Use of post-truth as a political tool

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Abstract: This paper shows, through the analysis of the literature and the most recent news, how through the use of neural algorithms and the application of strategies framed in what is called post-truth, certain political groups, mainly those who hold power in democracies with weak institutions, create a segmented reality that serves their interests and that in turn makes the task of exposing the factual facts more complicated. Methodologies as long as appropriate teacher training and education processes are in place.

Keywords: Post-truth, discrete reality, politics.

El uso de la posverdad como herramienta política

Resumen: En este trabajo se muestra, mediante el análisis de la literatura y de las noticias más recientes, cómo a través de la utilización de algoritmos neurales y la aplicación de estrategias enmarcadas en lo que se denomina posverdad, ciertos grupos políticos, principalmente los que detenta el poder en democracias con instituciones débiles, crean una realidad segmentada que atiende a sus intereses y que a su vez torna complicada la labor de exposición de los hechos fácticos.

Palabras Clave: Posverdad, realidad discreta, política.
I. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a remarkable change in what is known as the social perception of reality, i.e., how individuals and societies, personally or collectively, experience everyday reality [1]. Humanity in the current era and especially those societies with democratic systems are immersed in a historical process where the culture of immediacy has taken a leading role whose consequences are unpredictable and have been materializing in various ways; One of the most visible is the change in interpersonal relationships [2], where smartphones and immediate access to all kinds of content on the Internet have led large segments of society to spend considerable time absorbed in the screen of their cell phones, causing a deterioration in personal expectations, verbal communication, concentration, interest and general performance of the individual [3]. Another consequence can be observed in the degree of penetration of social networks (SN) in all human domains; technology has paved the way for SN to show their potential as transmitters, modulators, and models of information. This phenomenon becomes even more important when observing the parallel evolution of public opinion within Western democracies and their current social organizations [4]. The aforementioned is not trivial and this is because behind the SN there is a degree of sophistication, both visual and linguistic, whose depth and scope can only be compared with the evolution of ethics in the development of intelligent algorithms and the advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) that are achieved [5].

As different authors have studied, there used to be a link between the perception of reality and public opinion [1] [6] [7], the correlates of which were complimentary. This correspondence allowed democratic societies to have a predictable political, economic and social order in the present that could, in turn, be extrapolated without much change to the not too distant future. Nowadays, the complementarity of both correlates has changed, now their narratives do not always follow convergent paths, so much so that public opinion does not always coincide with the perception of reality. This has generated what has been called the era of uncertainty [8] and has opened the door to a social, economic, and political crisis unprecedented in history. The causes of this phenomenon can be traced back to five decades ago; however, it is the consequences and their evolution in the political sphere that drives the research of this paper, which seeks to expose how the political discourse and actions of certain actors have opted to construct convenient truths or emotive lies that model a discretized and customized reality that decisively influences both the perception of reality and public opinion [9]. This represents the core of what has been referred to in the academic community as the post-truth society. Although some authors oppose the conception of post-truth as something novel, the pattern, and frequency as well as the means it makes use of are very topical [10]. It should be emphasized that the constructions described above are not the product of chance, but obey the interests of the sectors that promote them, which seek to achieve strategic advantages for their purposes and allow them to operate with minimal resistance.

As it is necessary to put into context the concepts around which this work revolves, it is necessary to define them and organize them in such a way that the common thread that unites them allows to obtain a clear vision of the subject matter, allowing a glimpse into the future of the possible paths that the political use of post-truth will navigate in the coming years and how societies will be exposed to them. The concepts of perception of reality, public opinion, discrete reality, and the post-truth society should then be introduced.

a. Construction of reality

Reality according to Ortega y Gasset is not a fact, but an act of construction that is made from the individual, therefore, the reality is nothing but the perception that is achieved of it [11]. From a phenomenological position, this act of construction, of perception of reality, is based in the first instance on the information that is subtracted from the senses, which according to Ortega y Gasset, would be the sensitive component of reality; however, the reality is not composed exclusively of what is possible to perceive by the senses (patent reality), there is another dimension that escapes them, and that the human being perceives as a non-visible dimension (latent reality), as when one looks at a sphere from the front and does not observe its depth. The sensation of incompleteness is not something the human intellect likes, so the mind will tend to complete this lack of information in some way, and that way is through an exercise of intellectual, cognitive conceptualization. Therefore, the perception of realities is a continuous exercise of discovery and conceptualization. This continuous exercise is the one that allows the individual to discover the other, the one that interrelates with him. It is important to emphasize that the continuous exercise of this condition is what allows the human being to reach the formulation of ideas from how he manages to grasp reality, transforming the relationships between ideas into concepts, which are the ones that allow us to know the physical and ethical meanings of things.

