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Book review of *Truth Decay. An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* by Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, RAND Corporation, 2017, 324 p.

Significant developments that occurred in the past two decades in the media and information system, such as the rise of the internet and social media or even the commentary based journalism that adopted a 24-hour coverage, led to a continuously rising process of creating, disseminating and consuming information. Nevertheless, the enormous amount of information that crosses the public space is not always supported by factual information, data, analysis or statistical representations. In fact, this large volume of information circulating in the public sphere is rather based on personal interpretation, misleading content, false assumptions or intentionally manipulated stories. Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, authors of the complex exploratory research called *Truth Decay. An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* argue in favor of the term "Truth Decay" to define the current changes of political and civil discourse in the U.S., where opinions and personal experience are "overwhelming factual information", the line between opinion and fact is becoming blurred, while the public distrust in sources of factual information rapidly increases (pp. 2-3).

The phenomenon of Truth Decay is particularly important when major public topics are discussed, for instance, national policies, healthcare, economy or laws. Kavanagh and Rich's research is based on structured discussions with experts and review of relevant literature. The book is organized in six chapters that address the following issues: major trends of Truth Decay, a presentation of defining moments in the U.S. history that revealed the trends of Truth Decay, the complex drivers of the phenomenon, consequences and a proposed agenda for future research.

Kavanagh and Rich define Truth Decay as a set of four related trends, namely the "increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data, a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, the increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact, and the declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information" (p. 3). The increasing disagreement about facts or declining agreement about facts and data becomes more noticeable when there are strong scientific evidence, data or analysis supporting a theory, but disagreement still increases, as in the case of the cur-

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rent growing disagreement about the safety of vaccines, despite decades of research that have proven that vaccination is effective and necessary (p. 25). The book also emphasizes the tendency of newspapers or TV channels to use a mix of facts and opinion when presenting information, as well as the rise of internet and social media that led to the blurring of the line between opinion and fact, and the increase of the volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact (p.32). The insights in this part of the book are particularly helpful to better understand and address the challenges of the current media system and civil discourse dominated by the spread of inaccurate and biased information, personal opinions and judgments, or disinformation and false stories.

The authors explored several moments of the U.S. history characterized by yellow journalism (1880–1890); jazz journalism, tabloids, and radio talk shows (1920–1930); television coverage and New Journalism (1960–1970), and drew a comparison with two more recent decades, the 2000 and 2010. The results of the study stated that the phenomenon of Truth Decay is a cyclical process. The research showed a noticeable loss in confidence in major institutions that was common for the '60s and '70s as well as for the last two decades analyzed, while the blurring of the line between opinion and fact and the influence of opinions over facts was common to all the analyzed periods and increased over the last years (p. 72).

The study defines four drivers considered as significant conditions that contributed to the phenomenon of Truth Decay, such as cognitive processing and cognitive biases, changes in the information system, competing demands on the U.S. educational system and polarization. The authors explain that drivers such as cognitive processing encourage people to "weight experience more heavily than data and facts" (p. 81), while polarization and the rise of the internet contributed to the increasing disagreement about facts and blurring of the line between opinion and facts (p. 171). The book also ponders over the question of agents as entities that accelerate the Truth Decay, such as the media, academia and research organizations, political actors and the government, and foreign actors (p. 79).

A key section of this book addresses some of the most significant and damaging consequences of Truth Decay in the U.S., namely erosion of civil discourse, political paralysis, alienation and disengagement, uncertainty about the U.S. policy (p. 191). Kavanagh and Rich argue that these consequences threaten the democracy since "without a common set of facts, data, statistical analysis it becomes nearly impossible to have a meaningful debate about important policies and topics" (e.g., immigration, healthcare, or national economy) (p.199). The book suggests that Truth Decay is also seen as factor that contributed to the U.S. political stalemate, the division between elected officials (p.199), as well as the current political and social alienation (p. 208). For this reason, a better understanding of the damaging consequences and real costs of Truth Decay in the American society might help finding effective solutions to address the challenges and fight this phenomenon. „The challenge posed by Truth Decay is great, but the stakes are too high to permit inaction" (p.255).

The last chapter discusses the priority areas of research and serves as a helpful guide for future exploration of the concept of Truth Decay. The authors suggest that more future research focus on history to provide additional insights into the concept and to identify and collect metrics on aspects of Truth Decay. Such investigation would, for instance, gather data about „the speed of information flow, the amount of information available and the extent to which polarization has changed over time" (pp. 228-229). More research on the causality between Truth Decay and each of the drivers or further exploration on the question of agency will help

better understand the concept and formulate solutions and responses to tackle its current manifestation.

Kavanagh and Rich's book emphasizes the significance of Truth Decay in today's information ecosystem and its costs for major society areas (e.g. public policies and governance, national economy or healthcare). It is important to mention, that the authors established a valuable list of research priorities that will help better understand and combat the problem of Truth Decay. As suggested by the authors, an interdisciplinary approach will help devise possible solutions. Potential areas of investigation include the media industry, the new technologies, the civil discourse or the educational system. Finally, a major contribution of this book is that it highlights the complexity of Truth Decay, its timeliness and relevance to the current information-related transformations taking place in the U.S. and worldwide. Kavanagh and Rich emphasized that Truth Decay is a complex system and a phenomenon that imposes many threats to the state of democracy, political transparency or national prosperity. The book constitutes an ambitious exploratory work that tackles some major issues of the U.S. public life – the diminishing role of the facts and the erosion of the line between opinion and fact – and serves as a base to better understand the information ecosystem, while at the same time encouraging academics, policymakers, or experts to further thoroughly study the system of Truth Decay in the U.S and elsewhere in the world.