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## REAPING WHAT HAS BEEN SOWN: THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH AND ITS SUFFERINGS

### *Abstract*

The topic and the concept of 'post-truth' has emerged very evidently in the last year, following several political events in Western countries. The topic has also been made relevant by the uses, or rather the abuses, of the Internet, where uncontrolled, fake news circulate in today's world at top speed.

What we are facing now is the result of processes that have developed during the last decades in philosophy, sociology, communication studies, and journalism studies. We can indicate four processes, working at different but intertwined levels, that have contributed to undermining the possibility of any reference to 'truth' or 'reality', or any possible relationship between them. The four processes on which this paper will focus are: 1) the post-modern approach that took hold in many areas of philosophy during the second half of the twentieth century; 2) sociological perspectives that led to constructivist approaches; 3) communication theories that fostered social construction of reality by the media; and 4) the new ways to consider journalists' work as a construction of reality rather than a representation of reality.

The emergence of these processes, which tend to weaken any reference to a concept of reality external to the media and its mechanisms in the production and circulation of meaning, has triggered some unexpected backlash such as vague notions of meaning, uncontrolled influencers, communicative bubbles, and a return to a positivist view of social reality.

### *Keywords*

Post-truth; fake news; postmodern philosophy; communication; journalism studies.

*Quid est veritas?* wondered a puzzled Pontius Pilate (John 18:38). With this one question, faced with the unprecedented claim that the truth was there in front of him in the flesh, he gave voice to the perennial quest of philosophical inquiry. *Est vir qui adest*, retorted Augustine of Hippo, coining the anagrammatic answer to the question.

Many centuries later, following a significant evolution in the concept of truth in the theological, philosophical, and sociological spheres – an evolution that has propelled the concept far away from Pilate's skeptical attitude and from Augustine's Christian response – the abiding question of the nature of truth seems to have returned in dramatic fashion. The Oxford English Dictionary selected the adjective 'post-truth' as the word of the year in 2016. 'Post-truth' signifies a decline in the influence of "objective facts" in favor of "appeals to emotion and personal belief". Contrary to the view of most commentators, the explosion of the notion of 'post-truth' has emerged as the result of a series of processes that affected philosophy, humanities, sociology, and communication

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studies during the twentieth century. It is possible to identify even more remote origins of this problem by considering the Enlightenment's "demystification of powers" and the evolution of criticism through the three "masters of suspicion"—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In overcoming the ideological perspective of these authors, the modern sociology of knowledge arose together with an analysis of the relationship between forms of thought and social structures.

Limiting ourselves to recent decades, however, there are at least four interconnected cultural processes that have contributed to a gradual weakening of considering a reference to reality as a decisive element in approaching or achieving of truth. These processes did not by themselves create the post-truth conditions we now face but, sometimes against the intention of their proponents, they contributed to legitimizing them. We are aware that this map will not be exhaustive. Some relevant cultural trends will remain unexplored. However, we believe that our description of these four processes here will provide an important clarification of the meaning of 'post-truth' and its associated problems. The historical background of social concepts can shed light on their theoretical structure.

## I. REMOVING THE REFERENCE TO REALITY: FOUR FIELDS

### 1.1. *Philosophy*

We begin with a road map of what happened in philosophy. The paradigm of post-modernity, which appeared as early as the 1930s, and was defined by Lyotard<sup>1</sup>, is rooted in a hermeneutic background that, together with analytical philosophy, created one of the leading twentieth-century schools of thought.

The appearance of this paradigm, which heralded the end not only of ancient metaphysics but also the rationalist paradigm within modernity, can be summed up, as Ferraris does<sup>2</sup>, by the Nietzschean statement that, "There are no facts, only interpretations". Ferraris correctly pinpoints the problematic genesis of postmodernism in Kant's Copernican revolution, which inaugurated an epistemology focused on, and sometimes completely defined by, the subject. When Nietzsche pronounced this motto, he took the Copernican revolution to its extreme: the will of the subject is able to shape and, in a subtle way, actually create reality, which in itself is nothing but senseless chaos.

In the 1930s, when Heidegger began his *Kehre* with a desire to leave behind all of the hangovers of modern metaphysics and immersed himself in an intense study of Nietzsche, he created a lasting bond between the history of phenomenology, which had a solid grounding in epistemology, and the nihilism that Nietzsche thought was the destiny of Western philosophy. Three versions of the postmodernism that emerged from this bond are summarized here: the version of the French masters, often mingled with linguistic and semiotic studies; Vattimo's historical-cultural version; and the neo-pragmatic version of the American philosopher Richard Rorty.

