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The World of Digital Information

Post-Truth. Contemporary Paradigms in Framing Information

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Abstract

The article underlines the impact of the digital environment in reconfiguring basic notions as the concept of „truth”. A more recent alternative – „post-truth” – is discussed in relation with the dissolution of the binary logic and the rise of a new relativism. The new term is challenging the rational pattern of thinking, based on the law of the excluded middle, that was grounding our traditional way of conceiving the world, opening a realm where information is distorted by ‘emotionalism’, in order to become viral and to generate ‘clickbaits’.

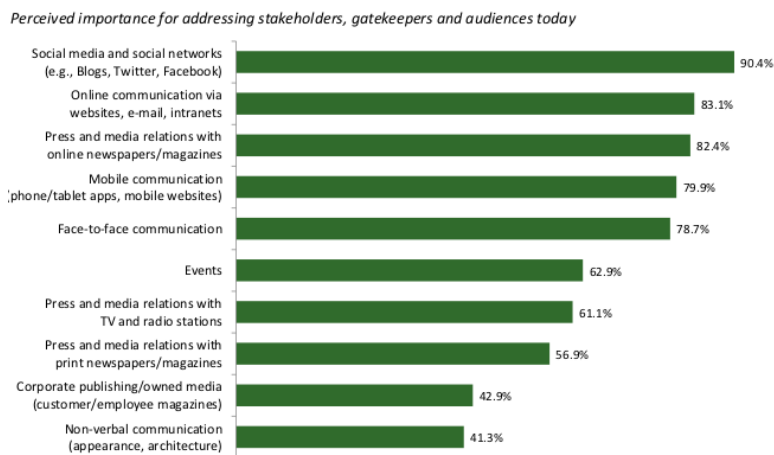
Keywords: post-truth, virality, postmodernism, emotionalism, clickbaits

At the request of the European Association of Public Relations, in July 2017, for a special section on their website dedicated to the most important communication issues in the global environment, I was trying to highlight an emergent trend in framing information nowadays.

Digital interaction, new ways of processing and interpreting information, a change of paradigm in terms of the use of communication tools, are all leading to a new perspective, situating the sciences of information in the realm of an interdisciplinary discussion.

European Communication Monitor 2017 (1), the most important survey in the field of strategic communication worldwide, proves that instead of the use of the more systematic traditional media channels, the practitioners are now switching to interactive, real-time strategic instruments connected with social media (blogs, Twitter, Facebook).

Importance of strategic communication channels/instruments in Europe



source: www.communicationmonitor.eu / Zerfass *et al.*

In this context, the sciences of information should address important questions as for example: ‘How this turn, at the level of tools and instruments is impacting the structure of the content?’

Recent researches in the field of communication sciences, corroborated with the outputs of studies and experiments in other connected fields - are proving the fact that: we are facing a new definition of the ‘real’, and even more, a new definition of shaped by a plurality of voices.

An experiment in the field of neurosciences, carried on by Mark G. Frank and Thomas Gilovich from Cornell University (2) was assessing the penalties’ records of the National Football League and the National Hockey League in United States during a time frame of fifteen years. Apparently, this has nothing to do with the sciences of information, but the research results are proving that both meaning and information are contextually shaped. The study demonstrates that the teams wearing black uniforms were penalized more often than the teams wearing any other colour.

Another experiment, displaying two identical videos with the same sequence of a football game, one version with players wearing black, and one version with players

wearing white, was confirming the first experiment. The videos were showed both to professional football referees, and to football fans, with the request to assess the game. No matter if the viewers were professionals or fans, they decided to penalize the team wearing black, more often than the team wearing white.

What neuroscience is demonstrating here, is the fact that information is not abstract. Information becomes referential, it can be altered and distorted, shaped by contextual perceptions, disrupted in different environmental configurations.

Issues like: ‘Can we really “frame” the reality by using colours, sounds, textures?’, ‘Can we just pack the content in a certain way to be able to “program” a specific response?’, ‘Can we change the perception on a given topic?’, ‘Can we provide different “versions” of truth switching from black to white, from penalty to reward?’, ‘Can we generate alternative patterns of behaviour, altering only the colour of a T-shirt?’ - might open new discussions related to the way we can frame reality within our “attention economy”.

Emerging fields of research such as the behavioural economics or neurosciences, seem to support the idea that we are no longer dealing with a univocal definition of ‘information’, while questions like ‘Where is the truth?’ or better said: ‘Who is right, in the end: the ones judging the team wearing black uniforms; or the ones supporting the team dressed in white?’ are just mapping a postmodern definition of representation.

The word of the year, designated by the Oxford Dictionary in 2016, seems to bring forth a more clear perspective. The word is defined as ‘*relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief*’ (3), constructed by adding a temporal prefix to the common noun that has nothing to do with temporality: ‘post-truth’. This concept seems to describe best the new situation of a continuous reshaped reference within the digitalised world.

