth undermines the public's capacity to assess information based on its quality, accelerating the rise of a post-truth culture. Addressing this crisis requires prioritizing rebuilding trust in public institutions, improving

public education, and implementing stricter regulation of social media. Such efforts must involve all those committed to preventing the erosion of democracy, social and economic instability, anomie, and division. Instead, the goal should be to foster social cohesion and advance societies rooted in knowledge and facts.

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OPINIA PUBLICZNA W ERZE POSTRACJONALIZMU:
PRZYPADEK MEDIÓW SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWYCH

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł diagnozuje genezę i mechanizmy powstawania postaw postracjonalnych w społeczeń-stwie i wskazuje na media społecznościowe jako jeden z najważniejszych nośników ich rozprze-strzeniania. Zdezorientowana opinia publiczna nie może opierać się na mediach społecznościowych, w których komunikaty są coraz częściej tworzone i promowane dla maksymalizacji uwagi ich od-biorców poprzez wywoływanie emocji i dostosowanie przekazu do wcześniej zidentyfikowanych preferencji użytkowników. Ważną rolę w rozstrzyganiu prawdziwości ustaleń mogliby pełnić eksperci i naukowcy, którzy jednak – wraz z innymi instytucjami publicznymi – tracą zaufanie społeczne. W tej sytuacji komunikaty propagatorów pseudonauki i szerzycieli postprawdy mają w przestrzeni publicznej taką samą wartość jak rozważania naukowców i ekspertów. W konsekwencji media spo-łecznościowe przyczyniają się do kształtowania opinii opartych nie na faktach i dowodach nauko-wych, lecz na emocjach, intuicji i subiektywnych przekonaniach. Prowadzi to do fragmentaryzacji społeczeństwa, polaryzacji, konfliktów społecznych i ostatecznie do osłabienia demokracji. Aby przeciwdziałać tym negatywnym skutkom, konieczne jest budowanie zaufania epistemicznego na poziomie indywidualnym, społecznym i instytucjonalnym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** postracjonalizm; wiedza społeczna; media społecznościowe; zaufanie epistemiczne