In addition to the sphere of individual reality, there is reality as a collective construction. Human beings are born into a community that precedes them, forming meanings in their relationship with others, assimilating those already established through the use of language, which is a fundamental tool for the construction of social meanings [12]. Schutz differentiates two types of meanings, on the one hand, there are the subjective ones, which are those that are produced in the consciousness of the individual on the objects interpreted from his point of view of reality. On the other hand, there are the objective ones, which are the product of collective construction and which have been established as referents both in culture and in social practice, and which are accepted as facts. It is at this point were to involve the other as a constituent of the individual's experience in his construction of reality, Schutz introduces the concept of intersubjectivity, which shows us how the surrounding reality in which the individual is immersed together with his peers is constructed through
interactions with the other in a region he calls everyday life [13] It is in this space where the actions and acts of others together with one's own delimit the range of freedom of all those who inhabit this space, which determines which difficulties can be overcome and which barriers are definitive. It is in this space where the individual can act together with his peers and feel part of a group; it is in this space where the perception of social reality is produced, and it is the place where the conceptualization of a world around is forged [14].

b. Public opinion

From the starting point of the conceptualization that emerged in the eighteenth century, public opinion is the expression of the views of the people as an expression of the multitude usually a direct and open assembly; however, at the end of the twentieth century, and according to subsequent contributions of several researchers, its definition has been inclined as the expression of different segments of society on a subject that concerns them directly or indirectly, this caused by the advent of mass culture and mass media. The evolution of the participation of the individual in society is not only as a mere operand of the changing processes of societies but already as a citizen who in himself represents society and the social as a legal purpose of government. So, society is the public, and public opinion is the heterogeneous conglomerate of manifest social interests [15]. Societies have always tended to stratification, therefore, the interests of one segment of society are not equal, or not completely convergent, with the interests of another segment of society. Defining these strata as social classes means that their interests generally define social behavior so that public opinion, in general, will depend on the social class to which the individual belongs or with which he best identifies. From the point of view of the ruler and the political class, it is necessary to know the general thinking of society on certain public policies, how much in favor or against they might be on a specific issue, so it was necessary to have public opinion scales such as those developed by Gallup [16]. In this framework of thought, public opinion qualifies as a reference for the ruler, as an expression of the demands of the state to which he owes as administrator. However, the will of power, and the political classes, have been revealed as not always consistent with the opinion matrices coming from the loudspeakers of the media, which are also a social segment in themselves. The media have become a moderator and shaper of public opinion with specific weight and which, like all human activity, has its purposes and interests. Thus, public opinion is understood as the product of the tension between different public actors.

Since the early 1990s, authors such as Lipmann and Westbrook developed the conception that the individual in society could not be an omniscient citizen, i.e., that an individual can't possess a minimum rational criterion that would make him sufficiently competent on all public affairs [17]; in turn, the individual tends to resist changing his position on an issue even when the evidence refutes its veracity, thus exposing himself to manipulation by propaganda, which appeals more to the emotions than to the rationality of the facts. Thus, in democratic systems, the suspicion of the individual's inability to formulate completely rational criteria puts it in the hands of average citizens to respond to problems for which they are not prepared. At this juncture, the position of the individual is to rely on his beliefs, emotions, and feelings. This is where the media and more recently social networks (SN) play a decisive role in shaping and directing public opinion. Thus, for the political and ruling classes, the control of discourse through the media and social networks appeals to emotions and constructions of reality that support their positions and reaffirm their purposes, even if these do not correspond to an objective or collective reality. This dichotomy between public interests and the interests of certain circles of society has contributed to the conceptualization of the post-truth society [18].

