THE RHETORIC OF POST-TRUTH

Sorin SUCIU
Politehnica University of Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: There is a widespread belief that modern democracies, due to their organization, have institutional mechanisms that, like an immune system, are capable of eliminating dysfunctions, syncopes, and even the dangers that could threaten their own existence. The access to communication and the freedom of expression are important allies of democracies but, at the same time, these values can be diverted for purposes other than the general interest. Spreading alarmist news, messages that "reveal" conspiracies or narratives that have nothing in common with reality represent the tools of those who stir the currents of nationalism for political purposes. My paper analyzes the phenomenon of post-truth and its harmful implications for the democratic systems.

Keywords: post-truth, post-democracy, manipulation techniques, sophism, rhetoric.

1. Introduction

The post truth has become overnight a star concept, the favorite catchphrase of the journalists, political analysts, ethicists and demonstrators alike. Designated "the word of the year 2016" by the researchers from the Oxford Dictionaries, the term refers to situations where in public opinion formation, objective facts matter less, sometimes at all, as opposed to the appeal to emotion or personal belief. The objective truth, the actual unfolding of the facts fades in the face of constructed scenarios designed to trigger emotions that will further lead to the achievement of the political goals.

The significance of the concept cannot be separated from the political events of 2016 which had a major impact on the public opinion, namely the Brexit, the US presidential elections, Erdogan's repressive policy or the expansion of Russia's influence. Closer to us were the elections in our country when a presidential candidate was "discovered" by the post-truth apostles as the "secret illegitimate son" of an American billionaire of Hungarian origin. Situations like the above demonstrate the force of the post-truth mechanism, its capacity to make significant changes in the global political order, starting from things that have nothing to do with reality.

The concept is not new. It was first used by Steve Tesich in an essay he wrote for *The Nation* in which he addressed the ways in which the American political scandals, from Watergate to the Persian Gulf War, were presented (Kreitner 2016). Almost immediately, a series of similar phrases emerged: post-truth (referring to George Bush's statements after 9/11), post-democracy (a model of politics in which elections exist and can change governments, but "public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams") (Crouch 2004, 4) or post-truth politics as a type a political culture in which public opinion and media narratives have become almost entirely disconnected from the substance of legislation", post-realism, post-real society, etc.

Although the term and especially the reality it designates are not a new, post-truth has gained an infamous reputation, especially with the proliferation of media channels and the rise of social networks. Whether we are talking about TV news agencies created to influence a part of public opinion (CCTV News in China), or social networks channels that act as propaganda tools, delegitimizing the institutions of democracy, all of these have determined a fragmentation of the public opinion, presenting themselves as alternatives to the mainstream media.

As Jayson Harsin points out (2015, 327-33), there are many techniques employed: political communication informed by cognitive science, which aims at managing perception and belief of segmented populations through techniques like microtargeting, prolific user-generated content and fewer society-wide common trusted authorities to distinguish between truth and lies; algorithms that govern what appears in social media and search engine rankings, sometimes based on what the algorithm thinks users want and not on what is necessarily factual; news media that has itself been marred by scandals of plagiarism, hoaxes, propaganda, and changing news values; tabloidization, infotainment, etc. Thus, cast into the world the post-truth does not intend to contest or falsify the truth, but only to render it as of secondary importance. Objective truth does not disappear (because the factual reality cannot disappear) but it is put under a fierce siege. We are witnessing a minimization of the truth for the benefit of a new perception that acquires not the status of the truth but its force.

2. The domain of the post-truth

Its existence does not have anything in common with the sphere of logic. At least in its classical form, logic is binary, that is, it only allows the existence of two truth values: true and false. Under the law of excluded middle (or the law of the excluded third, lat. *tertium non datur*), for any proposition, either that proposition is true, or its negation is true, a third possibility is excluded. The truths conveyed by the media are, in general, synthetic truths, they are derived from experience and can be verified by correspondence with facts (the correspondence theory of truth) or by their agreement with a set of preexisting sentences (the coherence theory of truth). Thus, from a strictly logical point of view, post-truth is falsehood.