The French Nietzschean renaissance of the Sixties and the militant political engagement of its leading scholars led to a 'left-wing' reading of Heidegger and of Nietzsche himself. This reading favors the spirit of Nietzschean liberation as opposed

<sup>1</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> M. Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2012.

to the mechanisms of various kinds power that this movement described, hidden in daily routines and in the legal and social system, and, most importantly, in language. A crucial representative of this point of view is Jacques Derrida, who shed light on the authoritarian metaphysical assumptions behind the dominant culture's words, grammar, and expressions. According to Derrida, we are inevitably phallo-logo-phono-centric, rotating around an authoritarian vision imposed through spoken language<sup>3</sup>. Derrida's turn toward this interpretation, which partakes strongly of the post-modernist mood, is certainly understandable. In fact, 'truth' has been considered by many thinkers to be an intrinsically authoritarian concept, for good reasons. The recent culture of the West arose out of various forms of totalitarianism, whose representative regimes presented their truth as 'the truth.' According to Derrida, any struggle for social and political liberation must be primarily linguistic, focusing on the distance of written signs from the fundamental metaphysical presence of the actual entities within words. Derrida shatters the meaning of language, taking it far away from what it represents, arguing that the difference between sign and object makes the struggle for liberation possible, violating and thereby 'deconstructing' the rules of grammar and syntax, logic and rhetoric.

In a different way, Gianni Vattimo's work brings to fruition Gadamer's cultural reading of Heidegger. Vattimo uses the same tool of cultural historicization to tell the story of the nihilistic fate of being itself, a fate which he sees in the progressive secularization and dissolution of every presumption of truth. Vattimo's 'weak thought' involves an acceptance of a complete secularization that involves the collapse of every ancient metaphysical and modern rationalist project<sup>4</sup>. The creation of social and political movements in order to acknowledge the lines of progress in history with its progressive loss of foundations and authority at a restricted, local level is the task of the intellectuals in our time. According to Vattimo, the loss of meaning is not necessarily negative. In fact, what is ending is the historical hypostatization of metaphysics. In participating to this movement, we are assuming authenticity and liberation of life in its restricted and limited chaos.

Lastly, Rorty, whose thought is particularly important in the US<sup>5</sup>, was a leading light in the analytical tradition, but he gradually came to the conclusion that certain difficulties in this tradition, especially related to the antinomies and barren technicalities of its philosophy of language, required a radical rethinking. Rorty saw the topics of analytic philosophy as one of the many forms of pertinent human language (and not a special form of access to presumed knowledge or truth), and he had to acknowledge that it was distant from the political and social life where real human interests are played out. For these reasons, Rorty concluded that it was time to abandon the conversation about Truth and Good, not in the name of a different or more precise conversation, but because it was time to "change the subject," to treat philosophy itself as one of many narratives that may appeal to private tastes but can never lead to definitive understanding. According to Rorty, the protagonist of this attitude is the "liberal ironist"<sup>6</sup>, a cosmopolitan figure who, according to the Rortyan Carlin Romano, was neatly embodied by US President Barack Obama<sup>7</sup>.

Following on two world conflicts and still in the midst of the horrors of totali-

<sup>3</sup> J. Derrida, *Éperons: les styles de Nietzsche*, Paris: Flammarion, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> G. Vattimo, P.A. Rovatti, *Il pensiero debole*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> C. Romano, *America the Philosophical*, New York: Vintage Books, 2013.

tarianism, philosophical thinking in the second part of the twentieth century provided a tragic response to the dilemmas posed by the concept of truth. Twentieth-century philosophy reached the conclusion that truth always leads, unfortunately, to authoritarianism and violence. It is therefore better to refuse the possibility of its existence and instead embrace a plurality of progressive and cosmopolitan interpretations that favor inquiry over by products of inquiry, dialogue over 'identity,' and expressiveness over rigor. It is not difficult to understand how these philosophical roots could have led to a 'post-truth' society.