c. Discrete or customized reality

At present, there is a resurgence of the individual as a social and political end per se. According to Dahlgren, the existing connection between citizenship and public opinion is materialized in what he calls the communicative public sphere [19], where the exchange of ideas does not take place homogeneously among large segments of society, but rather as small reticules from which individuals actively express their points of view and not only in a reactive manner, This means that individuals become not only consumers of information, but also creators of content whose organization does not respond to hierarchical structures, but rather forge links between peers, with consensus shared by identification rather than by an imposed articulation. The eruption of mass media via the Internet and social networks presupposes a radical change compared to how information was previously consumed and processed. Previously there were large media outlets that, under a journalistic ethic molded over the years since the media crisis of 1915 [20], served as a compass for each of the political, economic, and social actors to position themselves concerning different issues that were close to them. Now, with the advent of social networks and access to news portals on the Internet, the counterweights that kept the different segments of society in balance have been challenged.

This novel form of an organization entails certain risks that need to be highlighted. One of them is the one exposed by Eli Parisier in 2011, which he called the filter bubble [21]. Parisier shows that, in their eagerness to personalize and adapt to the tastes of users, large technology companies such as Facebook, Google, Netflix, or Amazon create a selection of content aimed at each user in a particular way, so that the same entry in a search engine for two different people will result in different content, this is because these companies track every click, every photo, every portal that the individual visits so that, through specialized algorithms, they can offer advertisers a selection of content according to the user [22]. However, this practice is done without the consent of the individual, and as Parisier makes clear, the individual controls neither what enters this bubble nor what leaves it. This would
not be so worrying if it were not for the fact that there is a general lack of awareness of these issues and that, as Han puts it, there is no "we" in today's society, but rather individuals who, in many ways, are at the mercy of the changing digital flow [23]. This could structure around individuals, due to the increasing flow of stimuli coming from the digital world, a tailor-made reality, discretized for each individual in the network, which may well be exploited by interests of many different kinds.

In this scenario, the individual, who takes center stage in all its facets, both rational and emotional, can be exposed to various sources of manipulation. From the filtered bubble that can become a personalized reality, is where the effects of a political class that, through the fabrication of emotional lies, seeks to control not only the public discourse but also the mechanisms of power that serve their interests, are most noticeable. This falls within the sphere of the post-truth society [24].

d. Post-truth society

As developed in the previous section, Han exposes that individuals are isolated in the network; furthermore a study promoted through the European center Ibsen, networks "did not particularly help to cooperate". Thus, in this granular society, where the individual is self-referential, there has been an evident erosion of general representativeness, which makes it difficult to optimize public policies. This has put democratic systems of power in crisis. As Arias Maldonado points out, the current situation of public participation of the individual is dynamic, unpredictable, and outside a consistent rational narrative; instead, the centrality of the discourse has moved to the emotional sphere, where the arbitrariness of the same monopolizes relevance [25]. Therefore, and returning to Han's description, the digital society differs from the previous mass society in the isolation of the individual within the crowd, where there is no group representativeness, which makes it difficult to achieve common goals, since these by definition are not possible because there is no unity of action, and when there is, it lacks sufficient depth to achieve lasting changes.

In the described framework, the post-truth society is developing, where even the definition of what is true is debatable; this brings both the perception of social reality and rational public opinion into a collision with those positions that, from the collective imaginary determined by beliefs and emotions, disagree as to the real nature of factual events. This confrontation hinders the discernment of the average individual to apprehend the rational reality and form an objective criterion [2].

The word post-truth can be traced back to the essay that Steve Tesich wrote for the newspaper The Nation (Tesich, 1992, newspaper) in 1992 [26]; in it, the author reflects on the need for society, which he identifies with public opinion, to have hope in something, even if that something to which it clings is a lie, in situations of uncertainty. The concept has evolved in juxtaposition with others such as post-democracy, disinformation, and fake news. Lying as a political tool has been present long before the existence of the SN, however, the level of penetration and conviction that it has reached with them has multiplied [27]. This is largely due to a population predisposed to believe and share information that has not been verified by any competent entity, but that agrees with their particular emotional or political affinities. Therefore, the post-truth society is built, not based on information as part of a verifiable reality, but based on the beliefs and positions of the individuals that compose it, which does not require any verification [28].

