

Beliefs, post-truth and politics¹

Creencias, posverdad y política



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Abstract:

This text presents the preliminary ideas of an investigation in progress related to the influence of personal beliefs in shaping public opinion and its relationship to politics within contexts dominated by post-truth. The political events of 2016 (Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump) have demonstrated the vulnerability of our democracies with regard to biased and malicious political communications. The post-truth era has revealed the ability of passionate political discourse (based on pathos) to ravage rational political speech (based on logos).

Keywords:

Beliefs, cognitive dissonance, post-truth, political discourse.

Resumen:

El presente texto avanza las ideas preliminares de una investigación en desarrollo sobre la influencia de las creencias personales en la formación de la opinión pública y su relación con la política en contextos dominados por la posverdad. Los acontecimientos políticos de 2016 (el Brexit y la victoria de Donald Trump) han evidenciado la vulnerabilidad de nuestras democracias frente a la comunicación política sesgada y malintencionada. La era de la posverdad ha revelado la capacidad del discurso político pasional (basado en el pathos) para arrasar con el discurso político racional (basado en el logos).

Palabras clave:

Creencias, disonancia cognitiva, posverdad, discurso político

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1. Introduction

On November 9, 2016, most of the world was stunned by the news of Donald Trump's victory in the presidential elections in the United States. The chronicles and editorials of the mainstream media highlighted the turnaround that had taken place in opinion polls, which for months had predicted the victory of Democratic Party candidate Hilary Clinton. The day before the election, on November 8, the difference in the polls exceeded three points in favor of Clinton (46.8 to 43.6) (Real Clear Politics, 2016).

A few months earlier, on June 23, 2016, the United Kingdom had shaken international public opinion with the decision to leave the EU. Against all odds, supporters of Brexit won the victory with 51.9% of the votes cast in a referendum. However, up until the last day, the polls had forecast a victory for the *remainers*, with 48% compared to 46% of the vote (Financial Times, 2016).

All of the international publications have dealt extensively with both electoral upheavals.

In a brief review of leading US newspapers, we can see that beyond the historical consequences, Brexit was a wake-up call to analysts of that country, due to the fact that Donald Trump had been nominated by the Republican Party as its candidate. The possibility that Trump could win the presidential election elicited numerous analyses that correlated both events, and from the beginning this correlation was established in relation to the appearance of fake news into the public debate and the post-truth context that had flooded the Brexit campaign, which was already influencing the presidential campaign to be held in November 2016.

In August of 2016, The New York Times openly denounced the inaccurate, incomplete, and blatantly false information disseminated during the Brexit campaign in its piece entitled, "The age of post-truth politics", by Williams Davies. The publication also warned of the decline in the authority of facts, and made a call to other newspapers not to forget their duty to resist populist demagoguery (Davies, 2016).

Along the same lines, the Economist offered its opinion in a September 2016 editorial that warned of the risk of fake news and the creation of a state of political post-truth that could lead to other events similar to Brexit.

In the "Art of the lie", the Economist warned of the risk of these types of political campaigns based on feelings rather than facts, and that such crusades, as in the case of Brexit, force opponents to fight on unfamiliar battlegrounds not of their choosing (The Economist, 2016).

In September of 2016, the Director of The New Yorker, David Remnick, opened a series of in-depth reports entitled, "Trump and the Truth". Remnick announced the launch of fact-checking departments, not only at The New Yorker, but also at other leading newspapers such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and a site specializing in data verification known as Politifact, whose reporters took on the task of verifying the accuracy of prominent news regarding the electoral campaign in order to guide and assist public opinion on some of the central issues, such as immigration, crime, unemployment and conspiracy theories (The New Yorker, 2016).

In December of 2016, once the victory of Donald Trump had become a fact, the head of the Washington Post's editorial page, Ruth Marcus, titled her commentary, "Wellcome to the post-truth presidency" (Washington Post, 2016). As in previ-

ous cases, the newspaper denounced the disregard by the presiden-elect of facts and verified data, and pointed out that Trump and his advisors had “embraced” the concept of post-truth without any remorse whatsoever.

A few months later, Masha Gessen, an expert in Russia, published an extensive analysis in *The New York Review of Books* entitled “The Putin Paradigm”, in which she established a parallel between Putin and Trump based on the conviction shared by both leaders that “the lie is the message” (*The New York Review of Books*, 2016).

This brief editorial sample of some media sources of international reference serve to point out the dissonance between factual reality (what has actually happened) and the media reality represented in the dominant journalistic discourse (what they said was going to happen).

Votes that were cast in favour of both Trump and Brexit have shown a popular will - slightly greater in both countries - dissonant with the discourse of the media, so it is worth asking the following question: Are analysts and experts making errors in interpreting election indicators? Were there signs that pointed in the direction of the final results that were simply ignored?

2. Post-truth and public opinion

There is no risk in thinking that the concept of post-truth has appeared on our agenda because of the need to have a performative linguistic resource that allows us to describe the features that deliberative democracy of the 21st century is adopting. Its use was multiplied by 2000% during 2015; hence, the *English Oxford Dictionary* selected it as word of the year: “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2016).

