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Post-truth and Social Networks as Challenges for Journalism in the Digital Era*

⸢*English Version*⸥

La posverdad y las redes sociales como desafíos del periodismo en la era digital

Pós-verdade e mídia social como desafios para o jornalismo na era digital

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Abstract

Objective: To analyze whether post-truth in the digital era, which has become widespread across various areas of communication, is a phenomenon that affects the

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information societies receive regarding fundamental issues used to make decisions in democratic systems; additionally, to investigate whether the intermediation of traditional media, particularly journalism, has served to verify and contrast the information delivered to the general public. **Methodology**: This is a qualitative research study that uses analytical methods and data collection techniques such as documentary review, morphological analysis, and a categorical matrix. **Results**: The widespread use of social media has largely replaced the mediating function of traditional journalism between information senders and receivers. This shift has made it increasingly challenging for journalism to contribute to shaping public opinion in democratic societies during times of post-truth and disinformation. **Conclusions**: Despite the challenges presented by post-truth in the digital era, journalism remains a crucial tool in maintaining the quality of information received by the public and preventing the erosion of rational assumptions that underpin political participation and institutions. As emotional expressions on digital platforms continue to grow, supporting and strengthening journalism as a vital component of democratic societies is vital.

Keywords: political communication; journalism; emotions; virtual social networks; democracy; post-truth.

Resumen

Objetivo: analizar si la posverdad en la era digital, y generalizada en otros ámbitos de la comunicación, es un fenómeno que está afectando la información que reciben las sociedades frente a temas fundamentales sobre los cuales tomar decisiones en sistemas democráticos; además de indagar si la intermediación de los medios de comunicación tradicionales —y el periodismo, en particular— ha servido para verificar y contrastar la información que se ha entregado al público en general. **Metodología:** investigación cualitativa, cuyo método es el analítico y las técnicas recolección de información utilizadas son: la revisión documental, el análisis morfológico y la matriz categorial. **Resultados:** las redes sociales han desactivado, en gran medida, la función mediadora de la prensa entre los emisores informativos y los receptores, lo que ha hecho difícil que el periodismo pueda contribuir a formar a la opinión pública en sociedades democráticas en tiempos de posverdad y de desinformación. **Conclusiones:** el periodismo sigue siendo una herramienta útil para hacer frente a la posverdad, la cual está poniendo en cuestión la calidad de la información recibida por la opinión pública, además de ayudar a evitar el resquebrajamiento de las bases de la participación política fundada anteriormente en presupuestos racionales y que han impactado en la construcción de

las instituciones políticas, pero que ceden espacio a expresiones emotivas construidas desde las plataformas digitales.

Palabras clave: comunicación política; periodismo; emociones; redes sociales virtuales; democracia; posverdad.

Resumo

Objetivo: analisar se a pós-verdade na era digital, e generalizada em outras áreas da comunicação, é um fenômeno que está afetando as informações que as sociedades recebem sobre questões fundamentais para a tomada de decisões em sistemas democráticos; além de investigar se a intermediação da mídia tradicional - e do jornalismo em particular - serviu para verificar e contrastar as informações que foram entregues ao público em geral. **Metodologia:** pesquisa qualitativa, cujo método é analítico e as técnicas de coleta de dados utilizadas são: revisão documental, análise morfológica e matriz categórica. **Resultados:** as redes sociais desativaram, em grande parte, a função mediadora da imprensa entre emissores e recetores de informações, o que dificultou a contribuição do jornalismo para a formação da opinião pública nas sociedades democráticas em tempos de pós-verdade e desinformação. **Conclusões:** o jornalismo continua sendo uma ferramenta útil para lidar com a pós-verdade, que está questionando a qualidade das informações recebidas pelo público, além de ajudar a evitar o rompimento das bases da participação política, anteriormente baseadas em pressupostos racionais e que tiveram impacto na construção das instituições políticas, mas que agora estão dando lugar a expressões emotivas construídas a partir de plataformas digitais.

Palavras-chave: comunicação política; jornalismo; emoções; redes sociais virtuais; democracia; pós-verdade.

Introduction

Events of local, national, or international importance gain significance due to the influx of information published on social networks. From elections to pandemics like the coronavirus, and even the most recent conflict between Ukraine and Russia, events become trending topics on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Additionally, a substantial amount of content circulates through messaging apps like WhatsApp or Telegram.

In the Russia-Ukraine war, Putin's government made the decision to block Facebook. However, the well-known social network also took action on its part by verifying all content originating from Russian government-backed mass media (BBC, 2022). The determinations of both parties correspond to a longstanding concern: the control of information, particularly the manipulation of public opinion through content that does not adhere to the truth.