## 1.2. *Sociology*

A significant shift in perspective also occurred in the framework of sociological theory. The structural-functionalist paradigm (Parsons, Shils, Merton, and others) and the conflict paradigm (advocated by Marxist and Weberian authors), dominated the sociological field until the late 1960s. The two rival paradigms shared a vision based on realism: there is a *social order* that can be discovered and analyzed, even though the order was immanent and consensual for the structural-functionalists and dialectical for the conflictualists. Both paradigms could thus be located in what was substantially a normative perspective, as each expressed an idea, albeit different from the other, about what society should be.

From the end of the 1960s new sociological paradigms progressively emerged: symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, the theory of social construction of reality, and a more relativistic form of functionalism. They shared the idea that *social reality is made by and through communicative processes*. Communication, from face-to-face interaction to systemic and media communication, is not just an aspect or dimension of social existence but rather its actual foundation and 'essence.'

These new sociological approaches modify the concept of social reality, meaning, and ethics that we can sum up according to some fundamental characteristics: 1) the social/cultural construction of reality replaced the notion of an objective social order; 2) a conception of meaning in which values, beliefs, ideas, experiences, feelings, and emotions co-exist in an ever more provisional and conditional manner replaced the conception of meaning as an intrinsic characteristic of reality or of a subject's intentionality; 3) 'weak' rationality, operating by means of local, personalized strategies, replaced 'strong' rationality, based on broadly accepted, clearly defined principles, definitions, and types of inference; 4) a morality characterized by interactive, temporary, and reversible practices replaced morality understood as a system of rationally made choices; and 5) an attention to the 'here and now' of daily life replaced a focus on planned action.

Two examples of these conceptual shifts can be seen in the great success of the concepts of "uncertainty society", "risk society," and "liquid society"<sup>8</sup> and also in the failure of theories upholding the superiority of scientific knowledge over common sense and *doxa*. The concept of the "liquid society" refers to the weakening until 'liquefaction' of social bonds and the social structure itself, with a corresponding identity crisis affecting both individuals and social groups. The cause of these changes would be some

<sup>8</sup> Cf. U. Beck, *Risikogesellschaft: auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986; U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1994; Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000; Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

processes such as globalization, growing individualism, and the triumph of a consumer society over the older capitalist, producer-driven society.

Those in the media and others using the term “liquid society” have seized on the term without fully understanding its meaning and implications, and tend to present this process of liquefaction as inevitable. If it is inevitable, the most appropriate cultural attitude is a “smart” flexibility about any truth claim. In this context, anyone who claims that a given value is absolute, deserving of total dedication, would appear to be ill-adapted to current social conditions.

To be sure, as von Wiese<sup>9</sup> observed, there is no “principle of individuation” that comprehensively defines our epoch. Neither liquefaction of the social structure and social bonds nor secularization, commercialization, relativism, etc., can claim to describe it exhaustively. Alongside these formulations their opposites can also be found, since what characterizes today’s society is the abundance of conflicting impulses running next to and criss-crossing each other, none of which achieve exclusive legitimacy. There are undoubtedly many signs that in the realm of everyday life, social bonds have endured and are in fact regenerating. While the processes of disintermediation and deregulation continue apace in some areas of social life, in other areas there are new and significant processes of institutionalization. There is also evidence that society is ‘crystallizing’ into new asymmetrical and unequal social arrangements, and into a digital pseudo-eternity made possible by ICT mechanisms.

Equally significant is the overthrow of the supposed superiority of scientific knowledge, still considered by many to be the only kind of knowledge capable of operating on the basis of truth vs. non-truth (as claimed by Luhmann)<sup>10</sup>, being in this way unlike any other form of knowledge, including common sense. In fact, resorting in an often unquestioning way to expert knowledge, assuming it to be superior to the many different opinions based on appearances, emotion, or private interests, has revealed many difficulties. First, confidence in expert knowledge comes with an inevitable uncertainty because it is usually beyond the comprehension and control of the ‘layman’. Also, expert analyses and diagnoses have sometimes been flatly wrong – think of the economic crisis and certain environmental disasters – with serious impacts on people’s daily lives. Lastly, anyone can see that experts disagree with each other in their analysis of events, problems, risks, and possible solutions, almost on a daily basis. Therefore, in some cases, the choice between different and sometimes contradictory ‘expert’ opinions cannot rely on evidence or a clear hierarchy of credibility, making these expert opinions seem no better than personal beliefs or preferences. The question is asked: why should a scientist’s expertise be more reliable than that of a wizard, an astrologer, or those who prefer not to vaccinate their children because they do not trust doctors and politicians who represent that they are effective and risk-free?