According to the Oxford Dictionary: ‘*In this era of post-truth politics, it’s easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire*’ (4). Paradoxically, the term is challenging the rational pattern of thinking, based on the law of the excluded middle, that was grounding our traditional way of conceiving the world. ‘Post-truth’ is adding the third possibility, as an alternative for... ‘to be or not to be’.

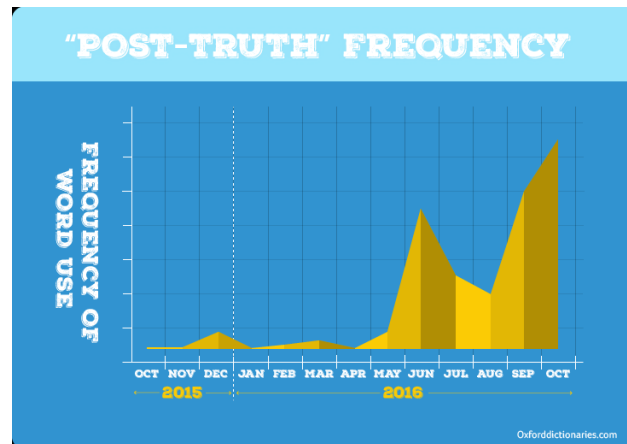
As the philosopher Timothy Williamson was putting forth in a recent conference organized by the University of Bucharest and the Romanian Atheneum, ‘post-truth’ is neither a synonym with truth, nor an equivalent of lies and falsehood, since it is simply making the distinction between truth and untruth: irrelevant.

The term has been first used in an essay published in *The Nation* magazine 1992, by the Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich. Almost, ten years later, in 2004, Ralph Keyes has published the book called ‘*The Post-truth Era*’. But, the tipping point generated by the political turns related to Brexit and US elections was 2016, when Oxford Dictionary was recording a 2000% increase in usage, compared with 2015.

The adjective ‘post-truth’ is opening a new realm where ‘reality’ becomes only a matter of ‘interpretation’.

Basically, the idea is not new, grounded in the philosophy of language of the XXth century. In 1963, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida was first using the term ‘différance’ in his essay ‘*Cogito et histoire de la folie*’, deliberately misspelling the word

‘difference’, though both words are pronounced identically. He was demonstrating, using this language game, the fact that information/reality is just a construct and, as a construct, it can only generate meaning through the interplay of the signs. In other words, reality, truth, are no longer based on scientific evidence, there is no need of facts, or better said – facts might be altered, distorted and transfigured.



sursa: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

Diagnosed in the realm of the real world, this trend is becoming more evident in the digital environment. The new frames of communication where the Web provides a parallel ‘media eco-system’, where networks of users are generating virtual ‘echo chambers’, where everybody’s voice is legitimate, making experts and expertise useless, are creating the best environment for deconstructing the idea of a univocal truth. ‘My science is named Evan, and he’s at home. (...) The University of Google is where I got my degree from.’ (5). These phrases, quoted by Matthew d’Ancona in his book *The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, were used by the model Jenny McCarthy in the Oprah Winfrey’s show, referring to her boy called Evan, and arguing against vaccination.

The perspective is paradigmatic. ‘Mommy instinct’ or ‘Google University’ are becoming personal and emotional alternatives, challenging the history of scientific research on vaccination for the age of ‘post-truth’. Rating scores are calibrating an irrational expertise with the same share of voice as the real ‘truth’.

Alternative media narratives fuelling the ‘curiosity gaps’, are replacing scientific information with emotionalism and ‘clickbaits’ (6). The truth becomes irrelevant substituting a rational perspective based on meaning, with an emotional approach, invalidating the value of the content and ‘truth’ in favour to the ‘digitally turbo-charged false science’ (7). Ezgi Akpınar and Jonah Berger are supporting similar conclusions in the article entitled ‘Valuable Virality’, published in 2017, in the *Journal of Marketing Research* (8). The paper, based on a quantitative research, explains the mechanisms that are making the information viral. Interestingly, not the relevance of the content, but its capacity to communicate emotions, becomes the ‘sharing’ criteria for the online users. ‘Compared with informative appeals, emotional appeals are more likely to be shared.’ (9).

These insights are confirming a trend identified by the ECM back in 2013, as the most important challenge in the field of communication at the global level (10). 73,7% of the communication professionals surveyed were mentioning that ‘developing communication strategies with social, cultural and political **sensitivity**’ – is the most important challenge in their field, proving that social emotionalism could become a strategic tool in spreading the information.

Major challenges of international communication in non-European countries



source: www.communicationmonitor.eu / Zerfass *et al.*

The science of information is dealing thus, with a new challenge. Binary oppositions between facts and opinions, good and bad, real and fake, truth and lie – seem to lose relevance in front of the emotional appeal that generates ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ (11).

Relativism, emotionalism, alternative media narratives are mapping the current world of communication, as substitutes for ‘truth’. Under the pressure of ‘big data’, within a complex virtual environment, narratology, rhetoric, aesthetic, consumer behaviour, psychology and neurosciences, will probably offer for the information sciences, the needed tools to support interdisciplinary content analysis, validating once again, McLuhan’s famous words: “The medium is the message”.

Notes and References

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