The decision on the Facebook news feed of the Russia-Ukraine war has not been unique. If the 2016 elections in the United States were considered one of the greatest examples of a post-truth era, the 2020 elections, characterized by attacks on the truth and the proliferation of lies across the digital universe, implemented a containment barrier. After losing to his rival, Democrat Joe Biden, some of the major mass media outlets in the United States took the step of muting microphones and even cutting on-air speeches by Donald Trump or his advisors in their news programs. The decision, unprecedented for a sitting president and a prominent news source, was made because the mass media believed that the president was spreading falsehoods.

This was not the sole contention raised by the mass media during the unconventional year of 2020. The pandemic spawned worldwide news regarding conspiracy theories about the disease's origin, baseless medications and treatments, and governmental statements that, in certain instances, exacerbated the number of infections. This was evident in countries like Sweden, Brazil, and even the United States. The lies originating directly from official sources were exposed by certain mass media outlets, including the Huffington Post (2020) and the BBC (2020).

Conspiracy theories that aim to spread misinformation find an easily accessible channel in online networks. A recent report by CNN reveals how Russia, through official sources including President Putin himself, has suggested the need to "de-Nazify" Ukraine in various situations. This phrase contradicts the reality of a country that has a significant population of Jewish descent, including President Volodymyr Zelensky (CNN, 2022).

In April 2022, in the heart of California's Silicon Valley, at Stanford University, former U.S. President Barack Obama accused social networks of amplifying "the worst instincts of humanity." Obama's assertion is striking, considering that he was the first U.S. president to leverage social networks in reaching the White House in 2009. In his speech to the academic community, he elucidated that "one of the significant factors contributing to the erosion of democracies is the profound transformation in our modes of communication and information consumption" (France 24, 2022, para. 2), while demanding controls on large technological platforms.

Since 2016, the term "post-truth" has been coined by Oxford University as the word of the year. It can be summarized as follows:

> In this definition, it is emphasized that the prefix "post" is used to signify not so much the notion of "moving beyond" truth in a temporal sense (as in "postwar"), but rather the idea that truth has been overshadowed and rendered insignificant. (McIntyre, 2018, p. 34).

In other words, *the truth*, it doesn't matter. Oxford University was not the sole entity to recognize the significance and extent of post-truth. The term "post-truth" entered the Spanish Language Dictionary (DLE) in 2017 with the following definition: "Deliberate distortion of reality, aimed at manipulating beliefs and emotions in order to influence public opinion and social attitudes" (RAE & ASALE, 2017, entry "posverdad").

Other theorists who have approached the analysis of post-truth prefer to simply label it as "lies." Such is the case with Levitin (2016), who goes further by stating that the "post-truth era is characterized by deliberate irrationality, standing in opposition to all the significant advancements of humanity" (p. 12).

While acknowledging the democratizing potential of internet-based information and its ability to serve as a repository of human knowledge, it is crucial to recognize that social networks and search engines, in their quest to create communities and lucrative advertising markets, are introducing elements that distort public opinion instead of contributing to its formation. Naturally, the aforementioned developments have significant effects on people's daily lives and crucial aspects, such as the political decisions made by societies on a regular basis. The very architects who manipulate emotions on social networks have also developed algorithms that reinforce users' beliefs, preferences, and tastes, leading to audience segmentation—a phenomenon referred to as "the filter bubble" by Pariser (2011).

Certain features within social networks, although regarded as positive by many users, have the tendency to intensify emotions, whether they be joy, hatred, or anger. As noted by Elster (2007), emotions hold significant influence over the formation of beliefs, upon which behaviors are founded.

The axis of being social spokespersons, which was once predominantly held by traditional mass media such as television, radio, and the press, now revolves around the millions of accounts created on social networks by individuals, political groups, and companies who directly communicate their content.

Information, regarded as a public good (Restrepo, 2018), plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. In this regard, radio, television, and the press have played a significant role in providing individuals with the essential inputs needed to make informed decisions.

The significance of traditional mass media and journalism in shaping public opinion has been extensively studied and acknowledged. These platforms have garnered substantial audiences and have strengthened their informative spaces, consolidating their power of social influence (Castells, 2009).

The main objective of this article is to analyze the role of the media, with a particular focus on journalism, in facilitating the exchange of information between senders and receivers within social networks. Journalism, guided by ethical codes (Cortina, 2021) and utilizing refined tools developed over time, has the potential to expose post-truth elements in various content and enhance public discourse. It can promote concepts such as "deliberative democracy" (Habermas, 2008) in shaping political institutions and their legitimacy, despite the challenges highlighted by Han (2022) in his work *Infocracy* regarding the decline of communicative action.

