If there is no truth anymore, why is everyone talking about post-truth?

The book *Who is afraid of post-truth? Collateral effects of a cultural parabole* [Chi ha paura della post-verità? Effetti collaterali di una parabola culturale], by Giovanni Maddalena and Guido Gili, Genova, Casa Editrice Marietti, 2017, 115 pp., 12€, ISBN 978-88-211-8852-7 contains a deliberately provocative thesis: the selected word of the year 2016 by the Oxford Dictionary – *Post-truth* – represents a macroscopic signal of alarm, in a world where the search for the truth has almost completely disappeared. In other words, the efforts carried out in the last centuries by intellectuals to abandon the search for the truth and to concentrate on the forms and functions of communication, are in crisis. However, this is an optimistic book, since it does not simply stop at the description of the causes of that crisis, but offers solutions and advice to surmount the problem of the systematic loss of trust in public communication.

The book is divided into three parts, which can be summarized as follows: first (I), the history of losing the truth; second (II), the mechanism of manipulation in a world without truth and the amplification of that mechanism through the social media; and third (III), the forms of reaction against the expressions of post-truth or the self-made truth. Let’s see the three parts in detail.

I. ‘Theories: truth, criticism of the truth, post-truth’ [Teorie: verità, critica alla verità, post-verità]: This historical part offers the reasons why we can observe a growing disinterest in truth in the intentions of scholars of Philosophy, Sociology, Communication and Media. This section of the book may appear superficial to specialists, as just 40 pages are given to an overview of the most important steps in the history of knowledge with regard to the understanding of truth. However, the authors’ attempt is to show the most important steps to constructivism, which they make responsible for the change from thinking and communicating about facts to thinking and communicating about post-facts.

According to Maddalena and Gili, there are three main axes in this historical path: from the end of classical metaphysical thinking, to the abandonment of the rational project in the Modern Age, and finally to the concept of Nietzsche, by which interpretations are substituted for facts. Although the book quotes many authors, we will focus here in just a few examples representing contemporary scholars of philosophy and sociology:

1. The French linguist and semiotic Jacques Derrida speaks about the liberation of the norms of language. In other words, he proposes a deconstruction of grammar and rhetoric, meaning that a text is therefore only our representation of it. This position is more obviously represented by Nietzsche, who said: ‘I fear we will not be able to be free from God because we still believe in grammar’.

2. The historical cultural perspective of Gianni Vattimo is expressed in his *Weak Thought* [Pensiero Debole]. In the same direction, Zygmunt Bauman uses the expression ‘Liquid Modernity’ to mean a society in permanent evolution: we do not have the criteria to understand what identity really is. It is simply a construction.
3. The philosophical position of Richard Rorty, by which we do not have to ask for truth or goodness, since all discourse is, in the end, a narration. This approach opens the door not only for the subject as an ironic liberal, but also in sociology to the thesis of Niklas Luhmann, i.e. that reality is constructed through communicative processes. As a consequence, the sense of Ethics is a social construction that changes with the circumstances and is fragile and fluid.

In the field of communication science, explain the authors of Who is afraid of post-truth? we find a particular understanding of performance: one that has its origin in some of Umberto Eco’s semiotic concepts. Eco represents a kind of modern nominalism that replaces external reality with a cultural reality. In this sense, Eco, like other scholars, has misunderstood John L. Austin and the Pragmatics by confusing semantics with action, considering that every speech act has a dimension of making reality. In Sociology, Erving Goffmann has developed the theory of dramaturgy: we look for the best effect of our role in society through a good performance.

What about the media’s role in this context? The consequences are obvious: we can speak – say Maddalena and Gili – about a ‘double reality’ (p. 30). For the media, it is not so important to describe external reality as it is to confirm and fortify the opinions of the public. With the increasing possibilities brought about by the modern digital media, everyone can create new opinions too, and they can be presented as mainstream. Jean Baudrillard spoke in this context about the ‘hyperreality’ of media and, from a different perspective, Marshall McLuhan said that normal life is constructed around the media. This is possible because the media simplify the facts and create stereotypes. At the end, conclude the authors, the problem of truth in journalism has been deleted, becoming ‘a non-problem’ (p. 44).

II. ‘Practices: uses, habits and bad habits’ [Pratiche: usi, costumi, malcostumi]: according to the book’s authors, it must be said that manipulation has always been a matter of fact. Today, the evolution of technology is able to systematically improve the old tactics. Therefore, the authors confirm the difficulty of distinguishing sometimes between events and pseudo-events; facts and ‘factoids’; information and fiction; news and propaganda; interpretation and manipulation.

The levels of manipulation are cognitive, linguistic and medial. From a cognitive point of view it is very well-known that for manipulation to be efficient, it has to work with framing and reframing. The traditional form of communication was to look for the existent frames in a culture and to speak with those presuppositions, in order to arrive to the best mutual understanding. Reframing is the cognitive effective form to change the frames or a part of them, and so to bring forward the knowledge of the participants into the conversation. Through the new media it is possible to make the frames the actual forms of thinking. The media – traditional and new – offer very efficient forms of reframing, when for instance politicians are presented as engaged in social works or when they are active in different social media. In this sense propaganda is camouflaged by information. Extreme cases are the pseudo-events or the ‘factoids’, that is, the dramaturgy of not-real events that, in the end, become real in their effects.

III. ‘Kickbacks: the un-expected consequences’ [Contraccolpi: le conseguenze che non ti aspetti]: The forms of reaction come from ‘unexpected’ and ‘non-authorized’ players (p. 83). They are a sign of this new movement the authors believe is a solution in a world free from truth, but also free from trust. Those new players (from outsider politicians to opinion leaders, among others), who were not expected, constitute a new phenomenon of mass communication. They are not legitimate but are everywhere present in the Internet.
Their sources and also the security of their information are more weak and provisory than serious.

Another problem for the status quo in media communication is the more and more loudly voiced deep frustration about the media, which does not offer information but serves opinions. In private – expressed in that ‘is it true what are you saying?’ – as well as in public communication, we observe a newly critical way of thinking as the only way of defense against fake news. This position has two extremes: skepticism (‘I don’t believe anything’) or ‘positivism 2.0’ (‘Just tell me the facts and keep your interpretation for you’).

As an alternative, Maddalena and Gili propose a ‘rich realism’ (p. 93): an efficacious way to win back trust and truth. This proposal starts with a commitment to the idea that in every form of communication there is sense. The task of social media should be the maximum diffusion of information for those who are looking for understanding and truth. In all communication expression, it is important to distinguish between reality and fiction, and to present the latter as a special form of communication with an evolution of sense. The most important suggestion of Maddalena and Gili is to consider communication as a phenomenon to understand reality better and not to substitute it with something else.

We conclude by saying that Who is afraid of post-truth? appears in a decisive moment. Not only because it is a good idea to reflect about the word of the year, post-truth, but, because it is urgent to change the point of view, and not consider the search for truth impossible because we sometimes have difficulty finding it. We need a new trust in politics, science and journalism, and this is only possible if we know that all their agents are sincerely looking for the truth. This book shows some solutions for the problem but gives much opportunity also for a deeper investigation. The volume is appropriate not only for scholars, but for a wider audience, and we hope it will be soon translated into English.

Alberto Gil

Department of Linguistics
University of Saarland, Saarland, Germany
a.gil@mx.uni-saarland.de

Received 7 April 2018; accepted 9 April 2018

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2018.1474717