The domain of the post-truth is the rhetoric, and within it, that kind of persuasion employed by the politics and called propaganda. The basis of post-truth is a fallacy or an incorrect *argument*. The error is not made unintentionally, as is the case of paralogism, but intentionally. In other words, post-truth is a sophism, that is, a logically incorrect reasoning, made knowingly and intentionally. The reasoning error is a material one because it does not relate to the observance of the logical rules of validity for the inferences, but to the content of the judgments. What is at stake here is the meaning of the premise in the context of the derivation of the conclusion.

The post-truth is not a particular type of sophism but it is constituted with the help of various sophisms, including argumentum ad hominem (the argument to the person), argumentum ad ignorantiam (the argument from ignorance), argumentum ad populum (appeal to the people or appeal to the majority), argumentum ad baculum (appeal to the stick), argumentum ad verecundiam (the argument from authority), the hasty generalization, the inconclusive analogy, etc. The specificity of post-truth as a

material sophism is the appeal to emotion and affection as a way of composing an alternative reality (or rather, an alternative perception of reality).

All these traits allow us to include the post-truth in the techniques of manipulating public opinion category. Post-truth technicians aim to influence or to change behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, leaving the impression of the freedom of thought for the subjects or groups concerned. Whether it is written media, audio-visual channels or internet, they use a form of fundamental, asymmetrical, deformed communication that does not allow or promote the debate or the dialogue. This involves a planned strategy, which starts with propaganda, continues with intoxication, and ends with indoctrination. For this purpose, the post-truth specialists employ ambiguity, confusion, mocking tone, deprecation, terms that have the desired connotations, the constant repetition of the media construct in different environments, using different sources.

Through invariable repetition, especially for propaganda purposes, a non-truth can be perceived as its opposite and considered as such by the public. This is more likely to function when the audience is frustrated and sensitive to emotional arguments. This is precisely the type of public most likely to be the victim of political microtargeting because it is the easiest to be persuaded. This public does not want to know the naked-truth but the "truth" that feeds its resentments and gives an answer to its discontent. The psychological resort of post-truth is represented by the amount of frustrations, dissatisfactions, fears, anxieties of an uninformed and thus vulnerable public. The global political situation is complicated; there are many factors that influences the state of affairs at national and international level. In most cases, the general public does not have the instruction or the time to carry out a rational analysis and to understand the causality of this multitude of factors. This situation is complemented by an avalanche of information that now comes from multiple sources and determines a state of information overload and saturation. It is precisely this fertile soil where the post-truth propaganda can take advantage and throw its seeds, offering simple, manichaeistic resolvings by dividing the world into good and evil, identifying themselves with the good and offering immediate, pragmatic solutions to restore the order. These proposed solutions can include (at least in democratic societies) attending the elections and voting for an unquestionable candidate, party or solution.

3. The imagology of the post-truth

It is interesting to point out that in this image-based media we are exposed to, the sphere of post-truth is not limited to the written or spoken word. Post truth has also made its way in the domain of press images. The historian and critic Vicky Goldberg once said "When, photography was invented, it was thought to be an equivalent to truth. It was truth with a capital T" (Goldberg 2009). This conviction has been reinforced by the fact that photography has increasingly begun to be used in the judiciary, in identifying people, as evidence in court, or as documentary photography that depicts the life of a person or a community as it is, at a certain time and a certain place.

However, this use of images has not excluded from the beginnings of photography attempts to manipulate images or to stage scenes in order to present a counterfeit reality as if it was true. Thus, "The Cottingley Fairies", made in 1917 by

Elsie and Frances Griffiths, were not pictures of fantastic, supernatural creatures, but only painted figures, cuts from magazines overlaid on their actual portraits. Robert Doisneau's famous "*Le Baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville*", a photo that was presented by the photographer as a snapshot that illustrates the ubiquitous romanticism of the City of Lights, was just staged scene shot by Doisneau with the help of a couple of actor friends (Poirier 2017).