The specific objectives of this research, as evident from the results, were to highlight, first, the amplification of "post-truth" content within social networks. Second, the research aimed to emphasize how the emotions and aesthetics embedded in tools designed for digital platforms are reshaping the way these messages are both transmitted and received. Third, to analyze the way in which social networks have contributed to a decline in the mediating role of the media and the press and, subsequently, to establish the way in which the press has been key in the formation of public opinion; this issue is explained from theories such as the *Agenda Setting* or the observations of Habermas (2001, 2008) and Sartori (1998). And last, to recover the role of journalism in editing and curating content at a time when, precisely, post-truth threatens to alter the veracity of the news and information that citizens consume in democratic political systems.

Methodology

The research was qualitative and the method, analytical. This allowed analysis by segments and a deduction of basic premises around the study of the phenomenon of post-truth and digital social networks that have challenged journalism in the last decade. Its forms of analysis were based on contextual categories and triangulation of information. The data collection techniques were documentary review, morphological analysis and a categorical matrix.

A morphological analysis was used. It is a combinatorial technique that allows breaking down a problematic question (in this case: *how can journalism contribute to shaping public opinion in democratic societies in a post-truth era?* into essential parameters: journalism in light of categories such as "post-truth," "digital social networks," "emotion," "aesthetics," "traditional media," "public opinion" and "democracy"). In this analysis, a categorical matrix was built that allowed multiplying the relationships amongst the mentioned parts (problematic question [a] and essential parameters [i and ii]). The steps that were followed were:

1. Specification of a general objective. To analyze whether post-truth in the digital era and widespread in other areas of communication is a phenomenon that is affecting the information received by societies regarding fundamental issues on which to make decisions in democratic systems, and whether the intermediation of traditional mass media —and journalism, in particular— has served to verify and contrast the information that has been delivered to the general public.

2. Identification of all the essential parameters that characterize the analysis:
   a) Journalism.
   i) Categories reviewed: "post-truth," "social networks," "emotions," "aesthetics," "traditional mass media," "public opinion" and "democracy."
   ii) Edition of contents for objective information.

3. Construction of the analysis matrix *versus* the essential parameters. In the matrix, the essential parameters and the analysis categories were documented from the organization of information in the matrix, highlighting the theories, conceptions, definitions and sources of information such as multidisciplinary and specialized databases, summary and indexing systems, and journalistic media, among others.

The results obtained from this investigation are presented as follows.

Results

This section answers the guiding research question "*How can journalism contribute to shaping public opinion in democratic societies in post-truth times?,*" contrasted with each of the specific objectives set out in the introduction of this document. In this sense, each of the essential parameters and categories documented in the categorical matrix described in the methodology are displayed.

Post-truth and Social Networks

Social and electoral phenomena such as the results of Brexit —which led to the departure of Great Britain from the European Union— and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, led to questions about the excess of information that surrounded both processes and that, in many cases, contributed to misinforming the electorate by being manipulated or not verifiable content (Moya, 2018). This section addresses the way in which digital social networks have been used to misinform, taking advantage of tools that these same platforms have developed to "build loyalty" with their audiences and ensure that they are connected as long as possible (attention economy) as a way to obtain money through advertising (Pariser, 2011).

In 2016, reflections on what was happening with the quality of the information that was transmitted through digital platforms —and especially through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or instant messaging services such as WhatsApp— made the concept of "post-truth" appear in the international arena. From then on, the term became an object of study, analysis, and theorization, due to the implications regarding the verification of information (Pariser, 2011; McIntyre, 2015; Ibáñez, ed., 2017; Harding, 2017; D'Ancona, 2017; Amorós, 2018; Alandete, 2019; Illades, 2018; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019). In this sense, "post-truth" was a term that required conceptual clarification, along with some others such as "disinformation," "misinformation," "fake news" and "alternative facts" (Tandoc et al., 2017; Valero & Oliveira, 2018; Rodríguez, 2019; Estrada-Cuzcano et al., 2020). Post-truth became a scenario for permanent discussion and a political strategy to manipulate public opinion; it is a symbol of the new effects of immediate advertising, propaganda, and not very truthful communication, now under the auspices of digital social networks.

The post-truth phenomenon leads to talking about fake news or, simply, lies. Four cases can serve to illustrate the situation in the digital world: first, the creation by the archetypes of social networks of algorithms for commercial

purposes in which they segment users based on information bubbles (Pariser, 2011); second, the existence of news companies or people who seek to generate *clicks* only to obtain economic benefits; third, the creation of news to falsify reality for specific purposes, e.g.: win elections, set fire to a society, create chaos, defame, sow doubts in front of a government, among others; and finally, the most recurring phenomenon, the information issued directly from official sources of some politicians through their social media accounts (Moya, 2018).

In all four cases, beyond the desire to earn money from the *clicks* obtained, the content published on the networks is changing the social perception of people regarding the decisions they have to make within of a democracy or in the public sphere (Crilley & Gillespie, 2018; Mosco, 2018); that is, they influence public opinion.