### 1.3. *Communication studies*

During the twentieth century, the theoretical and empirical analysis of communicative processes became increasingly central in philosophical and sociological reflection, following on the advent of the various modern means of communication: daily newspa-

<sup>9</sup> L. von Wiese, *Philosophie und Soziologie*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1959.

<sup>10</sup> N. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990.

pers, periodical journals, radio, television, the Internet, and social media. Two schools of thought – realist and constructivist – are opposed to one another in reading these phenomena.

The realist perspective was the first dominant paradigm in communication theory. It proposes what we might call the ‘dual reality’ model of media analysis. This model conceives of *social reality* as the primary world in which the person finds material and social integration. Media reality is secondary, derivative, offering a lesser degree of reality than social reality. The dual reality model emerges clearly in the paradigm of “limited effects” or “intermediary factors”, elaborated by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Early, well-known studies on electoral behavior showed that radio, newspapers, and other types of media had a limited influence on voting decisions. Instead, interpersonal relationships had the greatest influence on these decisions – voters were guided by information and suggestions provided by their intimate acquaintances (friends, family, colleagues). A later study<sup>11</sup>, which sketched the theoretical outlines of personal decision-making in many areas of life, confirmed the importance of interpersonal relationships. More generally, this study confirmed that the sphere of everyday life is governed by rules that take precedence over the influence of the media. Interpersonal relationships are the primary frame of reference for the individual, a primacy that manifests itself in decisions about which messages from sources of mass communication will be ‘positively selected’ or ignored.

The “critical paradigm” elaborated mainly by the adherents of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm) and by radical American sociologists such as Wright Mills, was characterized by the same ‘dual reality’ model and provided the most important alternative to the “limited effects” paradigm. For the authors adhering to this paradigm, the social function of the media can be traced back to the concept of ‘ideology,’ since it entails the systematic production of a distorted representation of reality. The critical paradigm introduces into the realist perspective a coercive view of the social order: the social structure is held together by socially institutionalized violence, of which the ideological function of the media is an integral part. The mass media generates a deformed image of the *real* social order emphasizing consensus, obscuring class differences, making the structures and mechanisms of power invisible, and stressing the predominant role of the individual with his presumed autonomy. This dualistic critical model, corroborated by a more robust grounding in empirical research, continues to be influential even today, positing certain theories about the long-term effects of media power such as the “cultivation theory”<sup>12</sup> and the “spiral of silence”<sup>13</sup>.

Contrasting these realist theories, the influence of the constructivist perspective of media analysis grew beginning in the 1970s and 80s, and is now the new dominant paradigm. This paradigm provides a radically altered view of the nature, function, and effects of the media: it posits that ‘reality’ as such is inaccessible to human experience, irrespective of the language and the symbolic and communicative forms we employ to represent it. “Instead of viewing the media as neutral instruments for transmitting information and

<sup>11</sup> E. Katz, P.F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*, New York: Free Press, 1955.

<sup>12</sup> G. Gerbner *et al.*, “Living with Television: The Dynamics of Cultivation Process”, in *Perspectives on Media Effects*, edited by J. Bryant and D. Zillmann, Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1986, 17-41; N. Signorielli, M. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation Analysis*, Newbury Park-London: Sage, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> E. Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion - Our Social Skin*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

ideas, there is now considerable debate about how they transform and interpret reality in the process of transmitting news and entertainment to the public"<sup>14</sup>. Instead of functioning as channels for the conveying of information and content, the media has become frames, perspectives, codes, and environments that do not represent reality simply, but in fact *organize* reality. Following the work of Schutz, Garfinkel, Goffman, Berger and Luckmann, a growing number of scholars now refer to the media as "definers of social reality"<sup>15</sup>.

Among the authors important for understanding this viewpoint, we want to highlight Stuart Hall, Marshall McLuhan, and Jean Baudrillard. Each of these authors was a relevant figure in media analysis who established important theoretical paradigms and influenced many other authors and scholars.