Closer to our times and with a pronounced political character, is a picture taken on Inauguration Day, the day when the new American president, Donald Trump, sworn in. The photo shows the vice president Mike Pence and his family during the inaugural march and it was posted by the vice-president on his Twitter account. The image does not contain digital manipulations that alter the content. It was made from a favorable angle that leaves the impression that the street is full of people who acclaim him when he passes in front of them. Another photograph from an unofficial source, taken from a different angle reveals a deserted street with empty stands that were unnecessarily guarded by the cops. Photographs tell stories and determine narratives in the mind of the viewer and, as Cottingley's Fairies, Doisneau's kiss or Pence's march prove, they can tell stories that never really existed. This type of manipulation is even more subversive and insidious and can even escape the observation of the rational viewer: as long as a photo is the perfect copy of reality, who can challenge the reality itself?

The prefix *post* attached to the word *truth* must not lead to a relativization of this central concept for all that is science, knowledge, ethics and legitimacy. Truth is not something that can be transcended and left behind. There is no functional alternative to truth and no substitute for it. A post-truth society is nothing but the antechamber of a Big Brother state, that is, of totalitarianism. As citizens of democratic states and news consumers, we have a responsibility to defend the truth and to counter its falsification. In addition, we also have the tools to guide us in the media (Dahmen 2017).

First of all, we need to distinguish between different sources of information, between mainstream media, which usually follow the deontological norms of journalism concerning the truth, and partisan media striving to manufacture an alternative rendition of the reality. Then, especially in the age of the Internet, it is at our fingertips to crosscheck *information, to compare and contrast* the data from multiple sources and thus to critically evaluate the media content in order to discern the objective facts from simple propaganda allegations. Based on our civic experience, we need to develop our critical thinking and to be able to go beyond demagogic, populist statements, and analyze profiles of candidates. We need to understand the complex causality of domestic and international politics. In the case of images, it is useful to pay attention to the aesthetics of the frame and to the details of the images. It is important to notice whether elements have been removed or added, if the photo has been resized, if the angle is strange or the perspective is too close or too far.

Finally, we must not forget that democracy is pointless in the absence of education. These words so dear to Franklin Roosevelt come to emphasize the power of education understood not as an assimilation of a set of contents, but as the acquisition of one's own critical thinking. Democracy is not a ready-made good, but a piece from a larger ensemble that includes, as an essential part, a healthy education system. Democracy cannot not be successful without a culture of learning, awareness and critical thinking. In the absence of that, we will have only an amorphous mass of disinformed voters. The fate of a democracy depends on the degree of rationality of its population.

References

1. Crouch, C. 2004. Post-democracy. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
2. Dahmen, N. 2017. "Want to Resist the Post-Truth Age? Learn to Analyze Photos like an Expert Would" in *Quartz*, available at https://qz.com/902573/want-to-resist-the-post-truth-age-learn-to-analyze-photos-like-an-expert-would/ [accessed April 2017].
3. Goldberg, V. 2009. "The Film and More", transcript, available at http://www.pbs.org/ktca/americanphotography/filmandmore/transcript3.html [accessed April 2017].
4. Harsin, J. 2015. "Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies" in Communication, Culture & Critique, 8 (2), pp. 327–333.
5. Kreitner, R. 2016. "Post-Truth and its Consequences: What a 25-Year-Old Essay Tells us about the Current Moment" in The Nation, available at https://www.thenation.com/article/post-truth-and-its-consequences-what-a-25-year-old-essay-tells-us-about-the-current-moment/ [accessed April 2017].
6. Poirier, A. 2017. "One of the History's Most Romantic Photographs was Staged" in *BBC.com/culture*, available at http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170213-the-iconic-photo-that-symbolises-love [accessed May 2017].