For authors such as Habermas (2001), the concept of "public opinion" is closely linked to the idea of the public sphere, as that space in which the mobility of concepts, arguments, and ideas can take shape and be used for the State and politics. Habermas' (2001) reason is that the hegemonic element of the debate in a society and public opinion must occur among enlightened people and with sufficient arguments, as a path to the truth, to be able to convince the opposing party. One might wonder if the objective world —which can be founded and argued on the stage of public opinion through the recognition that subjects can make of it, based on the action and language preached by Habermas (2001)— is not being disrupted with the prism of social networks and the emotions that circulate in them. Key concepts such as *isegoria* and *parrhesia* in the Greek *polis* for the ordering of the political realm, today are cracking in a liquid society (Baumman, 2015).

The first attack on the truth —and, perhaps, one of the deadliest and least perceptible for a user of social networks— comes from the very algorithms and tools designed by the architects of virtual social networks. For some time now, experts have pointed out how software developers who work for social networks or search engines, essentially pursue the goal that the user spends as much time connected to a computer or cell phone screen as possible.

In 2020 the Netflix documentary, "The Social Dilemma," the emeritus professor of Harvard Business School, Shoshana Zuboff raised the question as follows:

> It is a market that is exclusively dedicated to human futures. Just as there are markets that trade pork or oil futures. We now have markets trading human futures at scale, and those markets produced the billions of dollars that have made Internet companies the richest in human history. (Orlowski, 2020, mm. 15:48-16:22).

In the same documentary by Tristan Harris, a former designer who worked for Google, exposed the information bubble with an example that would demonstrate how far social networks are capable of taking information or advertising segmentation:

> If I want to rig an election, I can go to a conspiracy theory Facebook group, and I can find 100 people who believe the Earth is totally flat and believe the moon landing is a hoax, and I can say to Facebook: give me thousand users that are like that. (Orlowski, 2020, mm. 01:08:36-01:08:42).

Social networks have known how to exploit cognitive, ideological and political biases of the communities they have created. Exploiting cognitive biases is a reality that is known and taken advantage of by those who are only interested in exasperating the beliefs or ideologies already rooted in the thoughts of certain social groups. Faced with cognitive bias, it is difficult to contrast evidence; beliefs, learning, what social networks say and the content that individuals want to receive will weigh more than the strength of the arguments, reality, and facts. Post-truth is skillfully exploited from cognitive biases; it is even a generator of social polarization (Thompson, 2017).

The lies that proliferate on social networks began to be hidden with a common format for all societies: that of the news with "credible" headlines, a wording capable of deceiving an avid reader, description of events in mode, time, place, interviews, and even photographs or videos. "Fake news" became common in the digital world. The same thing happens in societies that began to receive countless contents that owe little to the truth, but which, moreover, were difficult to verify. For example, in April 2019, The Washington Post accounted 10,000 lies to President Donald Trump in 800 days of his presidency. Many of them were multiplied from social networks and sold with a "news" label.

The fact that politicians and ideologues have found in social networks the possibility of speaking without filters is another way in which post-truth has managed to undermine the daily conversation. The ideological war waged by Putin against Ukraine is a case in point. Similarly, in the case of the United States, the Trump phenomenon did not only occur in that North American nation. According to Kakutani (2019), this situation has spread to multiple countries.

False news, disguised in anonymity, travels at a faster rate on the internet than true news. One of their advantages is that it must be frightening, appealing to fear, rage, or primitive emotions to achieve more success in the field of "digital virilization" (Kakutani, 2019). The possibility of fake news spreading faster has been highlighted in studies by the "MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy,"

which have shown that this type of information has a 70% higher chance of being shared and accepted by those who read it (Arrojo, 2020).

According to a study conducted by cybersecurity consultants Kaspersky (2022), approximately 70% of Latino Americans are unable to distinguish between a fake and true news story; this is a figure that, when applied to the consumption of political information by societies, could pose a problem for the formation of public opinion on issues pertaining to state management.

The Emotional and Aesthetic Language of Social Media Networks

The highly emotive language used on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allows a fake news story to spread quickly. Platforms seek to be places where emotions can be expressed to achieve longer periods of connection. This paper will establish that social media has transformed the public sphere into something emotional that, in turn, contributes to post-truth.

The primary material on which mass media, particularly television, was built has been emotion. The image represented in the photograph and, later, in the video produced on millions of screens allowed emotions linked to aesthetic montages —from the most basic to the most elaborate— to attract and cultivate a public that Sartori (1998) refers to as "homo videns." Playing with emotions to achieve a homogenized society open to ideological (advertising) and commercial (consumption) proposals have been on the minds of theorists since the mid-nineteenth century. This was when the instrumentalization of behavior was one of the positive effects derived from studies such as conduct psychology; in fact, it is still being learned by social network architects today.