Stuart Hall, the most relevant representative of British Cultural Studies, places the ideological function of mass media at the center of his analysis. He interprets it within the encoding/decoding dialectic that occurs in the relationship between the media and the public. Recalling Gramsci, Hall argues that all culture produced by the mass media is constructed according to a "hegemonic code" that tends to perpetuate the existing power structure and the classist division of society. The ideological function of the media does not consist simply in disseminating the directives of the dominant groups, nor is it an act of conscious censorship or of the distortion of events or social problems by its operators. Rather, the media plays a key role in producing and articulating a definition of reality, a consensual framework, on which everyone agrees. The hegemonic code therefore acts as a *frame for discourse* that tends to delimit the entire universe of values and meanings that the classist society can express and admit, while at the same time appearing to be perfectly 'naturalistic' and taken-for-granted<sup>16</sup>. According to Hall, social conflict moves into the sphere of defining reality: "a social struggle for mastery in discourse"<sup>17</sup>.

As for McLuhan, even though he faced strong opposition and was accused by many of amateurism and impressionism, his technological paradigm<sup>18</sup> represented a radical challenge that prompted scholars to question existing media theories, and exerted a wider and deeper influence than is usually thought<sup>19</sup>. The approach followed by McLuhan and the Toronto School can be roughly defined as *mediatic a priori*. According to McLuhan, human beings produce media in order to solve specific problems; for example, to have more low-cost books to read. The desire to solve a problem results in a societal movement offering particular solutions, as we can observe historically with the invention of Gutenberg's movable type. But the media alters its creators in ways that the creators could not have imagined: it changes the equilibrium of their sensory system; thus, human beings who live in different sensory and perceptual worlds (oral vs. typographical vs. electronic) experience reality in completely different ways. The media does not merely co-exist with, or go so far as to take the place of, everyday life

<sup>14</sup> D. Crane, *The Production of Culture. Media and the Urban Arts*, Newbury Park: Sage, 1992: 4; see also J. Fiske, "Postmodernism and Television", in *Mass Media and Society*, edited by J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, London: Edward Arnold, 1991, 55-67.

<sup>15</sup> T. Bennett, "Media, Reality, Signification", in *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by M. Gurevitch *et al.*, London-New York: Routledge, 1982, 287-308.

<sup>16</sup> S. Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies", in *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by M. Gurevitch *et al.*, London-New York: Routledge, 1982, 56-90 (74-76, 85-88).

<sup>17</sup> Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies", 76-79.

<sup>18</sup> M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962; *Id.*, *Understanding Media*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964.

<sup>19</sup> J. Meyrowitz, "Morphing McLuhan: Medium Theory for a New Millennium", *Proceedings of the Media Ecology Association*, 2 (2001): 8-22.

and social relationships; on the contrary, it forges the human environment and everyday life itself. It shapes the perceptual and cognitive structures with which human beings see the world and how they function in the world.

The third pivotal author is the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard<sup>20</sup>. In his theory of media hyper-reality, he claims that in our contemporary, media-saturated society, a radical transformation of experience can be observed: events are shaped in anticipation of how they will be represented in the media. This thesis, which Baudrillard develops in many of his works, reached its maximum expression in a 1991 book in which he claimed that the Gulf War “did not take place”<sup>21</sup>. There were actual bombings and ‘collateral damage’ (i.e., death and destruction), but another ‘real’ war was built up by the media by means of an already determined representation or simulation. Something like this now happens in our daily lives – we go on holiday already planning to upload photos and film clips on Facebook, WhatsApp, or YouTube – even with respect to violent actions, bullying, or activities that endanger our own well-being or that of others. The representation does not follow the event but precedes it and determines its form.

#### 1.4. *Journalism studies*

Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*<sup>22</sup> can justifiably be considered the founding work of journalism studies. The title of the introduction, “The World Outside and the Picture in Our Heads”, confirms Lippman’s eminently realistic perspective: it is possible to know the world if we represent what is “outside” our minds correctly. However, since reality is too big, complex, and ephemeral for our cognitive abilities, we are forced to imagine it through a simpler model using ‘fictions’ or ‘pseudo-environments,’ that is, specially-created forms of representation. The media (Lippmann could only refer to the press) has taken on a strategic role in today’s society in constructing the pseudo-environment, conveying an image of all those events that fall outside the immediate field of experience of single individuals, while still having an effect on this experience. Media representation of reality is described as a process of simplification and standardization that translates the complexity of the real world into a system of stereotypes revealing some aspects of reality rather than others, interprets facts according to simplified or ideological formulae.

According to the same realist perspective, empirical studies of journalism in the 1950s and 60s focused on the concept of *gatekeeping*, namely, on the selective or filtering agency of professionals. On the one hand, these studies zeroed in on journalists’ personal judgments and ideological positions. On the other hand, they also considered owners’ and stakeholders’ influences and pressures about the content of newspapers. The perspective of these studies was based on the traditional theory of manipulation, which focused on describing the facts concerning, and discovering the mechanisms affecting, the intentional distortion of information.