II. Development

The rise of the culture of immediacy, social networks, and their algorithms based on Artificial Intelligence (AI) has led to an unprecedented historical moment [29]. The intermediation of the traditional mass media previously in the twentieth century played the role of a link between society and the centers of information and knowledge generation, so that they could act as regulators, modelers, and transmitters of ideas and concepts that were of common circulation in society. Today, social networks (SN) are ostensibly reducing the role of the traditional media, thinning or even eliminating intermediaries, making information pass to the user in an immediate, raw form, sometimes without a coherent flow, this happens because the RRSS still do not have a regulatory framework, a legal status that discriminates its practice and scope. This absence of rules leads to the disintegration of the formal validating centers of information and, therefore, the creation of knowledge, which could lead to a kind of collective oblivion. When information arrives directly to the consumer without any kind of filter, the phenomenon of non-correspondence between the media reality constructed on the network and the daily social experience in the individual's circles of proximity is produced. If we refer to the philosophical concept of information, it is a selection of facts whose verification signals can be traced in time and space in the material world [28]. In the post-truth society, there is a phenomenon of non-correspondence between information and truthfulness. The post-truth phenomenon is characterized by the creation of lines of thought within society that do not have a verifiable account, since it does not claim to be truthful but to possess a certain quality of truth at a given moment and time. The SN catalyzes this practice that occurs both consciously and unconsciously in society, and whose purpose is to influence the construction of public opinion [2].

According to García [30] fake news manage to reach a much greater acceptance, dissemination, and depth than the real ones; they also spread faster and much more extensively. This is coherent with the little regulation that the SN has concerning traditional information channels and that allow them, intentionally or not, to reach the personal motivations of individuals, from where they can play with the cultural, material, intellectual, and emotional biases of people. In terms of politics, fake news and manipulative political discourse in SN tends to have a much more pronounced effect within the user
community than more important news such as finance, climate change, or terrorism. From this advantage given to the political discourse from the network by the mechanisms that in SN allow disinformation, the questioning of both private and state institutions is born, where truth is relativized through the game of meanings in such discourse, promoting the aspects that could benefit the promoter segment at the time of building a public opinion that favors them.

Post-truth political discourse dismantles what Lorusso indicates are the categories of truth [31], that is, truth as correspondence, verification, and sincerity of a concept or fact. Post-truth political discourse does not seek to possess the qualities of truth, it seeks to convince; it does not seek to be true, it seeks to be seen as true, nor does it seek to be verifiable, but validated by the people to whom it is addressed, who do not try to corroborate what is said, but pretend to believe in it, although the substrate that supports the discourse rests on a lie. Certain political actors in different parts of the world have understood through the analysis of the behavior of individuals in a society increasingly active in social networks, made by experts in neuromarketing among other disciplines, that the important thing is to be believed [24].

a. Use of post-truth as a political tool

As indicated a few paragraphs back, the word post-truth was coined by the playwright Steve Tesich in an article for The Nation newspaper in 1992, then the conceptualization of the word was enriched by Ralph Keyes in 2004 where he defines it as the intentional manipulation of the truth, distorting it for some purpose, usually to the detriment of some person, institution or organization.

The post-truth way of proceeding can be illustrated with some important events that occurred during the 2010s. Beginning, for this study, with the presidential elections disputed in Trinidad and Tobago, where it is evident how a company, Cambridge Analytica (CA), through the statistical study (big data) and pattern recognition algorithms (behavioral analysis, psychography), dissected the political situation of the country, detecting that it would be a close vote and that the decisive segment in the elections would be the young Afro-Trinidadians who could vote for the People's National Movement (representative party of the Afro-descendant Trinidadians, which together with the United National Congress, the representative party of the Indian communities, are the main parties of the island). CA acted for the United National Congress and its objective was to demobilize the young black vote, so they designed strategies in social networks that discouraged the vote in this age group. The Do So campaign elaborated by CA exemplifies how through YouTube videos, emotional messages, and images disseminated through Facebook and the creation of instant influencers, they recreated a movement that encouraged the abstention of the black vote, giving an appearance and a narrative in reality that seemed legitimate. The strategy worked and the United National Congress party was able to place Kamla Persad-Bissessar as the first female prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago [32].