The Frankfurt School's theoretical foundation will be based on a critique of mass society expressed in texts such as the Dialectic of Illustration, in which Adorno and Horkheimer (1998) specifically address the racially motivated project undertaken in the West that led to alienation and the dominion of the individual in order to serve specific interests. Communications media are not left out of this analysis. According to Frankfurt School thinkers, within the framework of the widespread use of information, as well as the alienation and standardization of society, the role of the press, radio, and cinema is critical.

Between 1920 and 1930, communication studies predominated due to their nearly unlimited ability to influence emotions and, thus, human behavior. Publicists conducted extensive research into these theories. Perhaps a clear example of this is what the Nazis accomplished in this field: "Who controls the media controls society, and as an example, one can use Goebbels' advertising system" (Capellán, 2008, p. 215).

Although emotions were an important aspect of human behavior, there was a bias in their study. Only until the 1980s was there a renewed interest in reexamining what role these people have in making decisions, particularly in politics (Arias, 2016). Theoretical recovery of emotions in politics will be led by Nussbaum's (2014) theory in the second decade of the twenty-first century. But since the mid-1990s, there has been discussion about the need for an "affective turn" as a response to the dominance of the body and emotion discourse due to the influence of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. Shusterman (2002) asserts that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, from a neopragmatic standpoint, the care and improvement of the body will be highlighted in order to make the best public decisions. Similarly, several works with a philosophical perspective were published in 2009 under the title The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion (Goldie, ed., 2009)

The use of psychological techniques to understand human behavior with applications in technology is a rule in Silicon Valley, the birthplace of many of the world's most prominent websites. It is necessary to understand that, according to a Pfizer study published on their website in April 2016, social media networks have already altered our brain by causing "changes in neurotransmisors such as oxitocina, adrenalin, dopamine, serotonin, testosterona, and cortisol" (Pfizer news, 2016). Similarly, Castells (2009) in *Communication and Power* described how emotions emerge from stimuli that cause negative or positive emotions in a person's brain. These emotions can cause behaviors and actions, as well as influence decision-making.

With the "like," emoticons, filters, and other, sometimes imperceptible tools, social media networks have transformed people's daily lives into a "show," similar to a television production, complete with actors, speeches, applause, visual effects, and, of course, advertising.

Elster (2007) states that "emotions are accompanied by tendencies or impulses to the execution of specific actions" (p. 166) and goes on to discuss the different types of emotions: "The emotions of rage, guilt, scorn, and shame are inextricably linked to moral and social norms. Transgressors of norms may experience guilt or shame, whereas those who witness the violation may experience rage or scorn" (p. 172).

Emotions are evaluative and allow us to make decisions in response to a certain stimulus. Instagram has features such as adding a comment or saying "I like," whereas Facebook has the option to be furious, sad, enjoy, or amazed. What's interesting is that the networks don't leave anything to chance, and the option of rating any publication implies a call to action. In the 10 causes expected by Elster (2007) of some type of behavior awakened by the evaluation that is expressed with

emotions, can be found coincidences with the "emoticons," provided by almost all social networks to interact, among them: hate, anger, pleasure, and admiration.

In addition to emotions, television and, now, social networks have found a new field in the social aesthetics introduced by capitalism. As Maldonado (2016) advises resuming Lipovetsky and Serroy, who denounce "an 'Artistic capitalism' that is characterized by an ever-increasing consumption of aesthetic experiences" (p. 27); of all that the world of politics, including its components, must advance in the creation of performances and storytelling that are better suited to what today's audiences require.

The polarization that exists and is felt between opposing ideological groups is increased using social media. The concept now is that whoever speaks more forcefully and in a plain manner, or who exhibits more aesthetic-emotional postures, wins the digital battle: passion is killing people. The main issue is a public opinion that is becoming increasingly disoriented and uninformed, and the establishment of institutions is the result of this. Language is important in the construction of emotions because it allows for the creation of social reality as a result of participation in a linguistic community (Santamara, 2016).

The concept of a community in which language is based on rules, it is the language skills and the institutionalization of the practice that set the beginning of the social institutions. "Institutional facts exist only inside the framework of constitutional rules" (Searle, 1997, p. 46). It is exactly in this space of institutionalized events that emotions are manifesting themselves, now amplified on the public stage by social media. The role of politicians and citizens in democratic participation is changing (Cardona-Restrepo & Arango, 2020).

The instrumentalization of emotions contributes to the breaking of public debate and places the subject on a plane where rational facts can be confused with emotions and subjective feelings that are not always verifiable —in other words, in the context of post-truth. From an ideological standpoint, this situation "is the recipe for political dominance" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 41).

Traditional Communication Channels have Given Way to the Internet and Virtual Social Networks

The return of the press to a mediating role has been highlighted several times in this piece, in search of a normative proposal that will put the post-truth in counterbalance. Since the 20th century, the mass media and journalism have been recognized as having a significant influence on public opinion formation.