Beginning in the 1970s several journalism scholars, drawing on the new sociological paradigms, started to rethink the processes used in gathering and producing information. Three main perspectives emerged: 1) the “political economy” perspective made the outcome of the reporting process dependent on the economic structure of media

<sup>20</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Le stratégies fatales*, Paris: Grasset, 1983; Id., *Le crime parfait*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> J. Baudrillard, *La guerre du Golfe n’a pas eu lieu*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1991.

<sup>22</sup> W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York: Macmillan, 1922.



organizations, their form of ownership, and their economic interests; 2) the “culturological perspective” emphasized the role played in the choice and presentation of news by the media’s guiding values and views of the world and by readily available cognitive models. Journalists pick these up in their professional environments and in the wider socio-cultural environment in which they operate; and 3) the “organizational perspective” focused on the production routines and organizational constraints influencing the work of journalists, which determine the presentation of the news<sup>23</sup>. The researches that emerged from these perspectives shared a central idea, albeit with different emphases: the criteria for selecting and presenting information are not primarily determined by the actual nature of events (reality itself), but by the ideological and pragmatic choices of those who have the power to influence the experience of others<sup>24</sup>. This means that criteria such as brevity, novelty, negativity, competition with other media, and adaptability to the formats of the different media, become as significant to the presentation of news as the criteria of relevance and seriousness. Tuchman summarized this new way of considering journalistic work succinctly, stating that “the act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality”<sup>25</sup>. In the same vein, Golding and Elliott<sup>26</sup> highlighted the impossibility of conceptualizing ‘reality itself’ independently of the ‘framing’ carried out by the media, thus avoiding consideration of the concept of ‘manipulation’ (which implies the possibility to observing events from an impossible ‘impartial position’, beyond the influence of any kind of prejudice). In an important essay on the role of information media in a democracy, McQuail sums up the opinions of many professionals and scholars by stating that, “Objectivity is impossible and it makes little sense, in consequence, to measure it; secondly it is undesirable and should not be treated as a positive performance norm”<sup>27</sup>.

The German sociologist Luhmann discussed this shift of perspective at the highest level of theoretical generalization<sup>28</sup>. He observed that the contemporary system of providing information is normally both hetero-referential and self-referential. It is hetero-referential insofar as it reports on events that belong to the ‘world,’ such as politics, the economic crisis, sporting events, HIV, etc. In this way, the system ‘looks outwards.’ However, Luhmann asserts that this function always works by means of a specific code that is self-referential, having to do with the autonomous operation of the media system. This code does not operate by means of a fundamental truth/non-truth distinction, but instead on the basis of a distinction between information and non-information – actually novelty vs. non-novelty. Information in Luhmann’s scheme is defined by the essential and distinctive characteristic of novelty: time transforms novelty into a known fact, that is, it transforms ‘information’ (the thing which it is today) into ‘non-information’ (the thing which it is tomorrow because it is already known). The consequence of this process is the incessant search for something innovative, strange, exceptional, striking, out of the ordinary –will there be a record high on the stock exchange or deaths resulting

<sup>23</sup> M. Schudson, “The Sociology of News Production Revisited”, in *Mass Media and Society*, edited by J. Curran and M. Gurevitch, London: Edward Arnold, 1991, 141-159.

<sup>24</sup> H. Molotch, M. Lester, “News as Purposive Behavior: On the Strategic Use of Routine Events, Accidents and Scandals”, *American Sociological Review*, 39 (1974): 101-112.

<sup>25</sup> G. Tuchman, *Making News. A Study in the Construction of Reality*, New York: Free Press, 1978, 12.

<sup>26</sup> P. Golding, P. Elliott, *Making the News*, London: Longman, 1979.

<sup>27</sup> D. McQuail, *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest*, London: Sage, 1992, 187. Other pivotal studies about news-making share a similar perspective, i.e., Epstein, Altheide, Schlesinger, Gans, and Fishman. For a recent overview, see T. Harcup, D. O’Neill, “What Is News? News Values Revisited (Again)”, *Journalism Studies* (2016), DOI 10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193.