The so-called Catalan procés, which sought to disassociate this region from the Spanish state started in 2012, Donald Trump's campaign for the presidency of the United States of America in 2016, the consultation made in the United Kingdom to decide its exit from the European bloc, known as the Brexit consultation, what happened with the plebiscite in Colombia on the peace agreements in that country in the year. All these events had a common denominator: the distortion of the truth as a means to achieve an objective. The mechanisms used are similar, and as Trejo mentions, the unreal, which has no basis in everyday experience, has merged with the truth for important social conglomerates; then, they share and make decisions based on deceitful foundations [33].

b. Structure of the post-veridical action

The confluence of the digital era, the weakening of democracies, the rise of populism of various kinds, and the overwhelming advance of social networks, make up today's post-truth society. Evidence gathered in academic articles, talks, documentaries, and electoral processes in different parts of the world show that post-truth action is articulated in two ways: the first is the recreation of a convenient reality in the digital world, taking advantage of the filter bubble effect described by Eli Parisier [22] where AI algorithms can find social patterns. The unregulated use of data from users of social networks and the Internet is the source of feeding large databases that, through processes such as Big data and the aforementioned pattern recognition algorithms, allow to compose strategies tailored for certain target audiences, who are key to obtain some kind of benefit or advantage. When there is the intentionality of creating this type of biased information to spread it and manipulate certain sectors of society to obtain a privileged political position, we are in the presence of a concept that is a consequence of post-truth action: disinformation. Disinformation is the first front. The other front is the transfer of the post-truth discourse to everyday life. This is materialized in the disseminators, the people who promote and give notoriety and face to the post-truth media mechanism; they are the influencers, such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, or Nayid Bukele, who are established in the social reality as representatives of political movements. These people promote and are symbols of the discourse, they support and affirm it, they seek to exploit the emotions of certain groups that are related to them, influencing their decisions and beliefs to obtain political gain.

III. Methodology

In this work, information was extracted from several sources: recent bibliography related to the subject in indexed databases such as Scopus, Redalyc, Scielo, among others. Documentaries and written and online press were also consulted. First, the information was filtered by searching for the keywords post-truth, politics, and discrete in indexed open access journals. The results yielded 205 articles for post-truth, 35 open access articles for politics, and 103 and 13 open access articles for discrete reality or customized reality, respec-
tively. After searching the indexed databases and obtaining the above results, 23 articles were selected that addressed the topic of post-truth in the political sphere. Also selected were books of historical importance, a documentary, and talks that shed light on the mechanisms of disinformation and manipulation of social sectors; also selected were some journalistic articles that also dealt with the topics of interest.

After organizing the bibliographic support for this document, the article was structured in the following sections. An introduction to the fundamental concepts that allow understanding how the problem of post-truth is structured in the social sphere concerning the exercise of politics and the global uncertainties that have become evident with the rise of populism, the distortion of information through the mechanisms of disinformation, and the rise of an algorithmic society.

Once the background was known, the topic was developed by contrasting the sources with the evolution of events, to then offer the results and consequences obtained from the research.

IV. Results

From the bibliography consulted and from the analysis of them as a whole, the following sentences can be extracted:

1. The concept of post-truth is defined almost homogeneously in both academic and journalistic literature, being disinformation the most important product derived from this concept due to its scope and danger. Disinformation deliberately seeks to confuse, to manipulate certain sectors by presenting facts, data, statistics, and misleading conclusions to achieve a defined objective in time that satisfies its purposes. When the objective is political, the analysis of the facts points to the fact that individuals are much more likely to believe post-truth discursive constructions as true.

2. The ability of some politicians to feel comfortable constructing speeches lacking objective truth and obtaining good results despite all the indications that show that they lack support, can glimpse a future with increasingly sophisticated manipulation techniques. It could be expected, in the not too distant future, that a level of manipulation-convincing will so sophisticated that it could resemble Orwellian doublethink. This item should be investigated in greater depth, since some of the conditions that could make this concept a reality are present today, such as the fragmentation of societies, the isolation of the individual in a reality tailored by pattern recognition algorithms, and the formation of large blocks of geostrategic interest, among others.

3. The post-truth society is shown as a society in continuous transformation. This means that such a society is profoundly transient. The evolution of this particular moment may have to be studied in a few years.

V. Conclusions

1. A process of distancing will continue to be observed between reality as a verifier of facts, actions, and truthful processes with political speeches in which an alternate reality is promoted, based on statements that do not have any truthful rigor.

2. It is necessary to regulate content on social networks, such regulation must be born of a broad social consensus that guarantees freedom of expression but does not tolerate disinformation tactics.

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RESUMEN CURRICULAR

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