According to Hume (2011), the weight of the rulers was based on the belief that they had the people's support, an idea that demonstrated how the term "public opinion" is linked to the political concept in the development of liberal thought. Communications media —and within them, the journalistic exercise— will allow the mass media to serve as a tribune for public opinion, as well as disseminate information, which is their primary focus. In democratic systems, there has been convergence in the presence of a free, regulated, but independent press (Muñoz et al., 1992).

When a news story ends up in the hands of a minister or a top government official, or when a complaint allows the government to make investments in communities with limited access to basic health-care services, for example, the power of the media grows.

The impact of communications media and the role of the press in shaping public opinion has been extensively studied. Between 1920 and 1940, a number of theories emerged in the United States concerning their direct or indirect impact on popular decisions. Between 1940 and 1960, there were theories of limited effects. Then afterward came uses and gratifications in the 60s. And finally, the "agenda setting" proposed in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972). The approach of this analysis focuses on giving the mass media almost unlimited power. According to its presenters, the so-called mass media are the generators and creators of public opinion through their informative agenda.

The role of media, as social media, has not been exempt of criticism. The opposite approach of American statistical and empirical analysis is exposed by Habermas (2008), an opinion shattered by aspects such as image cult, that is catapulted by advertising.

Beyond Habermas, a relevant analysis of the role of the mass media —especially of information on television— is explained by Sartori (1998) in *Homo Videns, la sociedad teledirigida*. An analysis of how television is an instrument of news and information of various types that induce opinion is conducted. Sartori analyzes how the *homo sapiens* has transformed into a *homo videns* before the forcefulness of images and ease with which they can be digested by the television viewers. It was concluded that television and the information it provides can determine politics, electoral processes, and governmental decisions through the creation of a government based on opinion.

In this way, for Sartori (1998) public opinion must be nourished by information and, therefore, the publications of the mass media make views, news, and facts that contribute to its formation. Newspapers and radio will reinforce the proposal for public opinion, that Sartori (1998) calls "information cascades." It allows opinion leaders to guide the rest of people, especially, the ones who receive the message last. Television would end the harmony of that process.

Sartori (1998) highlights the massive condition of television and how easy a message can be absorbed that reinforce the empty concept of "democracy as a government of opinion" (p. 72). The author explains: "because television shows itself as a voice for a public opinion that is the *echo* of its own voice" (p. 72). Not to give importance to some topics has contributed to the decline of the press, but the use of the internet and social networks has become stronger. These networks forced traditional mass media to change the way they produced many of their contents, and they took away part of their advertising that to a large extent, moved into the digital world. *Homo videns* moves into *Homo digitalis* (Cendoya, 2018).

Digital communication has changed the dynamics of mediation in the mass media and traditional press. With the creation of social networks, a re-elaboration of some paradigms of communication can be observed; this occurs especially, with the direct process of sender, channel, and responder. The production of content established in mass media has come to be created by the sources or broadcasters of information that directly talk to the responder. That option was at the same level of a news broadcast, with the broadcast of any other type of production by any user of social networks (González, 2019).

In 2004, Tim O'Reilly, one of the largest computer gurus in U.S., coined the concept of a "Web 2.0" to remark that the advance internet had reached a stage in which the production of the same digital users was providing the information and data that is currently in the network. It was accompanied by tools on mobile devices such as camera, the ability to edit content and images and have applications such as social networks, the same ones that allowed to publish almost anything on the web.

The new role of citizens in information production and its consumption generates the concept of a "prosumer." This refers to people who, from a passive role, become protagonists in the communication process. McLuhan (1996) and Toffler (1981) had already argued that new technologies would change the way information is consumed and processed in the world. It moves the function of traditional mass media that do not have the reach to generate the amount of information and content that is produced on the Internet.

The massive production of content now does not exclusively come from traditional media, but from an extensive network of prosumers in a digital environment, which has divided audiences and created a new scenario for "agenda setting." Users publishing content for the agenda adds a new actor, who also has an active role in the process of communication. They feed into the mass media on those news and topics that become trends. On one hand, the mass media still has an influence on what to think, but on the other hand

the mass media itself takes viral trends on social networks as input for their informative agenda.

The press is still core to the generation of information that is consumed daily. Its function of moderation is limited by millions of people who use their social networks to inform and provide opinion. According to the report "Digital" in 2022, prepared by the agency We Are Social (2022), in 2021, 462 billion users on social mass media were reported. Facebook remains the world's favorite social network with 291 billion users; YouTube has 256.2 billion users; WhatsApp has two billion; 146.8 billion people use Instagram; 1 billion use TikTok; and 436 million are on Twitter.