The correlation between the concepts of public opinion and emotions or personal convictions inevitably reminds us of the scientific literature of the first third of the 20th century, when the so-called “mass society” experienced a crisis (Ortega y Gasset, 1930), and awareness was raised concerning the power of social communication as a kind of “shadow government” (Bernays, 1928), in which “shadow engineers” (Lasswell, 1935) were able to direct individual decisions and “manufacture consent” (Lippmann, 1922).

The idea, which in many cases involved the empirical application of Freud’s theoretical foundations of the subconscious, consisted of the belief that in a social environment duly shaped by propaganda, reasoning built on verified facts (logos) would be swept away by symbolic messages that appeal to the primary emotions of human beings (pathos), diminishing their rational analysis and provoking emotional responses.

Beneath the surface of these ideas, mistrust toward the ability of the average citizen to make the most appropriate decisions for the nation had been generated. Authors such as Walter Lippmann and others from the school of “democratic realism” (Westbrook, 1991), viewed the idea that each of us should acquire a competent opinion on all public affairs as intolerable and unfeasible (Lippmann, [1922] 2003: 43); There is no “omni-competent citizen” capable of deciding what is most appropriate in a rational, technical and informed way, because the world that we have to face from a political point of view is beyond our reach, vision and understanding (Lippmann, [1922] 2003: 41).

As such, the individual has overcome this inability by creating cognitive “pseudo environments”, or in other words, “representations of the environment”, which allow him to form a complete yet “fictitious” image of those aspects of the world of which he has no direct experience.

In the chapter entitled “The World Outside and the Pictures in our Heads”, Lippmann explains that most of the knowledge about the external world does not come from direct experience by the individual, but from the account that other people have made of that external world.

The warning of risk by these authors results from this situation in which the democratic system is based on the inexperienced decisions of the average man who is questioned about issues for which he has no answers, and for which he can only decide arbitrarily, according to his emotions and feelings.

This is the reason why authors such as Lippmann emphasized the social role of the press as a tool in shaping public opinion, and he went so far as to say that strictly speaking, the current crisis of democracy is a crisis of its journalism (Lippmann, [1920] 2011: 7).

The current problem of misinformation and the so-called fake news represents an old threat to the shaping of public opinion. Walter Lippmann had already defined propaganda as an activity consisting of a group of men capable of preventing people from knowing the facts in a direct way, and who can manipulate news related to those facts in order to adapt that news to their own purposes (Lippmann, [1922] 2003: 51).

It is a fact that the Eurobarometer of April 2018 published the unsettling statistic that 37% of Europeans claim to receive at least one piece of fake news each day, and for 31% of this same group it occurs once per week; simultaneously, 83% of Europeans consider fake news to be a threat to democracy.

These symbolic messages are characterized by strong emotional content and are thrown into the public sphere in highly polarized social contexts under the guise of journalistic information.

Although the reasons that explain the political events that occurred in 2016 are very complex and cannot be reduced to a single cause (the financial crisis that began in 2008, the social injustice resulting from the difficulties of survival for the most disadvantaged social classes, citizen disaffection toward the political and economic elite, globalization, and evidently, the influence of social networks in our digital society), the influence of disinformation campaigns may have played a decisive role in the oscillations of public opinion.

Facebook has recently admitted that 126 million Americans received fake news during the election campaign (Washington Post, 2017). We have also learned that “Russian trolls” published more than 80,000 entries on Facebook between 2015 and 2017.

According to the information available, those entries were originally seen by 29 million Americans, but Facebook has estimated that it reached 40% of the total population. Moreover, the media has already started talking about “victims” (La Nación, 2017).

At times, symbolic messages come from known issuers who have the ability to introduce messages based on false data or value judgments into the public debate.

President Trump's predilection for spreading messages of this type through the Twitter social network is a good example. During the election campaign, his messages regarding immigration were propagated with statements such as, "our country has completely lost control of illegal and criminal immigration"; "our country is a divided criminal scenario, and it can only get worse"; "we must stop the criminal, murderous machine that is illegal immigration"; "Clinton wants to flood our country with Syrian immigrants, of whom we know almost nothing. The damage is massive".

This reality, which currently occupies a large part of scientific analysis, guides the debate toward individual freedom and the threat posed by this situation to the foundations of the democratic system.

According to the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, Mark Leonard, the secret algorithms of large technology companies are determining how we perceive the world and are making it increasingly difficult for people to make conscious decisions (Leonard, 2017).

The degree of influence of the fake news regarding Pope Francis' alleged support of Donald Trump on the decision-making process of voters is impossible to measure, although some analyses point in that direction (Bharat, 2017).

There seems to be no doubt that the message is deliberately designed to emotionally challenge the electorate and influence the freedom of choice of voters, given that we tend to consider the vision that matches our feelings to be true. When we believe that something must be true, we nearly always find cases in which it is true, or people who believe it (Lippmann, [1922] 2003: 131-136). Therefore, post-truth introduces us to the field of a subjective perception of reality in which beliefs and individual convictions outweigh the objectivity of facts.