<sup>28</sup> N. Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag GmbH, 1996.

from an attack in Iraq? According to Luhmann, posing the problem of truth in journalism is a fundamental mistake in perspective or framing: attributing to one socially relevant system (that concerning information) the *modus operandi* of another (that of science). The issue of truth in journalism is dismissed as nonsense.

## 2. BACKLASHES

The theories and concepts that we have traced here established themselves in the contemporary cultural arena because of their interpretative usefulness. It is worth underlining that these points of view made important interpretative and creative developments possible in many disciplines, as well as enabling the democratization of knowledge. However, they succeeded also because they moved *in the direction of history*; namely, they supported the progressive views of the enlightened intellectual elite. They were often arms in the battle against epistemological obscurantisms, which were linked to the undesirable political choices of the rearguard.

Moreover, as far as theory and research on communication and the media are concerned, models describing the media as ‘frames’ of our social experience correspond to a more advanced and sophisticated vision of the processes of symbolic mediation. The influence of the sociology of knowledge, sociolinguistics, and semiotics has in fact shifted the focus of analysis from media content to the media itself, conceived as a linguistic and cultural form and as a ‘social environment’<sup>29</sup>. These new theoretical perspectives undoubtedly appear to be more suitable in comprehending social and communicative relations in a society in which the media shape the social environment and allow us to be perpetually connected, so much so that they have become active extensions of our bodies (i.e., our personal and mobile media).

However, the emergence of this constructivist perspective, which tends to weaken any reference to a concept of reality external to the media and its mechanisms for the production and circulation of meaning, has triggered the erosion of many of the principles at the basis of the emancipatory project from which that same perspective originated.

### 2.1. *The uncertain boundaries of meaning*

From a realistic perspective, the different ‘ontological’ status of social reality and media reality has had significant cognitive and ethical consequences. The concepts of ‘dysfunction’ (in approaches with a functionalist origin) and ‘manipulation’ (in critical approaches) expressed the ever-present distance and tension between social reality and its representations. From the constructivist perspective, in which social reality and media reality are constructed and reconstructed in an endless process, the issues of the *objectivity* or the *deformation* of reality appears somewhat divested of meaning, and do not have any particular moral implications. In fact, from this perspective, different media, genres, formats and contents, appear identical in their roles as producers of meaning and images of the human world, so it becomes impossible, as well as useless, to draw a

<sup>29</sup> J. Meyrowitz, “Images of Media: Hidden Ferment and Harmony in the Field”, *Journal of Communication*, 43, 3 (1993): 55-66.

line to distinguish between information and fiction, between reporting and propaganda, between the production of meaning and manipulation.

This has two implications that are as significant as they are dangerous. The first is that the disappearance of any reference to a reality that is independent of media representations also means undermining the very basis on which it is possible to criticize such constructions and representations. Any such disappearance is liable to become an apology, whether conscious or not, of any representation of the status quo (in the media and in society), a defense that is even more effective than the old conception, now easily debunked, of the media as a mirror of reality. The second implication is the difficulty in defining the terms of a professional deontology of journalism. All the concepts that have traditionally delimited journalistic deontology now appear weak against the idea (and resulting practice) that there is no threshold beyond which we cannot be pushed by the needs of imagination and invention. There is no real bulwark against the pseudo-literary narratives of new journalism or the systematic production of factoids and “devil’s news”<sup>30</sup>.

## 2.2. *New entries into media power*

A second unexpected effect concerns those who have commandeered the ‘power’ of the media. We must acknowledge without hypocrisy that the alarm that brought our attention to the concept of ‘post-truth’ has in part sounded because the manipulative techniques and practices of the media have been effectively employed by the most unexpected and ‘unauthorized’ centers of power. Trump, Brexit supporters, anti-European leaders, Putin, and ISIS propagandists have demonstrated the capacity to use the media as well as, if not better, than those who, up to now, have been considered ‘authorized’ to do so, such as traditional parties, major press agencies, mainstream media, and the ‘owners’ of the Internet. These new entries have subverted the previously established and undisputed logic and hierarchies of the media. During his second press conference, Trump’s spokesperson, by prioritizing the questions of small, local media representatives and only taking the questions of the major media at the end, brutally made the point that the kings of communication are naked. Without the respect and privileged position they have insisted on receiving from the ‘establishment’, they lose much of their power and influence.