The figures show the strength of networks as super-highways to inform; therefore, it highlights the importance of an epistemological analysis of the quality of contents that millions of users receive and how they are influencing human actions. The rise of Big Data and its relationship to psychology for the purpose of people's decision-making becomes relevant, mainly in the electoral sphere (Wooley & Howard, 2019; Yeung, 2018).

According to Elster (1996), actions depend on two requirements of optimality: desires and beliefs; these in turn are cemented in the evidence that comes from information collection and also the time spent by a person collecting it. Also, Habermas (2001) studies the validity in acts of speech that have as a basic condition being a clear discourse supported by a consensus with a communicative rationality. These acts should obey a reliable criteria and adequate reasons and arguments to establish a rational relationship and trustworthiness.

Political theory also accepts dissent on recognition of the other and its differences as a feature of pluralism within democratic systems. Opposite reasons and arguments favor the debate and foster public opinion. The importance of informative truth, both in the construction of beliefs and reliable criteria, are conditions and challenges that have been raised by journalism from its beginnings.

From the vertical communication of mass media much of the world has moved to a horizontal communication. Everyone constructs information and opinion. Apparently, there is a democratization, but it does not necessarily happen. As Arias (2016) states: "More than a conversation, therefore, we would have noise: we all talk at the same time, but no one hears the others" (p. 175).

Disabling the mediating role of the press in the communication process is contributing to post-truth and a public opinion with less opportunities of communicating truthful information making decisions in democratic contexts. Social networks changed verticality in the delivery of information and introduced a horizontal digital conversation with reproduction or forwarding of information between its participants. Digital platforms have succeeded in weakening the

economic model of traditional mass media based on advertising. They become information channels, that assume the role of the press.

Journalism as a Content Editor in the Post-truth Era

From the communication studies in the first half of the 20th century, journalism is observed in the fulfillment of parameters such as objectivity and truth, the basis of the first deontological codes of the profession. The recording of facts as they occurred, and the prospect that they could be contrasted and published within the framework of objectivity "becomes the guarantor of the professional ethics of journalists" (Arrojo, 2020, p. 137).

In the practice of journalism and its search for truth, the appearance of tools such as photography and video, show images as a complement to the news that was recorded. Milestones in human history such as Apollo XI lunar mission in 1969, the Vietnam War (the first to be transmitted by television) (Briggs & Burke, 2002) or, later, the Gulf War in 1991 or the attack on United States on September 11, 2001 by Al Qaeda have strengthened the mass media in the broadcast of reality and facts.

A report authored by a reporter from a prestigious media outlet and with journalistic standards — though immersed in the social field and with the help of some scientific and statistical tools — can offer guarantees for those who want to approach a news report to be sure that the information is reliable. In this sense, Restrepo (2016) states that "for journalists, the word *truth* means fidelity to the informed facts" (p. 56). It is a changing truth based on the facts and evidence with which a reporter covers the news.

The truth is the most important demand in journalism. Sánchez (2018) suggests that the truth, which is just a statement that a fact really happened, should be the basis of news. Examples are abundant, ranging from the occurrence of natural disasters such as an earthquake to the election of a president or sports achievements like a soccer team scoring a certain number of goals.

The BBC's editorial standards state that to uncover the truth, journalists must adhere to:

- gather material using first-hand sources
- check facts and statistics, identifying important caveats and limitations
- validate the authenticity of documentary evidence and digital material
- corroborate claims and allegations made by contributors. (BBC, 2007, p. 23).

Other style manuals used by various journalistic media align closely with the guidelines established by the BBC, adopting them as a reliable guide for their reporters.

Journalistic work encompasses the truth-telling of news. Indeed, the facts that are published daily in the mass media comprise other aspects, which can be known thanks to the work conducted by reporters. By considering the narrative of a particular event, as well as investigating its origins, previous facts, consequences, and protagonists, the public opinion can develop a complete picture. It is customary that, once a news item has been published, a later follow-up provides meaningful insight to elucidate all the aspects that public opinion requires to improve its argumentation.

Journalists conduct a comparable process as scientists, and must be willing to subject the news they intend to report to the scrutiny of editors and, ultimately, the mass media editor. Regarding reporters, the process of finding a story and subsequently its broadcasting mostly begins at an editorial board, where the facts to be reported must undergo scrutiny by editors, directors, and even peer journalists. During this initial stage, numerous informational proposals are discarded due to factors such as lack of importance, validity, possibility of corroboration, or duplication of previously published information by other mass media (Ruiz, 2019).

This stage also includes the possibility of gathering information, in addition to interviews, to verify the occurrences. Materials such as archival materials, statements, images, and other relevant sources are crucial for supporting contents. Informational context is an issue that, digital publications often fail to provide with sufficient depth or rigor (Restrepo & Botello, 2018).