Even when facts highlight the error of a belief, human beings tend not to doubt that belief, but instead doubt the facts that question their beliefs. This phenomenon was described by Festinger, Riecken and Schacter in the work entitled, *When Prophecy Fails*, in which the following appears: "A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point" (Festinger, Riecken, & Schacter, 1956).

Shortly thereafter, Leon Festinger formulated the "Theory of Cognitive Dissonance" (A cognitive dissonance, 1957), in which he explains the psychological mechanism that is triggered in human beings who face a conflict –dissonance– between their beliefs and the facts, and who try to interpret those facts in a manner that is consistent with their opinions.

This defence mechanism might lead human beings to devise explanations or use reasoning that eliminates inconsistencies and reinforces their convictions to the detriment of objective data.

3. Brief note about Brexit

In our opinion, the result of the Brexit referendum cannot be attributed exclusively to the influence of Smart Data technologies employed by Cambridge Analytica, but rather to the success that these have had by being used in a climate of Euroscepticism that is widespread in British society.

Therefore, the social context of post-truth is not limited to the temporary time frame of the referendum, but rather to a situation that has been fed for a long time in order for these messages to grow.

In this sense, Professor Christoph Meyer of King's College London affirms that in the case of the Brexit referendum, the result cannot be attributed solely to the political campaign, but also "to the effects of negative press coverage of the EU on collective beliefs over decades. While other European countries also know Euroscepticism, Britain is unique in the nature of its media coverage of European integration" (Meyer, 2016).

According to Meyer, accusations made by supporters of Brexit during the campaign in which they called "Brussels" corrupt, oppressive, undemocratic, foreign, etc., were successful among part of the electoral audience because such messages had been disseminated for years, especially by the written press.

Andrew Crines of the University of Liverpool agrees with this observation, and he assures that "the referendum campaign was a long time coming. Approximately 26 years, in fact" (Crines, 2016).

Crines underscores the argument that the messages of Brexiters fell onto fertile ground prepared by the Conservative Party whose leaders had for decades been spreading the message that "Europe abuses us".

Similarly, Meyer affirms that those who supported staying in the European Block launched the campaign without taking into account the enormous lack of knowledge regarding the nature of the European Union that prevailed in British society (Meyer, 2016).

A symptom of the prevailing ignorance is the fact that the most commonly searched questions in Google in the UK just after the result of the referendum was known were the following, in this order: "What does it mean to leave the European Union?", "What is the European Union?", "Which countries make up the European Union?", "What happens now that we have left the European Union?" and "How many countries make up the European Union?" (Google Trends, 06-24-2016, 1:24 pm).

According to opinion polls carried out by IPSOS MORI in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, the majority of British public opinion toward complex problems such as immigration and the economy coincided with the issues emphasized by Brexiters during the campaign.

When asked what percentage of the European Union budget was allocated to finance European civil servants, Britons who were interviewed responded with the figure of 27% of the budget (in other words, just over 38 billion euros), when in fact the figure is 6% (or 8.5 billion euros). This difference is significant due to the fact that one of the most repeated slogans during the campaign was related to the onerous cost of maintaining EU bureaucracy.

The perception of investment in the United Kingdom coming from the European Union was also distorted, and was estimated by respondents to be 30%, when in fact it is 48%, which is 18 percentage points higher than commonly believed. However, these same respondents thought that investment from China in the United Kingdom was 19%, when in fact it is 1% (IPSOS MORI, 2016).

In summary, the data offered by IPSOS MORI show that on the day of the referendum British public opinion was a fertile breeding ground for the ideological seeds of Brexit supporters. The perception of reality shown by these studies clearly tilted the balance toward a victory for separatist supporters in the Brexit referendum.

4. Conclusion

A contemporary reading of the “Myth of the Cave” will help us understand post-truth as a problem of reality perception. Let us briefly remember that the Athenian philosopher placed prisoners inside a cave.

There, held in the same position since their birth, the prisoners observe in front of them the shadows of objects that the light of a torch placed behind them projects on the wall. They cannot turn on themselves, so they cannot see these objects. The only reference they have of these is the inaccurate reflection of their shadows. However, as they have not seen anything else, the prisoners confuse the shadows with reality itself. Updating the Platonic myth, we would say that the prisoners of Plato’s cave live in the post-truth.

Post-truth consists of a favourable social context in which objective facts (*logos*) are relegated to the background of the public debate by the emergence of symbolic messages with a strong emotional charge (*pathos*). From here it can be inferred that the success of these messages depends on how they are interpreted by citizens in what Thomson (1997) calls a “process of hermeneutical appropriation” of reality.

Furthermore, as José Ortega y Gasset pointed out, man is in a belief system that shapes his mental structure and is imposed on him in a process of attributing meaning to the things he perceives (patent and latent reality).

We are social beings who do not start from zero when we face the world; on the contrary, from childhood onward we gradually receive, in a prolonged process of acculturation, a structure for interpreting the world.

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