In addition, the Internet has given countless users – organized and disorganized, good and bad, presentable and disreputable – the potential for exploiting the same strategies and tools once reserved for mainstream media. They have been able to assume the role of ‘transmitters,’ ‘opinion-makers,’ or ‘influencers.’ In this way, mediated communication has become a mass practice: everyone can manipulate and be manipulated by anyone else, whether the transmitter or recipient is naive and unsophisticated, or more organized and ‘professional.’

## 2.3. *Communicative bubbles*

A third effect, also unexpected, relates to the blurring of the idea of the media as the ‘translator’ of experience, in other words the place where different opinions, beliefs, and

<sup>30</sup> A. Pratkanis, E. Aronson, *Age of Propaganda*, New York: Freeman & Co., 1992, ch. 2; D. Fertilio, *Le notizie del diavolo. La parabola ignota della disinformazione*, Milan: Spirali, 1994; G. Gili, *Il problema della manipolazione: peccato originale dei media?*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2001, ch. 8.

worldviews meet, enter into dialogue, and enrich each other. This view conceived of the media as an essential actor in the public sphere – creating a space for free discussion in which citizens can openly express informed opinions on various social issues and on the goals and proper methods of social life, and learn the views of others. This view must contend with the results of studies conducted as early as the 1950s and 60s indicating that people prefer to expose themselves to information sources and messages that they regard as most compatible with their prior vision of reality and themselves. People’s attention is mainly given to media that confirm what they already are, want, and believe. Moreover, many sources of media information have conformed to this game, allowing their consumers to look at themselves in a mirror of reciprocal self-referentiality.

The Internet, celebrated as a ‘digital forum,’ has revived hopes of renewed dialogue, since the use of interactive and participatory media allows its users to open themselves up to the most diverse opinions and, at least potentially, expands the environment in which they live and forge relationships. However, this ideal vision has had to come to terms with a very different reality. As many international studies<sup>31</sup> have demonstrated, social media communities that are created online and through social networks, although potentially unlimited, are often based on a principle of *self-selection*, almost always involving people who already know each other and have some form of relationship. The digital revolution, especially with the advent of social media, rather than interrupting the circle of ‘homophily’, that is, the tendency to meet and recognize those similar to ourselves, in some ways extends and strengthens it. Some researchers talk of the “echo chamber”<sup>32</sup> and “filter bubble”<sup>33</sup>. They point out the unexpected social effects of customized searches for information and content using search engines, websites, and social networks that ‘learn’ from users’ past behavior, offering them content that is familiar and agrees with what they already know, limits openness and curiosity toward what may be different and discordant.

#### 2.4. Back to reality: which reality?

Paradoxically, the last effect has been some restoration of the notion of ‘reality.’ But which reality? A mythical sense of ‘reality’ is increasingly taking hold, both in the most sophisticated philosophical debates and in journalistic culture. This is a return to a raw, positivist realism. Subtle re-readings of Kant as a ‘realist’ philosopher have been used to support a *scientistic* version of scientific and technological research as the only thing able to deliver a secure knowledge of what is real, thereby providing predictive capacity based on ‘big data’<sup>34</sup>. The trenchant image of this 180° change in direction is the 2017 *New York Times* ad campaign, which is entitled “the truth is hard”. The paradox of the story we have told is that, after having progressively removed the referential function of

<sup>31</sup> For an overview, see N.A. Christakis, J.H. Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2009; S. Broadbent, *L’intimité au travail. La vie privée et les communications personnelles dans l’entreprise*, Limoges: FYP Éditions, 2011; N.B. Ellison, d. boyd, *Sociality through Social Network Sites*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, edited by W.H. Dutton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 151-172.

<sup>32</sup> C.R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0.*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> E. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, New York-London: Penguin Books, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. G. Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015, 10-29.

communication with respect to reality, nowadays danger is to eliminate the possibility of multiple meanings that has been pursued for so long, only to return to a diminished and impoverished reference to a merely numerical reality. After almost a hundred years, Lippmann's positivist diagnosis can be prevailing again: a reliable representation of social reality is only the one that translates it into statistics of births, deaths, weddings, accidents, elections, and economic systems, consistent with the most updated and defined methods of knowledge known to science. When it comes to narrating and interpreting complex and controversial events, this diagnosis necessarily leads us to surrender to the fact that ideological prejudice, imperfections of language, and constraints in the information production process inexorably encase the real world in stereotypical visions which are to a greater or lesser extent deformed. This last example of backlash reverses the Nietzschean statement "there are no more facts but only interpretations" to read: "there are no more interpretations but only (predictable) facts".