The reputation of mass media committed to journalism to promote the truth is built precisely on the corroboration and verifiability of the facts reported. These media are aware that the publication of news, which does not correspond to reality or "misrepresents the truth" undermines their prestige and, therefore, has an impact on their audiences. The anonymity associated to fake news published by certain "pseudo-media" is not the suitable way for a mass media briefing to be subjected to the scrutiny of its audiences.

The economic crisis of mass media also had an impact on newsrooms. With many of them diminished, the possibilities of publishing more and better material have resulted in a decrease in their audiences. Low salaries, no research opportunities, and long working hours have made numerous journalists migrate to other types of activities related to communication. The quality of content has been declining due to inadequate resources to conduct long-term investigations or recruit experienced reporters. The European Union identified this situation and

took the first actions against the so-called "fake news" in 2015, with journalism at the heart of the strategy (European Commission, 2018).

Mass media itself has been implementing the tools that have been placed at the service of their audiences with the purpose of corroborating the veracity of content published on social networks, such as www.chequeado.com or *Politifact* in the United States. Additionally, to the mass media, programs dedicated to the education, practice, and research of journalism are emerging with the aim to combat misinformation (Ireton & Posetti, 2020).

Quality journalism, as raised by Thompson (2017), is nothing more than a work in the service of truth for the benefit of democracy. This is happening precisely at a time when globalization, terrorism, outrage over political and economic corruption, fake news, digital anger, and emotionality are all threatening democratic principles. Accordingly, journalism has the potential to make valuable contributions to a society striving for solid arguments for making the best decisions. A deliberative democracy characterized by public debate grounded on accurate information and a free press fosters deliberative argumentation in societies, empowering individuals to denounce post-truth wherever it arises.

Conclusions

Horizontal participation in virtual social networks has created a new agora wherein information is no longer communicated as news based on real facts. These are pseudo-informative contents and opinions often generated by anonymous or official sources, comprising falsehoods that cannot be verified. This fact has become a challenge for public deliberation, which is always receiving inaccurate information that supports preconceived ideas. This situation influences citizens' decision-making on substantial issues, such as health during pandemics, the election of a president like Donald Trump, the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, and the war between Russia and Ukraine, to mention a few examples.

The press and the subsequent emergence of journalism based on ethics codes whose main pillars are truth and objectivity have enabled audiences, through mass media, to gain a better grasp of reality through news about facts and occurrences that may have really happened. Journalism has exerted control over other branches of public power without usurping them. This control is

achieved through denouncing their deviations or excesses, uncovering lies and highlighting their social failures.

Despite this, mass media has been criticized for their attachment to making the news spectacular and for its focus on delivering content as just a mere product of the cultural industry or its partisan and ideological adherence, which in some cases has contributed to its credibility decline. The migration of advertising to the Internet resulted in economic challenges for mass media, and journalism had a negative impact due to a decrease of activity in its newsrooms.

Democracies have already been concerned with an informative post-truth. The European Union is advocating for the rescue of mass media and its news slots as an alternative to combating so-called "fake news" (European Commission, 2018). Similarly, mass media itself has realized that reverting to quality news production models can be so broadly accepted that they have already begun to charge for their content with good success.

The health of a democracy relies largely on the quality of information available in the public sphere, enabling citizens to make the best decisions. Hyper-communication techniques have led to the democratization of information, as well as the leap of lies and manipulation on a global scale. On other occasions, timely information and adequate resources enabled citizens' decisions that changed the course of history. In turbulent times, rigorous journalism that seeks the truth may correct information inconsistencies due to the Internet. Furthermore, journalism can provide the quality content that public opinion needs to build societies in which decision-making is influenced by the truth rather than lies and manipulation.

The challenge is determining whether the journalistic companies affected by the advertising crisis will be capable of such a task or whether, as is already expected, small revolutions will be produced by digital networks of journalists who will gain a space through their constant pursuit of the truth and exposure of power excesses.

The mission of journalism is already anticipated as a titanic task. The effort to produce quality content will also depend on the extent and importance that society places on truth as the source that democracies need to repel the ghosts of populism, corruption, sentimentalism, and irrationality that have taken over the political scene today more than ever.

Finally, progress on critical education regarding news content is required, as is the capacity for citizens to exercise self-control and refrain from reading and reproducing fake news that raises public spirits while increasing polarization in electoral preferences. Furthermore, adhering to ethical principles in information management is important, as it entails intellectual honesty and verification journalism as a means of rescuing traditional journalism in multilateral agreements

so that fake news does not generate revenue, as well as constant denunciation of the networks that foster it. "Fact checking" is also important with the participation of business, the mass media, the government, and educational institutions to overcome skepticism and combat disinformation (Badillo, 2019). These affect the collective construction of democratic institutions and have a direct impact on their legitimacy and credibility, paving the way for polarization and fear, where any collective project vanishes.

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